

THE WINDOW SEAT

A CREATIVE LIFE
IN SAN FRANCISCO
IN THE SEVENTIES

STEVE BROOKS

Al Hays

Savage Amusement

A Naked Man

I'm smoking a True Blue and drinking a little Marsala. I'm about to move to another apartment, one that has sun in the morning. My new roommate is Betty Boop, aka Connie Salter. She runs a second-hand shop. She's as nervous as a wounded squirrel. I went to dinner at her place, then on to a party, at her invitation. We dipped gin punch from an avocado wastebasket. Betty's boyfriend, Jon, was there. He gazed drunkenly at Betty. She told him I was a poet.

"Don't show him any of my stuff," he said.

I have a book due out in the fall, a collection of five poets, but I'm not writing poems, right now. Instead, I'm reading and regrouping. "Making changes is strange and difficult," I think, and nothing feels truer. I've been divorced for over a year, separated for two. "I could use a little happiness," I said to myself, the other day. I'm recovering from a venereal infection, the second time in a year. I'm 33, and I'm about to change my line of work. I want to perform on stage. My cousin, Karen, is coming out from Chicago, to join me in a dramatic career. I think we could be another Nichols and May.

I went down to LA for two weeks a while back, to see if I could get into show business with the help of my rich Uncle Harry. Instead, he suggested I go down to the Balboa Bay Club and pick up a rich widow and he was serious. Harry's wife, Teddy, once married to a top executive at MGM, working on her fifth face lift, which is the limit, I've been told, suggested I forget about the silver screen, get a job, and write poetry as a hobby. Teddy is proud and Harry is humble to tell me that he plays bridge with John Wayne. The Duke.

I went out for more cigarettes and ran into my roommate, Paul. Paul is just back from a music festival at a Mission District junior high school, held in a room filled with nubile Chicanas. Like me, Paul distracts himself chronically. He suggests we go down to Garcia's on Haight Street for Mexican food. He was gone a year in Mexico, and now he's back, unemployed, broker than I am, under suit from the New Jersey State Police, and the gay landlords are demanding his eviction. He's troubled, left and right. At Garcia's I ask for a fresh ashtray. The plump teenage waitress coolly opens the front door and chucks the dead butts and ashes into the street. "Classy," I say. I order coffee

first. It doesn't come. It comes with the coke I ordered for later. The other waitress, younger than the first, looks at me mystified. "You want coffee *and* a coke?" she says.

We stop in at Cat's Cradle, converted from John's Playhouse, from gay to bluegrass. Onstage, after the two-dollar spaghetti feed, the same faces are playing as played with and around my brother, Mark, three years ago and two years before that. It's a seedy joint, populated by musicians and musicians' girlfriends. "This is my old lady," etc. "It's like the poetry scene," I think, "low energy, laid back, dull."

Now I'm back home, drinking Hiram Walker's Ten High. Paul comes back from the corner with fresh toilet paper. No ripped-up Sunday paper for him. I chip in. Paul hands me back a quarter change. "Thank you, sir," I say, and chuck the quarter over my shoulder. Like Jeff Miller, who parks cars at The Plantation Restaurant, back home in Moline, Illinois. Any tip that's only a quarter is met with a gracious, "Thank you, sir," and an automatic, mechanical, spring-loaded, bullet-release, over-the-shoulder, into-the-bushes, next-to-the-fountain, good-bye shiny new quarter. I think I have to get some money to Betty, so she won't balk at taking me on as a roommate. I suspect, at the same time, she's nervous about me backing out.

"My god," I think, "it's another relationship." I suspect I'm being hired as a buffer between her and her peripatetic boyfriend, Jon. Betty works part-time as a waitress at Yancy's, a pick-up, dance place, with undertones of urban violence, frustrated energy warming into the pool of night air, at 2AM, Coupe de Villes in the street, motorcycles, girlfriends whispering to each other, a few steps ahead of their anxious, confused dates.

Dates? "What constant, anachronistic, language blows," I think. Business is bad at Betty Boop's. Someone smashed the door window and stole fifty bucks and a few rings. Her place has lace curtains and a Donald Duck clock with moving eyes. The clock doesn't tick. It blinks, "Blink, blink. The mouse ran up the duck."

The thief was into kitsch. He's addicted to it. It's probably boyfriend Jon, who steals Betty blind, when he can get her blind. He gets nowhere when she can see him clearly. Paul is dispossessed in his own apartment. It's mostly my furniture and my stereo, but worst of all, here I am sitting in his chair. Paul is wandering from wall to wall, from pillar to post. He sits to read the Mexican poet he's translating, Oscar Oliva, and he's astounded. He finds Oliva simple, eloquent, and apolitical; a poet who uses simple words, like "beautiful."

"Where's the party?" I ask.

Both of us are flush with sexual desire. I go to the phone to call Betty, to see what's up. There's no answer. I come back in a talkative mood. The little girls on the block caught me talking to myself on the street and nicknamed me *Talk-It-Over*. Here comes *Talk-It-Over*. It makes me self-conscious in the city. Walking along, talking to myself. I turn a corner and try to make a song out of my words. It never works. "Hey, Ronnie, did you catch that guy trying to turn his mindless jabber into a song?" "Man, this city is on the skids, nice looking guy like that, talking to himself on the street."

All neuroses in plain sight. Erica Jong (*Fear of Flying*) is waving her bum in public, but she doesn't mention stretch marks. I know she's got stretch marks. Everybody's got stretch marks. Not to mention Werner Erhard and Erhard Seminar Trainings, E\$T, assholes feeling good about being assholes. But, the best advice I've gotten, recently, was from an ESTie, Curt Mackey, a fellow poet, with whom I share this venereal disease, or one of its more benign cousins, transferred from Curt to me, via Anne Valley Fox, another fellow poet. And a good fellow she is. I would walk on glass to get to Anne. (I'm not saying broken glass, mind you.) The advice was one word. Responsibility. Curt talks about the joy and OKness of taking responsibility for everything that happens or is happening to each of us. Curt is implacable. He takes to responsibility like the immune take to disease.

"Somebody's going to have to buy me a new shirt," I say, standing at the closet.

"When you find out who that is, you tell them I need a shirt and some new pants."

I take out a brown shirt I found in the dressing room of the New Committee Theatre, five years ago. We were putting on a play I wrote in collaboration with Charles (not Chuck) Borkhuis (also called *Bowery*, for his clothing style) in order to help end the war in Vietnam and, specifically, the bombing in Cambodia. The shirt was left over from "Fortune and Men's Eyes," starring Sal Mineo. It has a patch on the sleeve that reads, *California Correctional Facility*. I ripped off the patch, and the shirt. The war continued unabated, including the bombing of Cambodia. I watched Julia Vose boldly strip in the middle of the dressing room, between scenes. And Marilee Janson, who changed her clothes in the corner over by the cement block wall, with her back to the room. Both of them were tantalizing to my eyes.

I'm on the piss parade, now, taking regular hikes to the toilet. The misty, soulful voice, engulfing the room from FM 101, says, "It's just one of those things you put down to experience." I have some more Marsala. Paul is in the kitchen, talking to David, a real nice guy from upstairs, who says he's *into* poetry. There's a song on the radio, hard-sell

soul. "Voulez-vous couchez avec moi, ce soir?" David says Charlene, who also lives upstairs, has him in her harem. He says she comes up and rapes him, occasionally. Charlene, David, and Paul are being evicted at the same time. It's ménage-a-trois into the street.

A while back, Paul and I came home drunk and stood shouting up from the sidewalk, "CHARLENE!!" She never came down. Her full name is Charlene Funderbunk. Her daughter is Rainbow Funderbunk. Charlene is in the hospital in Santa Cruz, after she dropped acid, fell off a chair and cracked her skull. On the radio one deep FM voice is asking another, "And what do I do, if I find that I have rats in my apartment."

"What are we listening to?" Paul smiles.

I jump up and switch to phono. I drop the floating arm onto "The Seasons" by Vivaldi. I stand, facing the stereo, seriously directing the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra of New York, as if I have a dripping Popsicle stick in my hand. It reminds me of a college friend, Phil Landrich, from Des Moines, skinny and homely as Abe Lincoln, who would stand for hours, straight as one of Abe's split rails, directing his stereo, perfectly. College life was full of such weirdos. Wait a minute. Not weird at all. "Wonderful people," I think. Bill Landrich gave me the name I used for a humor magazine in college, "The American Heretic." I used the name again for an art gallery that went bust, back home in Moline. A nice lady from Alcoholics Anonymous, next door, said, "What a nice name. Will you put an eagle over the door?"

I looked at her, and I thought, "I'm in the wrong town."

Paul and I join the Philharmonic, pumping our right arms violently across imaginary rubber violins. Our hair flies across our grimacing faces. "God, these guys must have right arms like mastadons," says Paul and then turns reflective, "This guy must be a poet." Vivaldi also turns reflective. "Nice guy, Vivaldi," Paul says. Later, he yells from the kitchen, "You're not going to tell me there's no peanut butter?"

"No, but I'll tell you there's not hash browns."

He goes ten steps up the passageway to the street and comes back. "Shit! The store's closed." It's after midnight. I feel something funny in my right triceps.

"You're going to develop a twitch and be crazy, just like me," Paul says. He hangs up his threadbare laundry in the closet. He places the cellophane wrapper from two peanut butter cookies on my propped-up left leg and lies down on the bed. Later, in my new, temporary bed, in the back storage room, I have a dream, which includes my ex-wife, Jenny. We're in a caravan, forced off the main highway into an underground traffic

circle. I notice the name BROOKS over the entrance to the underground complex. Under BROOKS, in smaller letters, are other names, including Larry King, the husband of Billie Jean King. I laugh. I wondered if there might be a BROOKS with KING in the same building. I tell Jenny about it. We're back in the traffic flow. We can see our way up and out. We're on a country road. We pull over and picnic. Down the path come two runners. I begin to run with them. Jenny says, "Just a suggestion – the shoes?" I look down. I'm wearing dress shoes with black socks. I run over to a pile of clothes and put on white socks and look for track shoes. I put one sock over a black sock and have to make the change again.

I feel an urge to say to Jenny, "I love you." I can't ever remember feeling it or saying it. She's being kind and helpful, but the runners are getting some distance down the road. She's somehow part of the run, as if she's going to run, too, but our concern is to get me off and running. I wake up, wondering if I'm in love with Jenny. I'm awake at least four hours before I want to be, I have an uncomfortable erection, the sense of the dream, and uneasiness about it. "So this is what they call morning," I say, to myself, "a state I avoid like Kansas."

I go into Paul's room to get a pair of shorts, and Paul rises up.

"Oh, a naked man," he says and drops back to sleep. I'm glad to contribute to Paul's dream, but for me, it's coffee and the sound of the cup on the wood plank table. It klunk-klunks in the silent kitchen, like a tiny Dutch milkmaid, in her wooden shoes, stepping off the last rung of a ladder, onto the wooden floor.

A Negative with a Positive

I'm watching excerpts from "Jesus Christ Superstar," on the Mike Douglas Show. Satan is interrogating Jesus, in oblique slices of video. "I'm leading an incredible life," I think. Days ago, I got Sherry vibes. I went with, slept with, lived with Sherry, for almost a year, this last year. I went downtown to the movie, "Alice Doesn't Live Here, Anymore," and I fell in line behind Sherry and Traci. "No, that's not Sherry," I thought. "Looks like her, though. Wow. I really got worked up. Oh, shit, it is Sherry."

"Sherry!"

"Steve!"

The last time I talked to Sherry was several months ago, at 2 AM, from a phone booth on Pacific and Grant in Chinatown. I cried, I howled, I fell silent, I chatted. I spent

an hour and a half recapitulating the year of our relationship. On other occasions, Sherry had admired my egotism, she recommended I never get a job, and she pointed out that I followed a positive statement with a negative one. "What a beautiful day, I hope it doesn't rain."

I listened to her observation and tried something new. I followed a positive with another positive, then with a superlative. I got so excited I could hardly stand it. "What a beautiful day. This is a great day! This is the best day I've ever seen!" It became too much to handle, so I backed off from the superlatives. She said I always backed off when the relationship was good. She welcomed me to her, whenever I wanted. Finally, she got fed up and started up with a greeting card salesman from Chicago. She looked terrific. It was a funny movie. I held my hands in my lap. I squelched my laughter. When the movie was over, I strolled along with them for a block or so and stopped.

"Well, I'm going the other way. It was good to run into you. Bye."

"Bye."

We were both smiling. I barely glanced at Traci. I walked around the block, exultant. Then the 47Potrero bus dropped a power bar off the energy cable. It swung and dropped. It ripped a support cable loose, and the live wire flailed the street. I leaped into a doorway. I didn't want a wild, maverick power line tickling my skull. My reflexes confirmed and my adrenalin tripled, I walked into Henry Africa's for an Irish coffee. I noticed the new photo of the owner, shaking hands with Eddie Arnold. I watched the owner try to prop an aluminum ladder against a six-foot-wide mirror, hung at an angle, strutted out from the high wall and ceiling. With the help of two employees, he was climbing his way into his own reflection. All eyes in the place were glued to the climb. The goal was to implant a screw and eye in the ceiling, adjacent to the upper left corner of the giant mirror.

I couldn't wait for the mirror to shatter or to find out what he was going to hang on the chain. I crossed Van Ness and got on the bus. The guy next to me was holding an artist's pad on his lap and drawing intricate doodles whenever the bus stopped. Across from me, a middle-aged man was masquerading as a middle-aged woman. Black gloves, silver fox fur, blond wig, soft tenor voice, and a net shopping bag.

"Maybe it really is a woman, underneath," I thought.

Apples and Potatoes

I watch The Smothers Brothers, and I think they're back on track. Well-trained comedians, they have a well-engineered show. All my belongings are packed in cardboard boxes in the corner, marked APPLES and POTATOES. I'm set to haul my apples and potatoes over to Betty's.

She calls. "What are you doing?"

I start to say, "Nothing."

I start to say, "I'm writing."

Instead, I say, "I'm watching TV."

She says, "Well, why don't you come over?"

I fantasize that Betty is in love with me. My next feeling is paranoia; "Betty has bad news. She's changed her mind. I can't move in." But she took my rent check and deposited it within minutes. I'm excited about balling Betty. I'm not sure why. Adventure, plus breasts, I suppose. Tonight is my last pill. I'm free to fend for myself in the cornfields of love.

Scenario: Betty is in love with me, and I'm obligingly happy but cool and direct. "It won't work," I tell her. She moons in her room. There's a full moon, tonight and the end to social disease, so I'm in my new room composing my thoughts. Betty lies on her chenille bed cover, coaxing herself into a frenzy. She rises and tosses the Binaca back on the bed. She's at the door, breathing, leaning on, but not touching, the frame. I'm close to a revelatory state I can't explain. It's the nearness to energy and action. There's a light bulb over my head. Blink. Time to go over to Betty's.

I'll Send You to Heaven

I'm watching Cannon, the overweight detective. Cannon is called into a small town in 'a neighboring state' to investigate corruption. *Have Gut, Will Travel*. I'm in my new apartment at Betty's place. Betty is out to dinner. The attraction is still there. I feel the tension you feel from sleeping with your roommate. Paul said he thought it was a mistake for me to sleep with Betty. Paul likes to warn me against mistakes. When I got on the trolley, coming over to Betty's, I stood on the corner, like a normal citizen. The trolley doors opened. Above me, on the steps, was a wino, a man, an elder. A guy behind him

was tossing him off the trolley, manhandling him, as the driver waited. The guy doing the ejecting wore a fatigue jacket with the hood pulled tight around his face and tied.

He said to the wino, "Get off this trolley, you son of a bitch, and if you ever get back on, I'll shoot you and sent you to heaven."

To heaven, for heaven's sake. I got on. The trolley was like a stunned theatre audience. I went to the back and sat next to an off-duty driver.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Uh, the guy was bothering the other guy, and he dragged him up front and tossed him out."

"Why all the way to the front? Why not the back doors?"

"I don't know. To show the driver, I guess."

When the guy with the mean-mask got off, everyone in the trolley came to life. A lady behind me said, "He was as crazy as the other guy."

I'm delaying thinking about Betty. I like Betty. What I hold against myself is my unwillingness to resist fucking everyone I like. I wasn't able to come. It's a sign I trust. It was like fucking my cousin. Next morning, Betty told the landlady I was her cousin.

Hitting the Red Roof

In Vesuvio, after a poetry reading at Intersection, I talked to Curt. I told him about a play I'm working on, *O Neil, Tell Me You're Not Dead*, a free-form soap opera that requires the actors to speak clichés and banalities with real conviction, to truly listen to each other, regardless of the superficial language. Curt understood what I'm trying to do. "It's a tough director's job," he said. "It's a good actor who's willing to make a fool out of himself. I'm not an actor, but you're one of those few people I know who can say things right on the edge."

"That's what I'm scared about," I said, "and that's what I want to do, to get into those dangerous areas. Paul came in with Steve Schutzman and Tom Cuson. Eugene Ruggles, San Francisco's answer to Dylan Thomas, the quintessential drunk poet, buys Curt a drink. Ruggles tries to buy Bob Kaufman a drink, but the bartender refuses. It's policy. Bob is always drunk. He can recite T.S. Eliot beautifully, but you can barely make out the words. I think about what I want to tell Curt, but Paul is there, and he mocks me.

"Steve isn't looking for affect," Curt says. "He's looking for what's true."

I go ahead, my face ragged, "You make me want to cry when you understand what I'm talking about."

Later, everybody kids Curt about his creased, light blue pants, not in keeping with his roustabout image. After several minutes of that, he says, "Oh, shit," and takes his pants off. He tosses them against a table leg. He stands, in his navy blue shorts and lumberjack shirt and smokes a Pall Mall.

At 1:30AM, we drive around town in Steve's Ford Falcon and Curt's VW, looking for pizza. Steve says of the other car, "Those guys in front are just wandering around."

I say, "If we were in front, we'd be the ones wandering around."

We hit the Red Roof on California at 2AM. Tom, Steve, and I sit alone at different tables and peruse our menus. We finally settle at one table. Curt and Paul come in. Paul is not in the mood. He orders an empty plate. In mock pity, we all contribute our share, a slice of onion, a bite of hamburger, a leaf of iceberg lettuce. We were having a wonderful teenage kind of time.

"There's a pubic hair in my hamburger," Steve says.

"It's OK," Tom says. "They grow on you."

Steve shows us a card that Diana, his ex-old-lady, had made up. On it is a profile of a man with his hand in two positions, in front of his nose and his mouth, with an arrow between his hand and his nose and an arrow between his hand and his mouth. The inscription on the card reads, "Please help me. I can neither taste nor smell."

Good old stolid Curt laughs at the jokes, and his laugh is infectious. We all laugh until we're hurting. The waitress joins the fun. The head waitress, with glasses on a chain over her bosom, doesn't. Tom says the chef is laughing behind his grill, that he's the one who put the pubic hair in the burgers. We all chip in for the tip. We contribute all our pennies, nickels, and dimes. There are five of us, and we have to do better.

"I've got a transfer," Paul says.

"Well, I see your transfer, and I raise you the top of a Beer Nuts Bag."

"I see your Beer Nuts Bag, and I raise you an article on the caste system in India," Tom says, and the pile grows.

"I see your ten-cent stamp," Curt says, "and I raise you one shoe."

We leave, and Curt remains shoeless. Steve takes the shoe and tosses it at Curt's VW. They ram each other in the parking lot. Curt was annoyed that his offer of the shoe was withdrawn. He meant it to stand.

Today, Paul said he might have me subpoenaed to appear in Small Claims Court, to testify for him in his fight to squat where he is. In the Bureau of Records, he finds out that Ida Crolingen fashioned Apartment #7 from a couple of storage rooms, back in the 30s, without a permit. The landlords want 125 bucks a month for it after they evict everyone else first. "30 days. Get out. We're taking over." I'm glad to be out.

I finish my lasagna and watch Petrocelli act Italian in San Remo. I say to no one in particular, "I think Jack Hirschman is the best goddam poet in San Francisco." Curt says that most people are afraid to show their faces, but Jack shows his. At the translator's reading, Jack read translations from the Russian, Spanish, Italian, French, and German, all in the original Hirschman. Jack runs around town in a cape or a gesture that makes a cape, drunk, sweating, cold, grinning a gappy black-tooth leer, talking a mile a minute.

Jumping into bed with Betty was a messy thing to do, but Petrocelli solved the mystery. "It was unintentional, so he'll get rehabilitation, not jail." Everybody across the backyards has their shades drawn and their lights on. It's time for the *Eye-Witness News*. Instead, I go out to mail some letters. I stop in at The Chelsea Pub for an Irish coffee nightcap. In front of the Chelsea, there's a guy hunched against an apartment doorway, pissing in his pants, a pool forming out of his pants-leg. It might as well have been blood.

Inside the bar, I stare at my reflection in the bar mirror, as it goes from dashing handsome to lonely sad and won't go back again, no matter what I try. The bar is dirty, there are glass rings on the bar top, full ashtrays, dirty bottles, and a dirty mirror. The Irish coffee is muddy. There's a dirty washrag on the bar. I run it across in front of me. I take a swipe at it. I quit and accept the bar as it is.

Back outside, the drunk guy is in a position like the penitents at Mecca. Kneeling in his own piss on the cement. I try not to be bothered. The guy is young, in blue jeans. There's an airmail letter in his back pocket like a tragic cliché from Kansas City. I stare at the soles of the man's buckle boots.

"Shit. So what that he's young? Tonight, young and desperate go together."

The Sunset Apartments

I settle in, with the idea that the afternoon calls for a physic. How's this combination? Burgundy in a flower-print glass, country music on the FM, wavy-glass windows, windy and clear outside, blowing sheets on the lines. It rains in San Francisco

like a gesture. It rains like your mother sprinkling laundry. San Francisco is the Phi Beta Kappa of Cities, the Debate Club of Cities, the Maresy Doats and Doazy Doats of Cities, this Pastrami on Rye, this Sliced French Bread and Swiss Cheese of Cities, this San Francisco.

I'm lonely and slipping. I take my essentials (Anais Nin, glass of wine, pad and pencil) up to the front room, where the late afternoon sun is accenting the imperfectly cleaned windows. I like clean windows. They transmit the clarity of the world. Could a clean sheet of glass be the filter of clarity in the world, like it is for a drawing on a sheet of paper in a frame?

From here, I can see, through a fish bowl of gradually melting glass, Pasquale's Pizzeria and looking left up the street across Irving, the converted bank building, now called The Record Factory. There's a lettered iron arc on the other side of the street, ornate with a sunburst on top, *Sunset Apartments*. Every window but two of twelve on the façade of the Sunset Apartments has closed shades.

The building I live in is swaybacked or sunk in on itself like an old bed. It tilts toward itself, like an old woman bending to pat a child on the head. I nail the window shut to eliminate the drafts that come through the gaps. The windows don't fit the frames. The glass is falling and thinning.

The building, directly across the street, is a splendid example of Early Spanish, Neo-Classic, Muslim, Fire Department, with swirls and arcs, arching doorways, lots of plaster and pseudo stone. There's a garage door in the center of it all. The available verbal information in view is all of a theme, *One Hour Parking - NO Parking - No Parking Day or Night - No Parking. And, For Rent - Furnished Apartment*. Furnished with what? *Unparked automobiles?*

The hillside above the record store is layered with houses. It could be the South of France or Argentina. I hear children's voices shouting, as only children do. They belong. Their shouts are energy shouts. I look at my hands in the reflection, folded, one over the other. I see them, big, thick-fingered, fleshy, with red in them, and I'm convulsed with a sob. I don't really cry. "It's self-pity, again," I think.

I can see a man standing beside a Dodge Van across the street, and for a second I think he's pissing in the street. But he isn't. I go to my room, in the back, and empty a paper trash bag, looking for cigarette butts. Up front, again, I see the face of an old man at a window across from me in the Sunset Apartments. I feel a kind of sympathy. All I can think about is that when I am that old man, my unhappiness will be multiplied. A kid

bounces a red-white-and-blue basketball against Pasquale's wall. I've managed to shut myself off from almost everyone. No one calls. I'm close to people, only when I'm with them. All I can think is that I want to be on the stage for my life and love.

I went to bed with Dorita, a young, distraught, Black woman. I barely liked her. I left in a hurry. I told Paul the story with energy and gusto. A dozen times, during the night, I decided, I realized, I warned myself, and rarely do I subscribe to my own advice. I end up in a small, upholstered room with a color TV, Paul Butterfield blues all night long, wine in a cute bottle. I sleep, feeling weary and foolish, and she says she can't talk to my back. "Oh, my wife," I say.

There's an orange car on the street, backing up. The driver, in short sleeves, with muscled forearms, is ready to burst forward. He's picking up a friend and a pizza. I want to be in love. Danita, the Black woman, who's also Puerto Rican, out of Chicago, says she loves me. Paul says he *could* be in love. *Let go*. Of course. I let go with Sherry. I'm in love, I let go, it hurts. I'm not in love, I let go, it hurts.

LaWanda Lindsey is on Hee Haw, singing, "I know that San Francisco aint the kind of city where a fellow like you sits at home on a Saturday night." It's Saturday Night. My father asked me once if I thought TV shows were made for me or for twenty million people.

"For twenty million people," I said.

"I think they're made just for me," he said and fell asleep in his leatherette Barcalounger. The next day, when I asked him about it, he denied he said it.

I call Anne. I want to say to her, "Look, I know you don't love me, but I'm miserable. You've been good to me in the past, and I've come to you, now." She's not home. I let the phone ring. I watch the news.

Five Disturbed Men on the Brink of Disaster

I'm part of a group of five White Male Poets collaborating on a book. We have a grant, a leader, and a working title that nobody but our leader likes. Stephen Vincent calls it *Five Disturbed Men*. His idea is that we've all been through similar crises, and that there's value in our being together, talking and writing out of our experiences. We've gone at it for four months, and we have a working manuscript no one has seen, because Stephen doesn't make copies. We're meeting again, tonight, the way we have seven or eight times, already. Hilton Obenzinger and Larry Felson are politically motivated and

committed to that expression. Beau Beausoleil is ideological. He's a modern myth salesman.

"Everybody is in the business of being honest, and nobody's any good at it," I think. I'm watching a movie about spiders, starring the guy who plays Captain Midnight on TV, who, it's been recently revealed, is a Hollywood alcoholic. "Is it Ella Fitzgerald or is it Memorex?"

I'm reading a poetry magazine in which half a dozen poets reveal themselves in a diary format of sixty days, divided among them. The giant spider drools and wails, as it preys. The poets reveal precious little of themselves and talk poetically or politically about the world. They watch TV, they criticize TV, they write. The giant scorpion and the giant worm scream like banshees as they do battle. They have glistening maws. None of the poets fuck or fart. Instead, they describe, with exclamation points, their outrage at the misery and deceit in the world.

One poet, Andrei Codrescu, laughs and has energy, but he disappears in his anecdotes. His stories are light, he's transparent, and I enjoy reading them. I think Andrei's saying something real, however light it may seem. At the last moment, the giant scorpion can't reach the hero and the small boy called Juanito. They escape by inches. Some of the entries are not diary realities but what the poet wrote that day. As I read the collection, I look not for poetry but the plain truth. "Poets' lives are the conduit maybe the source of their poetry, but their lives are not the thing itself," I think, but what do I mean? Why not the thing itself? I'm not writing poetry, so I don't qualify. "Bullshit," I think. "Says who?"

The poets talk about books. I think, "These people are great identifiers, with others, with movements, with emotions, with pressures. They have absolutely no idea who they are." Is that normal? It seems intensely, absurdly normal. They occasionally talk about their particular predicaments. The spiders attack an express train. The passengers, men in suits with padded shoulders, women in mid-calf skirts and three-inch pumps, flee the scene. Months ago, when we were first getting going, the idea of *disturbed men* was compelling, and the impetus for being a men's consciousness group was fresh, so I told the group about being picked up in a bar by a woman, taken home, fucked, and then hustled out the door, the next morning. It was a shock, a mind-reversal of crucial value and therefore worth talking about, I thought. Later, I ran into the same woman in the bar where we met. She was upset that I didn't say hello. So I said hello.

"What's your name, I forgot," she says.

“Steve, what’s yours?”

“Carla,” she said.

We laughed. I asked her for a ride. I asked her if she wanted a cup of coffee. I asked her if she wanted to stay the night. I said I was uncomfortable and always talk nervously when a woman was in my room. I told her I was miserable, and then I felt better. I told myself I liked her. She said she was a Gemini, and she tells me I’m a schmuck. I tell her I’m not a schmuck, and I fall into a sound sleep. She can’t sleep and explains, at 6AM, that she devised and carried on a word game with me. She asks if I heard her. I didn’t. It’s my bed, my room. It all feels neat and orderly, and in the morning, I was determined not to be miserable.

I told the others how Carla wants to write a book about her experiences picking up men. She wants to turn an otherwise miserable string of events into a worthwhile project. She teaches troubled kids, like my ex-wife does. She had small breasts, a flabby ass and flabby thighs, a body like a beanbag, but it smelled great. I joked with her. She said she didn’t mind if I was miserable. She was warm and comfortable.

It seemed to me, when I told the four other poets about my experience with Carla, that they cast scornful glances at the pretty boy and his phony problems.

“So much for male sharing,” I thought.

The Crossing Guard

I approached 14th and Irving, on my walk to the Sunset Branch of the Public Library. I saw a girl crossing guard, maybe eleven years old, tall, thin, and blond, in a school uniform sailor suit. She stood, with her head lowered, her back toward me, as I came to the curb. As I stepped off the curb, she walked three steps into the lane and raised her right hand like a semaphore. *Sophomore*, we used to say when I was her age. She faced the street, her back to me, as I crossed. I was well protected. There was no traffic in sight. I felt silly and pleased. I smiled, but not at her. I crossed the street. I stayed within the lines.

More Character

I tell Paul a story about sleeping with a woman. He begs for more character development. That makes me think the only character development I know how to do, is

my own. I live alone, divorced from wife and kids; I have no girlfriend, no best friend. Already, I'm forcing the issue of my isolation. It's difficult for me to develop anyone's character but my own, and I'm afraid my own is losing development as I lose others from my life. Stephen Vincent calls to tell me he wants more poems for our manuscript. He names several from memory. The kind he wants are poems that broaden their scope to include other people, not just me and the city or me and my senses.

"Me and my shadow," I think. "Of course he's right," I think, "but am I wrong?"

However, he asks me for poems I've already written. I say to myself, "You touch others, and you are touched by others. Don't disrespect what's true in your life."

Stephen implies that my scope is large enough, but my vision is too narrow. Character development is not impossible. I dedicate myself to character, "MORE CHARACTER!" I say.

The Unswitchables

I'm sitting at my drawing table, drawing sentences out, like blood. I look out the window occasionally, and I'm startled by a silhouette, a reflection, a partially transparent, reversed ghost of myself, giant and dark, against the backsides of the stores on Irving Street. Above the roofline, I see a giant pack of Tareytons and the message, *Join the Unswitchables*. I'm reading Anaïs Nin, who is trying to figure out Henry Miller's wife, June. Betty and Jon are in her room, bathed in TV light, smoking marijuana. Potent smoke and ambivalence. Jon gets up to leave.

"See you later, Steve."

"See you later, Jon."

Betty goes to the phone and calls Cindy, from next door, to come over and meet me. Betty hangs up.

"I am FUCKED UP!" she says, referring to being loaded. Loaded up with marijuana and down with Jon, and with a friend, Cindy, who wants to do something but not go to a *dumb movie*. And, with a new roommate who sits at his desk all day, taking notes; listening to, composing, and sending messages. Cindy comes over. Betty describes Cindy as a runaway housewife. Cindy is a plain specimen of feminine humanity, with her hair done. She's looking for action. Betty says Cindy is a good cook. Cindy complains about paying the utility bill of someone else's apartment on her PG&E bill. She doesn't want to go to a movie, but Betty wants to hide out in a darkened

theatre. Both women finger their hair. Cindy says they could take her motorbike, but she's inexperienced, taking riders. Betty says she doesn't want to be her *patient*, when she means *passenger*. They sit, cross-legged, on Betty's bed, the paper spread across their laps like a map. After meeting Cindy, I come back to my room and look at my empty bed frame. My bed is only frame. I don't have a mattress yet. My bed is a half-shell with the oyster missing. A square of air. A bed of supposes.

I stopped by Paul's, this afternoon, just before he went off to small claims court, with what for him is no small claim. He wanted me as a corroborating witness, to tell how shitty the landlords are and how righteous his complaints are. He was in the shower, when I told him I didn't think it was a good idea for me to testify.

"I don't want to tell tales in church," I said, trying to get the idiom right.

Paul is beleaguered. He doesn't have a shower curtain. It's in my new apartment. His co-defendant, Daniel, doesn't care about the outcome but took vivid color Polaroids of the decay of two American apartments. Like compromising pictures of your wife, when you don't really want a divorce. The pictures are perfect. The place looks like a deathtrap.

Barb, from upstairs, decided she couldn't attend the hearing, because her face is swollen. Another deserting friend. Paul decides my being there might not be such a good idea. Somebody might ask me a question. Such as, why is my name on the check, when Paul is the one making the claim? I enjoyed not helping Paul. I'm determined not to feel sorry for him. I told him the story of Peter Ellington's court case, a suit to get his kids back from the Philippines. They were with their mother's Philipino, national hero rich daddy. The court said, "Leave the kids there. Their mother is improving herself, back home." The will of the court. Whim. Wham. Will.

Then, Paul told me a truly inspiring story. Called to jury duty, recently, he stood and objected, when he noticed that the prosecutor had peremptorily challenged and refused to seat any black jurors. The courtroom exploded with objections. The judge was taken aback. The trial was of a man accused of assault with a deadly weapon. The man claimed self-defense. He's black, and the potential jury was all white. Paul said the jurors couldn't understand the man's desire to own a gun.

"The man," Paul said, "may be sent to jail for doing what everyone around him does." Paul was relieved of duty. The prosecutor asked that he be permanently barred from jury duty. Paul thinks lawyers are lost without their rules, and he won't play by the

rules. In the hallway, the defense attorney's assistant ran up to him and gave him a big handshake and a big grin, "Thank you. Thank you, very much," she said.

Despite his nobility, however, Paul shouldn't take himself on as a client. He is without brief or briefcase. Speaking of brief, that's what happened. He got in court, the judge gave him one minute to state his case, rejecting his points as he made them, disposition in the mail. Now, he's fasting, not smoking, not drinking, as befits a man whom the law has succinctly denied. He's preparing to steal some bread and sleep under a bridge. My life goes quiet. Like the weather, it changes, and like water, it flows, it floods, it freezes, it cools, it boils. And when it rains, it pours. My son, Jack, (Jackson) is asleep in the front room. Earlier, we read nursery rhymes, after a game of MONOPOLY.

"Lessons, all useless," I think.

I go directly to jail, several times.

"A record for me," I say.

"Yeah," Jack says, "cause you never been in jail."

"Eight little Injuns, never heard of heaven. One kicked the bucket, and then there were seven. Two little Injuns, fooling with a gun. One shot the other, and then there was one. One little Injun, lying all alone, he got married, and then there was none."

I call Anne and invite her to take Jackson and me for ice cream. She can't go. She says she's "really into something." She says she'd love to meet Jackson. I think, "Take me, baby, and you get Jackson as a bonus."

Betty goes over to stay the night with Jon.

"What makes the lamb love Mary so?" the eager children cry.

"Tommy's tears and Mary's fears will make them old before their years."

Betty says I don't look as old as I am, and that I'm nervous, when I appear calm. I answer that I have a lot of trouble with illusion and reality. I call Anne to tell her I'm going crazy without her, that my last two years have been a search for her, either in her or in someone like her. I'm dulcet and mellow and the picture of self-assurance. I tell Betty about my stammering brother, Mark. For Mark, there are no rules he can rely on. He can't trust his mouth to produce language. Language is our first acceptance of the rules. Without language, we're all without rules. Mark makes an ethic of his condition. We all do. In his view, every convention is up for grabs and totally and violently artificial.

Curt told the story of being blindfolded for a day. He lost all sense of space and time. Every step was all he was doing. Without being able to see the corner, all he

sought, in his walk down the street, all that his being cared for, was the being he is, in the making of each step.

"There was an old woman, living under a hill, and if she's not gone, she lives there still."

"How many miles to Babylon? Three score and ten."

"Can I get there by candlelight?"

"Yes, and back again. If your heels are nimble and light."

I'm drinking Lejon extra dry Vermouth in the 4/5 pint. I'm smoking True Blues and listening to old rock 'n' roll playing down the hall in the back room. For someone who's not smoking, I'm smoking pretty good. A pack of Trues. Like a pack of Truths? Is that equivalent to a pack of Lies?

"I can't stand you, Arthur. What you say is a pack of Truths."

My ribs hurt all day. I wonder if it's emphysema, cancer, or sleeping on a too-soft mattress. Last night, in Churchill's, I sat next to a steamfitter. "What's a steamfitter?" I asked. "Someone who contains evanescence for a living?"

"Yeah, man, I understand. Go on, tell me more," he said, looking a little desperate. He asks me if I think it's difficult living in this country. I say I think it's the most difficult country to live in, in the world, because we are the new world, and we did it. It's the conscious man's burden."

I tell the steamfitter that I watch my wastebasket, "It fills up in a day, with empty bags, cans, cartons, packs, and wraps."

"What are you, man, a writer?"

He says he's a loser, and his recent good luck is merely a will of the wisp, a wisp of the will. He's determined to accumulate \$10,000 in two years, sink it into a bar, and then go bust when the customers desert him. Oh, well, you only go around once, might as well make a botch of it. Grab all the failure you can. Gusto is to life what foam is to beer, merely evidence that the beer isn't flat, as valuable as a moustache. I once wrote in a poem that moustaches were masks, "Let us be naked of lip," I said. It was easy to say, after I shaved off my moustache.

Night of the Living Dead

A World of Possibilities. I'm watching my cigarette burn, when Shelly blows in, all in black, to visit Betty. "This is the night of the living dead!" she says. "I offer myself to

them. Zombies. He could have said, 'Hey, baby.' Any bullshit. I'm sick of it. Every night of my life!" She's wearing a black beret, black long-coat, black slacks and black shoes. Blond hair and face. Her face is bony, bereft of color or paint. She's pissed off, fucked up, and like that. She says to me, "Hello. Yes, I'm pissed off."

A voice on the radio says, "It seems that most people aren't getting the most out of sex. Contact Dr. Joel Fort, at Fort Help." And then, rock 'n' roll. My room looks like a table setting before dinner. Shelly comes in and checks out my room.

"Is this your room?"

"I need a bed."

"I slept on a narrow thing, for a while."

"That's what I'm doing, up front," I say, and I point to the front room, the parlor by the street, toward Eighth Avenue.

"Is this your book?"

"It's Betty's. I'm reading it."

"Well, I won't intrude on your privacy."

"It's OK."

Then, Betty and Shelly leave.

"I'm out," Betty says. "Don't tell anyone where I am."

"I wouldn't dare," I say.

I'm watching *The 500 Pound Jerk*, starring Alex Karras. Alex is an American weightlifter in love with a Russian gymnast. A Ruskie friend says to Alex, when he temporarily loses the girl, "Das vadanya, tovarich."

"Jesus," I say to myself, "I got to get my ass in gear and get around the world. Why did I have kids?" Immediately, I'm overcome with a rush of love for Jack and Rachel. Regrets. Ambitions. A world of possibilities and a string of relatively few choices.

"Dear Betty," I address her, abstractly, (She's going to Mexico.) "I'm going to buy a bottle of San Miguel Beer, to bless you on your way."

A girl on the corner asks me, "Did you see the sunset?"

I see it. It's a great sunset. Living at Eighth and Irving, on the edge of the Sunset District, it's a long low slide to the ocean. As Alan Ginsburg might say to Gary Snyder, "I make my way to the beach, today, listening for ocean rhythm, alpha wave, heart beat, like oxen hooves suck from mud road, as cut pine crashes to forest floor."

At the beach, I saw three Chicanas write their names in the sand with fence slats.

Nearby, a man trained his dog with a scowl and a fist.

Go Call Trackenberg

Riding the streetcar, I see a funny thing, and I laugh. “Oh, my god,” I think, “things must be getting better.” I’m laughing again, rising again. I watch a construction site in the street, near the streetcar. A man on a backhoe drags a huge metal plate to the edge of a ditch to serve as a walkway across the ditch. Another man stands nearby, supervising. The plate edges toward the rim of the ditch, cutting into the soft asphalt of the street. Then, like Lee Trevino’s putt drops gingerly into the cup, the plate slips over the cliff and drops six inches into the sand and dirt below. The plate falls. Two sets of eyes fall. The shoulders of the man watching, fall, and then his eyes rise to meet the eyes of the man on the backhoe. They look at each other, and I laugh. I remember another time.

Working for the *Iowa-Illinois Gas and Electric Company* at 22, I witnessed a similar scene. I was a helper for a gas line repair crew. Three crews were called out from the office in Rock Island, to the town of Silvis, a couple of blocks from the Illinois State Psychiatric Hospital. It was raining. A drizzle. Gray May skies. When we got there, myself, Baron Wallace, who was the other flunkie, Jerry Frisby (his real name), the assistant, and Marshall Dillon, (Robert McHenry) also called Chester, the boss of our crew, and the others, the backhoe was already beginning to dig down near the gas leak. The backhoe operator, a true artist, was advised to go slow, since the sewer pipes were near the gas main. The sewer was ancient, clay, overlocking sections. Slowly, the man cleaned off layers of earth, like peeling back blankets on a bed. As eight other men lean over the edge of the pit, and all eyes narrowed to a point six feet below, the prong of the shovel of the backhoe caught the lip of one of the clay sewer pipes and ripped off a chunk, slowly and inexorably.

There below us, was the sight of rushing water, a small vision, like a breakthrough in archaeology, like discovering an underground river, a tiny River Styx. It was silent around the pit, as we all gazed on the miserable mistake. I thought of the delicacy of the accident and the prospect of patching it up. It wasn’t my place to speak, or it seemed, anyone else’s. The backhoe operator, who everyone respected, shut off his motor. The

scene was enacted in silence, in the misting rain in the muggy morning of an early summer day a few blocks up from the Mississippi River.

Finally, a voice said, "Well, it looks like she shot her wad."

Then another voice, "She shot her wad, all right."

Then, a crew leader, "She sure shot her wad, this time."

Then, the resigned voice of the man in whom resided overall responsibility, "Better go call Trackenberg. Tell him *she shot her wad*."

A Tolerant City

I'm watching Alistair Cooke talk about San Francisco as a marvelous place to live. "San Francisco has nine hills and is free of frost. A tolerant city, not monolithic, each has his own house. It's reproduction, in an orderly manner." A dog runs by Cooke as he sits among some foliage on a hillside, stripping the stem of a flower. He talks about the old-time crazy character called Emperor Norton who suggested that Abraham Lincoln marry Queen Victoria. I'm watching this on a Sony Solid State TV, equipped with an on-off switch and a volume control, which allows me to choose between faint sound and harsh sound. I'm going to a poetry reading any minute, at Intersection in North Beach. It's a reading by John Ashbery, or as Jim Gustafson puts it so fondly, "...that faggot from New York."

I'm happy to be happy again. "I love TV," I think. "It's a terrible thing. God save us from terrible things, and God bless Himself for allowing such terrible things." I'm drinking terrible, straight, cheap, bourbon whiskey. It's 9:21, and the reading starts in nine minutes. I better get a move on. Go tell Trackenberg.

Synchronicity

Robert Frost is on the streetcar. He's holding a *44 caliber Umbrella* in his lap. He mutters something about President Kennedy. I try to see if I can catch it. "The bastard... wanted my autograph... the bastard." He glances at an Olympia Beer sign, then at a young man on crutches, as he continues to caress his high-gauge umbrella. He rubs his knee and shakes his head, as we enter a tunnel. Frost is dumbly complacent, as he twirls the barrel of his umbrella in his crippled left hand. Jean Paul Sartre gets on and takes a seat near the front. He reads the TV listings in the Chronicle. At Church Street,

Sartre stands to allow for the departure of his seatmate. He sits down and existentially considers the horoscope and the contract bridge column. The man on crutches gets off at Market and Duboce. It's *Family Unity Month* on the streetcar. *The Jewish Welfare Federation* declares, "We are One." We're also told, "Newport is Alive with Pleasure," and Blue Cross says, "Getting Sick Can Sneak Up On You." Downtown is as busy as the back of a vagrant dog. Frost gets off at Mason, and Sartre gets off at Powell. The driver says to Sartre, "Oh, not too bad. And yourself? Goodnight. See you tomorrow."

I get off at Third and go into Stevenson Alley to piss. I stand in a recessed doorway. The bus driver has the same idea. He and I piss, synchronistically, not twenty feet apart. Ah, the sweet world of pleasurable necessities. Now the Stockton bus driver is talking to a friend, "It's a stupid stereotype," he says. The bus is full of Chinese conversation. The driver's friend raises her left hand, opens it and points to it with the index finger of her right hand, saying as she laughs, "That really freaks me out." The Stockton bus agrees with the NJudah streetcar that sickness can sneak up on you. The driver's friend says something about competition in South America, and an attractive head of hair appears in front of me.

At the poetry reading, there's a parade of actors, going up and down the backstairs, coming and going from the stage upstairs. Ashbery uses great Anglo-Saxon consonant words. Curt comes in and opens a bottle of beer. I stare greedy arrows at the bottle, and he allows me a swallow. I take the swallow like God's appreciation for the least of these. A man, with love in his eyes, edges closer and closer to Leslie Scalapino. Lover is pulling his beard and crossing his legs into the future of her crossed legs. I feel sorry for the guy, but I don't know Leslie at all well, and he's a stranger to me.

Ashes on the Rug of the World

I went to the Surf Theatre to see "Hearts and Minds", a movie about the Vietnam War, a recapitulation of the scenes, thoughts, anger and confusion of the last ten years. One scene is shot during the '68 Tet Offensive. It was on TV at the time, in front of millions of Americans on the Huntley-Brinkley NBC Evening News. A colonel in the Saigon Police summarily walks up and shoots a prisoner in the head, in the middle of the street. I remember the moment. I was teaching school and living in the woods in Connecticut. The highway patrolman, who lived upstairs and owned the apartment we

rented, was out back in the woods, shooting his guns to work off anxieties. Jenny was feeding two-year-old Jackson.

On the news, Chet said something about the next piece of film being graphic. Then, the camera backs down the wide Saigon street, ahead of a Viet Cong prisoner in a plaid shirt, shorts, and sandals, with his head lowered, his hands tied behind his back. A figure crosses in front of the camera, turns, raises a revolver, and shoots. The prisoner crumples to the ground. A pool of blood spreads quickly. The film ends. Silence. Followed by the EVENING NEWS logo, in silence, followed by a commercial. I was stunned. In the movie, the blood spurts from the man's head in a high arc. We have seen a lot of that on TV, but there's a difference. The TV is a cool, artifact medium. The event is reduced to miniature and held at a distance that seems controllable. When Lawrence Welk says, "Thanks for welcoming us into your living room," that's nonsense. The TV doesn't come into the room. We go into the TV. If you put a towel over the TV, it's suddenly in the room like radio programs are. But in a movie theatre, it's all in the room. Right here. Right now. On the Movietone News.

After the movie, the audience seemed in a stunned hush, a tangible kind of public consciousness. I felt hostility. I wanted to strike out at someone. It was crowded in the Surf Theatre, the aisle was packed, and people were moving slowly and silently toward the door. A girl said, "Excuse me, excuse me," trying to get through. During the movie, a guy in the back applauded and shouted hooray, when an American bomber was shot down. I thought, "Jesus, fella, it's not a football game." I tried not to bump into anyone. My head was full of ten years, and I didn't know what would or should come out, if anything did.

After the poetry reading, last night, I stood in the narrow alley between Vesuvio and City Lights, taking off a joint with David Fallows, Curt Mackey, and Tom Cuson. David had a bottle of Bud in his hand. I was as drunk as I get, on the excuse of celebrating David's inheritance of \$11,000. Earlier, at the table, inside, I had lapsed into maudlin expressions of brotherly love, "I like you David. You're a nice guy. You know that, but you can't handle it. You can't handle being a nice guy. You can handle all kinds of heavy shit, but you can't handle that. You're fucked up, but I like you. I like you, too, Curt. I really do. You're fucked up, too, but I like you."

"What about me?" Tom said, leaning around Curt.

"I like you, too, Tom."

It was funny, liking everyone. It felt true. "You're a nice guy," I said to everyone, and they all looked foolish and shy. I was happy for David. He's full of projects. I suggested he might run through the money just to get back where he's familiar. I want to be just as happy, just as moneyed. David was acting even mellower than I was, and smoking cigarettes. I went down the bar and stopped to talk to Lanny Wicher. He was sitting with Stephen Schwartz, the self-proclaimed *Voice of Surrealism on the West Coast*. I started using a French accent. A girl in a beret, at the table, sneered, "What a phony accent."

Lanny said I was Canadian, and she became embarrassed. I felt like a jerk, but only barely, so I steamed ahead, feeling good. I went downstairs for a piss, came back up and put my arm around Giselle, and told her it was all OK, using my regular American accent. She said she didn't want to talk to me. "OK," I said, "I'm gone," I said. Back in my seat, a girl at the bar was eyeballing me. Finally sliding over, she joined the table, watching me. After a time, I pointed at her, "I think that woman likes me," I said. I loved it, and then we were all out in the alley, the new girl included, and I took the beer bottle out of David's hand and chucked it over my shoulder. CRASH! David got all worked up and started pushing me around. He said something like, "This is my world...my street...don't mess it up."

I thought about cleaning it up, for a second, and then I said, "Fuck you, David. I'm sick of worrying about the damn world." He pushed me again. I wasn't going to be pushed. I pushed back. He went on about the present 2AM San Francisco Back Alley Ecological Balance."

"It's a gesture," he said, finally.

"You're right, David, it's a goddam gesture," I said. He continued trying to get me to clean up the brown splinters. I walked over toward the crash site and walked back. "Shit, I don't want to pick up the damn bottle," I said. My mind flashed to earlier in the day, when I glared at a young couple who dropped their 7UP cans on the street on Market and Van Ness.

Then, Curt said he agreed with David. "Hell," I said, "I agree with David." David then said I should never do that, again, in his presence. He wanted me to promise. He threatened to hurt me, in some manner. Then, I calmly and forcefully told him I would wrap his ass around a nearby pole, if he kept pushing me.

I couldn't believe I was saying and doing what I did. I told Curt, later, that that sort of thing was new to me. David was always blowing off in a belligerent manner about his

time in Vietnam, and he's a drunk and a street poet, presumably a tough guy, and here I was, backing him down. David said he was glad we didn't fight, because he was sure I'd beat the shit out of him. I had no such intention. But I got into that marvelous state of being where there is no fear. I recognize it as instinct. It's not dumb courage or drunken bravado. It is un-aggressive and impassive, a state of clarity and calmness.

We all went back into Vesuvio, laughing, Curt, David, and Tom were joking. I turned serious, still smiling. "It's really not funny," I thought. "I'm smiling, but not because it's funny. I'm smiling, because I love it."

Then, David brought out his big guns. The ones that, normally, when I'm sober and deferential to his high-energy world-weariness, made me self-conscious of my boyish look and lack of hard experience. He accused me of being a closet faggot; that I need to have my ass reamed out.

"David, is that your problem?" I said. "Because that's the same story you always tell. Is that what you worry about? So, you've had your experiences. Since when? How long since you had your own asshole reamed out, David? I'm sick of worrying about dropping ashes on the rug of the world, and I'm sick of guys like you who think that just because you're miserable, you've got a lock on reality. I love life, and I'm a nice guy, and I don't want to be miserable or serious, and I'm just as right as you are, maybe more so."

I felt clean. I went home and called Anne at 3AM. She came to the phone and said, "Oh, Steve, I'll talk to you tomorrow. I'm in the middle of a dream."

Speed Up and Slow Down

On the way back from the library, I stopped in at The Treasure Trove on Irving and bought *Last Tango in Paris*. The woman at the card table, chain-smoking Pall Malls, said some reviewers thought it was not so good of a movie. In the other room, I could hear an old woman's halting voice, asking questions about napkin holders and telling personal details.

"I... still... have sterling... silver ones... do... you... remember... those?"

The clerk nearby replied, indifferently, "Oh, really. No kidding. Well, that's really something."

The old woman talked more than most people with normal faculties do. She talked like a woman who lives alone and shops in used clothing stores so she can have someone to talk to.

"You can pick up the things on the table," the clerk advises her. "I mean, you have to, to see what things are underneath, but, I'll pick up the things on the shelf. Ha, ha."

She laughed a commercial laugh with a softener added to the harsh detergent of her message.

I buy *Blood on the Tracks*, by Bob Dylan. "Bob, you can't sing for shit," I think. A great kvetcher, Mr. Dylan. It's a terrific album cover. You can't tell an album by its cover, but looks are not always deceiving. It's the implication of what's beyond the looks that's deceiving. Gore Vidal says character cracks beauty, confuses it and lessens it. Linda Ronstadt says running has the same effects as doing speed. I want character and energy. I'm addicted to the drug of beauty. I seek beauty, then signs in demeanor or costume, of character. I want the apple and Eve too. I think I need to run into a woman of character. I think of a woman I saw when I was running in the park. She had large, intimate eyes, clear, unflinching vision, and a small, trim frame, six inches above the ground in flight. Her short-shorts revealed sensual thighs. She ran effortlessly. Her smile spoke of her ease. When I run, I'm tuned to the creaky overcoming of my inertia, but we do the same thing. We run. All of a sudden, "I'M GOIN' RUNNIN'!"

Coming back from running, turning the corner on Eighth and Lincoln Way, I spotted Mike Lehmann trotting toward the park, on the other side of the street. After a half-second's hesitation, feeling my tendency to avoid others, I hailed Mike and we talked. Mike and I are alumni of Grinnell College, in Iowa. We lived in the same residence hall. Now, Mike teaches at USF, and I've run into him, from time to time, over the last four years, always in or near the park. He's easy to talk to, quiet, serious, two years older and thoroughly likeable. He's just back from his mother's funeral in New York City. He didn't tell his students, who said, "Hey, Mr. Lehmann, you go on vacation? Ha, ha." if he mentioned the real reason, they might fall all over themselves with embarrassment. I thought about my current practice of spilling my guts on everyone. I tell Mike about my isolation.

"Gee, Steve," he says, "I don't think that's so good. Have you got friends? Don't be a hermit. It's bad for you."

"I don't know if it's what I have to do, or what I'm stuck in and don't want to do," I tell him.

There's a bird on the wire outside my window who's head of a household of birds that nest in the venting pipes that connect to my gas space heater. Sometimes, in the morning, the birds seem to be trying to find the way back out. I know their screams are

not of fear or flight. But of what? Hunger for food? Animal joy, like the kids out front? I tell Mike I may want out of San Francisco, because it's such a low energy town.

"I feed off energy," I say.

"Well, New York, you should give it a try. It's still the Big Apple, and it's not so bad as people say. You walk on the street in New York, and there's sparks in the air."

"I'm a self-starter," I say, "but it's so much easier if there's energy to feed off of. I want to do some things on the stage, and that's where the best theatre is."

I go home, thinking about writing my cousin, "Hold it, Karen. Let's go to New York." I think about writing Borkhuis in New York, "Borkhuis, let's see what you can do for me. I need a place." I come in the apartment and check the furniture for sales potential. "Whoa," I think, "slow down." I take a shower, after noting the loss of three pounds, in the last three days, from fasting.

On the phone, this morning, I said, "Hello."

Stephen Vincent said, "Brooks fast?"

I said, "Not so fast now."

Stephen said, "Why not? Did you quit?"

"I had a peanut butter sandwich, last night."

"Was it good?"

"It was wonderful."

"I can't imagine. I don't like peanut butter."

I can see I'm not ready to go to New York, right now, this minute, any time soon. Take it easy. Allow the inevitable. Don't push the river. Don't push the Brooks, the babbling brooks. In my senior year in high school, the swimming coach, Burly Bob Bennett, announced the team from the stage at a school assembly. He smiled endearingly, as he introduced me, his captain, as Babbling Brooks. I thought, at the time, that if I had a gun, I'd have shot him.

It's late afternoon. The sun is out from under the cloud cover, as it sets, burning its way toward Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Here, in the city called Baghdad by the Bay, it accents the flat, slat walls of buildings that have ornate Victorian facades, with angular shadow Ls and Vs, brilliance and glare, cut by shadows, a hillside of tall pines, as if the boy who washed his hair with green soap had an afro. On the stereo, Hank Williams is singing, "I'm free and ready, for us to go steady. Hey, good lookin', how's about cookin' somethin' up with me?" And I feel good. I feel real good.

Ghost Characteristics

My captain's chair broke. "Crack!" Several dozen threads spoke in unison, and my left thigh dropped six inches to the poop deck of discomfort. I assigned the collapsed blue canvas chair to the wall behind the door, and I appropriated Betty's cane rocker from the front room. I wanted to make love to myself. I wanted myself to make love to me, so I unbuckled, slowly, and unzipped. I took out my genitals. They lay there, like a tired housewife. I stimulated them, and they responded. I know them. I know that, despite a bad day, with a little coaxing, they will respond. With an engorged organ in my hand, it's like having my arm around a pasta-stuffed first date. I feel obliged to my sexuality. I take out images of seductive women. I imagine I am engaged and encouraged by them.

I step out to take a leak. I look back at these compliant women, deep in their sensual anticipation. I see them through the slit in the slightly open door. They push their hair on top of their heads with both hands and forearms. Their thighs fall open, as they lean against the shadowed wall, lost in thoughts of desire, pleasure, and satisfaction. I jerk off, in love with sensation. I let sensation be in love with me, forgetting the images. I finish. I get up to piss, and it stings. It always stings a little when I piss through semen, but this time, it doesn't quit. Ten minutes later, I want to piss, can't, don't, but it still feels uncomfortable. It stings. It hangs on. I want it to stop. It burns.

On *Rhoda*, they mention "The Towering Inferno." My burning desire subsides. My stomach hurts. Is it booze? Is it guilt? Is it guilt about booze, masturbation, and TV? I drink a lot of water and contemplate peanut butter and suicide. I feel better. At 9:30, on TV, they wash a shirt, stained with oily dirt, in All TempaCheer, and it comes clean.

Suddenly, I'm only happy writing. I'm addicted to it, like a novelist. Like Jerome Robbins and Isaac Asimov. Like Georges Simenon, Charles Dickens, and Victor Hugo. Like any normal anal-retentive. What's the opposite of anal-retentive? Anal-expulsive? Big shit in the word department. But that's what anal-retentives are. Maybe poets are anal-expulsive, because they get rid of all their personal shit as fast as they can, and that makes them economical and spare in their language. I go out to buy more bourbon. I'd rather spend my little money on booze than fritter it away on necessities and expenses. On the stairs, behind me, I hear the voices of the upstairs neighbors. I wait at the bottom of the stairs, while they come down. "I'm curious to meet my fellow building occupants," I say, rather clumsily, "I'm Steve."

"I'm Pris," the woman says, and already I've forgotten the man's name. Chuck or Larry? I trail behind them, out the door and onto the sidewalk.

"Welcome to the world," I say, gesturing to the street.

"That's what they say," Pris says.

Instead of a fifth of bourbon, I buy a can of Coors, a pack of Beer Nuts, and a Snickers, at *The Russian Fresh Hot Piroshki Liquor Store*. In the narrow confines of hot baklava, I'm drunker than in my room or on the street. On Stacey Keach's TV show, "Caribe," a woman goes swimming. She holds her arms in the air beside her shoulders, like ostrich wings. She flaps ineffectually in an imitation of grace, as she wades into the water. She dives and swims. She swims well, for a few strokes, before the camera cuts away. I imagine an actress, never a swimmer, who is told how a good swimmer swims, who swims as she is told, and, as an actress, she swims like a champion. Her proud father proclaims, in a grainy documentary, "She was always in a dream world." Uninterested in group activities, like sports, she appears to swim like Donna De Verona, after a few words from a clever director.

I think I'm like that. It's best not to tell me how to do it. I rebel. But tell me how others do it, and I imitate to perfection. Like children. I hear it said that children are the purest of beings, fresh and original, but I observed my own children, when they were two and three, laughing the phoniest laughter, in imitation of Jenny or me, and using language clumsily. Like bad actors, they learn to be real. Their social reality is given to them by adults. We become what we imitate. Like those artists who apprentice themselves to the masters, then, lo and behold, become masters in their own right, original and unique.

My brother Mark lived in an old Victorian on Scott Street, in '67, with a bunch of other people. One of them was a graphic artist, who worked five weeks on a layout for an ad company. In the last couple of days, he did five alternate mock-ups. "So they'll have something to reject," he explained. I expect all options to be accepted. And rejected. My children become presidents or bums, bastards or blessed, babes or boobs, loved or left, like America, a land of plenty and plenty of land.

I'm wandering, like a beachcomber, with a lot of beach and no boat. I go down to the corner bar, but I don't like it. The music is too loud. I decide to go downtown for a drink. "Downtown," I say, in a pseudo-Southern accent. "Mississippi god damn! Because I deserve it. I deserve to sit in a *good* bar and have a *good* drink. Yes, ma'am and godDAMN. God Da-Uh-Oh-Um, with four syllables, like the tent preachers do.

I strut home for better clothes, for flashier threads, for a costume that befits my station. All aboard. The bus comes, and that's a problem. I deserve to take a *good* bus, but there is only *the* bus, the great equalizer bus. It moves along like a banana on its way to bruised and overripe. It's hot inside the banana. This particular banana makes frequent stops, taking on, and letting off, *bites*. It's a battered banana, but this banana is my Boat to Paradise. Someone spray-painted on a billboard, "Want to feel Black Velvet?" about the Canadian Scotch, next to a bejeweled, reclining woman in a black velvet gown. The spray painter demands, "Stop Sexism!" Then, someone drew tits and a crotch on the blob of paint intended to obliterate the sexy blond in velvet, lying prone near a giant bottle.

Taking a bus is like taking a slow boat to China. I begin to wonder if I really want to go to China. At Van Ness, I feel arrogant. I stride across Van Ness and piss against the side of a giant blue box covering some surprise the Bay Area Rapid Transit will unveil in the future. On the 47Potrero bus, I sit in the aisle seat, disallowing any fellow citizen from sharing the seat with me. It's a bench seat - the kind popular on American sedans before the Sixties, when sitting in buckets became popular. Mass individuation. "Your Vote Could Make the Difference." "There's one set of tires we want to make sure is safe under all conditions. *Yours!*" "Are you ready for *your* cup of coffee, sir?"

I sit back in my chair in Henry Africa's. It's like being in an elegant drawing room. I listen to Merle Haggard and Marty Robbins sing in the background, and I order a Margarita. "Bring me a Margarita," I say, like being at the Mustang Ranch, outside Reno, ordering up a prostitute. My glass is encrusted at the lip, like a man who dives headfirst into The Great Salt Lake. I wonder if women don't actually love arrogant men with cigarette gestures and cursory glances.

"What makes that son of a bitch so arrogant, anyway?" My lungs feel like a Vaseline balloon, an ex-rubber. What a way to go.

"What's the prognosis, Doctor?"

"He's a spent Trojan, a burst Rameses."

There's no one of interest in the bar, and I'm in the mood for a Helen or a Cleopatra to blow up my balloon. A woman in tweed, trimmed in orange, who rises to leave, is wearing a button, "Smiling is Irish Power." There's an attractive blond nearby. Paul and Steve dismiss blonds. They contend there's no mystery in them. I see transparency in blonds, and beyond the glass, I see nothing. I grew up among blonds, in the Scandinavian Midwest, where the American ideal is the norm, and adventure is

unheard of. I catch the blond glancing at me, circumspectly. She has her fingers crossed at her uplifted knee. She listens dutifully to the man she's with, a Jewish teddy bear, wearing a plaid shirt collar outside his crewneck sweater, with rings on his fingers and soft, unsure eyes. He might be Italian, or Armenian, Arab, or Russian. One of her fingernails picks rhythmically at her thumbnail. She doesn't speak, and all conversation is directed at her. It's so easy to get down the details of strangers.

My brother Mark can conjure the entire life history of any woman he passes on the freeway. A face, a glance, and with elaborate, contrived awareness, he *knows* the woman. He has no girlfriends, no women friends, and he despises his mother, who, he contends, with good reason, never loved him. He's thirty, and his bitterness is at least fifteen years late. But, never mind. "Perhaps," he says, "I can't love women because I think they're all my mother." Freud, who died the day our parents were married, did not roll over in his grave.

This woman's teeth, skin, and hair are all blond. The shadows she produces, lounging against a purple couch, are precious. She's creamy. I wonder if her nipples have any color in them. Does she have pubic hair? If she does, it could crown the angel on top of a Christmas tree. She leaves, and I'm free of that fruitless speculation.

I order a Tequila Sunrise, in honor of Vivian Leigh as Scarlet O'Hara who reminded us that tomorrow is another day. A man puts his arm around the waitress, who is a cross between Ann Southern and Doris Day. His hand caresses a figure on her dress, a cartoon man in a boat, smoking a pipe through a moustache and holding an oar, with a look of disconcerted amazement on his face. He's sailing on a sea of black, crosscut by jagged snatches of white and blue, across a flat ass. No fish today. I'm getting drunk like a drunk, and as usual, I appear as a thoughtful man at ease in his environment. The waitress likes the man who caresses her. She walks around like a matron, but she's beginning to point her toes at the carpet and place a light hand against her breastbone.

My brother has no ready concept of the meaning of gestures. He watches and interprets. He's infallible in his instantaneous acknowledgment of casual signs. He pathologically responds to negativity in gestures, but he spots it. Nowhere in his make-up is the male conceit to override and conquer such gestures. On the other hand, this brother of his has the compulsion to pile all the available condiments on the hotdog of life. I know if I buy a pack of cigarettes, I'll smoke all of them. But, in a bar, I can't drink all the booze. That's the ambition of a lifetime.

My lungs are getting used to my renewed smoking, after five days without. Like a mother to me, my body sighs, willing to die for me, knowing I'm a sad child. Loving my capacity for abuse, it absorbs abuse. My body is a sweetheart. Yes, Virginity, there is a Santa Claus in Wolf's clothing.

At 1:30AM, at the corner, I have my choice. I can take the Owl Service, home, or the 41Union to North Beach and one last shot at meeting someone I might love. I take the Owl home. At Van Ness and Post, the bus stops. In the lot of an Arco Station, I see a Plymouth Valiant, crushed like a pack of cigarettes, in the "For Service Only" area. The bus driver runs a red light. A motorcycle patrolman stops him and asks for his license. The driver says he didn't see the light. The cop laughs and sends him on his way. He runs yellows, all the way to Market. This driver is a true public servant, getting all the stray dogs home in time for the late movie.

I stand on the corner of Van Ness and Market, at a quarter to two, in the cool breeze, and no bus comes. My hair whips in the wind, like windshield wiper blades on my forehead. A cute little gay guy is eyeballing me, and I think, "Sure, I'd fuck you, if you were cuter, and you had breasts and a vagina and I was in love with you, with balls and a dick thrown in for good measure, or as David said, "to groan on." It would be OK to talk to someone, to pass the time, but no thanks, and another guy, wearing a silk jacket with a tiger on the back, strolls back and forth. I watch a computer programmer on the third floor of the Bank of America Building, and damn, it's cold. This is no way to run a carriage service for me and my compulsions. Then, here, thank a merciful god, comes a bus.

After midnight, the trolleys are replaced by buses. I hope it's the NJudah, but no, it's an LTaraval, straight to the zoo. More gays arrive. After 2AM, the NJudah is the Gay Express. It's a theatre on wheels, with costumes and bizarre, benign behavior. Wait. Here comes the NJudah. Absent a sexual hang-up about such things, I could really get off on this bus. Or get it on off this bus. I reveal my cue ball sexuality, willing to identify with any eight ball mentality. But it seems I'm here for the early show. Twenty minutes later, and the joint would be jumping. I have the whole seat to myself. How disappointing for a man who is constantly willing to threaten his own masculinity with fantasies from all points of the spectrum. Truth is, I think I should hate faggots, like my father before me. My father tells me how disgusted he is to see Joey Bishop hug and kiss Sammy Davis, Jr. on TV. My father is an affectionate, physical man, but he rankles at male sexuality. I inherited my father's inclinations and his bullshit. I call these inherited traits "ghost

characteristics,” i.e., reactions to life that we inherit from our parents’ prejudices, despite the independent and contradictory experience of our own lives. I am as victimized by ghost characteristics as anyone is. It’s rampant, this mirage disease of heredity.

Such a Place

In this year of the 20th Century, there is a restaurant called McDonald’s, one branch of which is in the Financial District, with long lines, serviced by efficient Third World teenagers. There’s a dining room on the lower level, with bushes in a window well, mirrors, and graphic designs. There are large letters on the trash-bin doors that form the words THANK YOU. There are small, two-person tables, where strangers eat food they seem embarrassed to be eating. They look away if their eyes catch the eyes of another. In seven minutes, every new patron is the old-timer at the table. Each meal requires a dozen individual pieces of paper or plastic wrapping. There is the illusion of a feast in the paraphernalia. Coming out of a McDonald’s onto the street is like coming out of a porno movie house. Patrons take quick steps into the sidewalk traffic and cast furtive glances at other patrons entering, to see what kind of a person would eat in such a place.

Hey Mac

A woman, in the seat ahead of me on the streetcar, is crying silently, touching her arthritic finger to the bones around her eyes; shaking her head slowly. Another woman gets off the streetcar, wearing a yellow knit pants suit, baggy in the seat, like diapers. At the welfare office, a woman leaving passes down the unemployment line. She waves to a man in the line as she recognizes him, keeps waving as she stops to hear his greeting, and keeps on waving as she continues away from him. There are two lines, side by side, moving like adjacent freight trains, boxcars bumping and jerking, parallel single cars changing position, one ahead for a while, coming even, dropping behind. Two young women recognize each other from a previous, casual acquaintance.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

One woman is nervous to be talking and then not talking. She adds with a sigh, "Still here." After a time, she asks, "You're not working?" The other shrugs and looks around, "I wouldn't be here, if I was."

A kid, about fifteen, gets on the trolley by knocking on the door. He takes a transfer from the driver and starts for his seat. The driver calls him back, "Hey, Mac, c'mere. Let me tell you something. Never snitch the transfer when I give it to you." The kid looks sheepish. I imagine a rush of fear and embarrassment. The kid mouths, "OK," shrugs a little, and with his head low, walks toward the back. I want to become him, step up to the driver and say, "Now, let me tell you something. Never call me "Mac", and never tell me to "c'mere."

I think about boldness. Last night, playing basketball, I repeatedly avoided taking the ball to the hoop. Instead, I stopped short and took a jump shot. I was urged to beat my man, one on one, "Take him to the baseline."

Later, Curt referred to the dialogue in the alley behind Vesuvio, when I blew David's cover as a tough bastard. Curt calls that game the same as its reverse. "You mean, like portraying yourself as a nice guy, when you're really a bastard?"

The Arrogance of an Afternoon's Conceit

I'm sitting in *The Owl and the Monkey Café*, on Ninth Avenue, between Irving and Judah, a couple of blocks from my new home, staring out the window, when two women sit down near me. I admire one's breasts, silhouetted through her blouse. I admire the other one's cheekbones and dimples, her large mouth and her great big ass. She gets up for a spoon, and then she gets up to shut the door. All movement accentuates the grace of her beautiful bum. Her friend straightens her back, bouncing her breasts against the tabletop. She has the face of a French cartoon schoolmaster. I think she must know and enjoy knowing that I'm looking at her.

I'm lonely and distraught. My mind is crowded with plans for escape to peace. Up the coast to Bolinas, back to Illinois, to the arms of a woman, to death. Cowardly death, if I was serious. Death by disease. Come-and-get-me-I'm-exhausted death. I dismiss the voluptuous woman. She talks like this, "So he says blah, blah, blah..." I dismissed a girl, last summer, who said, "So he goes..." Welcomed like goddesses, dismissed like schoolgirls. It's the arrogance of an afternoon's conceit. One girl looks like Olive Oyl

with great tits, the other looks like Raquel Welch with a great ass. What choices I tease myself with.

“So, I’m a bastard, after all,” I think. Olive gets up and wobbles her chest over to the counter. It reminds me of the kid on *Art Linkletter’s House Party* who described his mother’s nightgown, “It has a face painted on it, and the eyes watch you when she walks around the room.”

“Boy, she loves those breasts,” I think. It’s wonderful. She acts like a man’s fantasy of what it might be like to have breasts. She moves her chair. She shakes her breasts. She stretches. The silk feels wonderful, slipping across her nipples. She inspects her fingernails, pulling her forearm against her breasts. She lays her arm over the back of her chair, luxuriously exposing her breasts, as if she’s lying back on the deck of a private yacht. Raquel sits on her grand derriere, as if all consciousness resides below the waist. She’s keenly aware of her ass, like a man pulling a large trailer cross-country behind a Fiat. She says, “Oh, yeah, that was the best night I’ve had, for a long...long...long time,” while she looks wistfully at a parked car. Here I am, sitting in the Owl and Monkey, owlshly playing the monkey, developing character at fifteen feet, in profile, with overheard conversation. Could it be much different from asking someone his or her sign? Is it destructive, or only the absence of something constructive?

Last night, as we walked the streets of North Beach, looking for Curt’s car, the four of us, Tom, Paul, Curt, and me, Paul made an observation, “I know what type of woman you like,” he said, looking around the group at each of us in turn,” but Steve, I have no idea what your type is.”

Curt stood on the corner of Union and Jones and said, in a moment of gentle resignation, “I haven’t got the faintest idea where it is.”

We found it, three blocks away, with its sad, beaten and crumpled fenders, cringing against the curb. The four hapless shepherds find the 100th sheep.

Raquel looks like she’d allow for some, but not much, nonsense.

Nasty, Nervy, Loving and Alive

I’m in the Owl and Monkey, eating a sugar crunch and drinking a cup of coffee, trying to get a handle on what I’m feeling, after last night. The sun is shining and, for a brief moment, there’s hail, like birdshot. Occasionally, I decide to get through an evening without drinking, smoking, eating, fucking, or running around. It usually requires

a lot of TV, and last night, I watched a lot of TV. If I eliminate TV, the pressure to do one of the others results in my doing all of the others. TV is a voice in the room that is passably entertaining and avoidable, which I like. I can drop it, whenever my mind or body begins some activity. I washed dishes and sewed the torn canvas of my director's chair.

After listening to Emmett Kelley, Jr. say that sadness comes over him when he puts on his Weary Willy costume and makeup. I get out my own mime makeup, and I remember feeling sadness in the makeup. I think, "That's what stopped me from continuing with the mime." I put the whiteface on, with high arching eyebrows, red teardrops, and a downward swooping mouth. I get it all on, and I don't feel particularly sad. Nothing. I wash it all off. As usual, my face is scraped to a splotchy red in the effort. As the evening progresses, I drop my options.

At 6PM, I get a call from Peg Malden, Jenny's college roommate. She's in town, for a while. She explains, somewhat inexplicably, that she's getting married, and she's left her fiancé, to give him some time, space, excuse? She's looking up old associates and friends. She sounds good. She says I sound good. We make a general date for early next week. Her sister, Connie, comes on the phone, and we make an even more general date, to get together, sometime soon. A year ago, Connie and I had a fling, and here she is again, free on Wednesdays.

"Well," I say, "I'm going to eat my dinner, and I'll talk to you, later."

So I drop options. Among them are; Call Connie back, eat some more, smoke cigarettes, drink some bourbon. Paul says that stopping these things, you see what buttons they push in one, and it is so, but so what? On TV, in a show about wolves, Clint Walker, reminding me of Curt, terrorizes a town and then says the terror makes the people more alive than ever. The presence of death draws out their love of life. I remember the business of never driving the basket, and about being cold to panhandlers and a real grinner among friends.

Then I think that what I like about drinking is that I get to be nasty, nervy, loving, and alive, and I realize it isn't drinking I want, but being>NNL&A. What I want is to live boldly and on the edge, but it's damn scary. I also think I drink to escape boredom, but it's>NNL&A that eliminates boredom. I want to be scared, busy, loving and alive.

Driving the Basket

This morning, I got up, and what did I do? I didn't do anything, and then it happened. Flash! I got an idea about doing the mime, an idea for the ending of my stage show, scheduled for October, six months from now. In the shower, singing in my richest Irish warble, *Jeannie with the light brown hair*, my unconscious, relaxed mind started working creatively, effortlessly.

Then, playing basketball, I DROVE THE BASKET! Playing against Roper, the best player there is at the International Center. I drove for three baskets in a row, hit again, and won the game on a driving hook. I did it some more in the second and third game. Pat said to me, pleading, "Hey, Steve, take it easy, this time, OK?" Whoopee! I was playing like I wanted. And off the court, I was making up lines, like a word man. "Get me," I thought. Big Max went up for a rebound, and everyone got a kick out of the sight, laughing lovingly about his leaping ability. "Yeah," I said, "it's like you pinch a balloon on the top and the bottom, and you pull a little."

I didn't eat a midnight snack, last night when I sort of wanted to. I go through this routine every 3-4 weeks. I do it, and every time I do it, I get better at it. "Man, this living free is a tough row to hoe, but the crops are creamy. BIRDS-EYE!"

Or, as I said in my speech before the National Honor Society student assembly, at the end of my senior year in high school, "You can't sew wild oats and reap Cheerios." Nobody laughed, until Miss Garst, the Gertrude Stein of Moline Senior High, started laughing, and it caught on. You weren't supposed to crack jokes if you were serious and smart. However, my sentiment, at the time, was disingenuous. I was just beginning to get into sewing my own wild oats, and Cheerios were sliding down my personal go-and-get-some popularity poll. Often, when I'm drunk, nobody thinks I am. And before I learned how to drink, everyone thought I must be drinking to act so wild and have so much fun. It occurs to me that if I could be freer with friends and lovers, I could be more loving with them and everyone else.

Pat, the ballplayer, said, "Man, I'm 34, and now is when it happens. You let it slide, now, and you never get it back. I seen this thing on TV about blood pressure, I read the symptoms, and I think I got it."

"Yeah, me too," I say. "Shit, I get through playing, and my face feels like a balloon full of blood. I've got bad circulation. I wish I had something to do, everyday. Run, b'ball, volleyball, soccer. And then skip it, when I don't feel like it."

"Yeah," says Pat, "that's it."

I went downstairs at the gym, worried about high blood pressure and making two balloon allusions. I wonder if there's anything wrong with my balls, my baby balloons, and I wonder if I analyze too much?

"That's because, sweetheart," I say to myself, "either you're afraid of the truth... or you're looking for the truth... or both." And, I say to myself, "The truth is in the doing, not in the talking about it." To quote Dr. Brown, my shrink from last year, "Steve, you worry about a problem, until you're sick of worrying about it, and then you forget about it."

I wanted to say, "Doc, how about going out for a beer? What'd'ya say? How's your love life? And how come you never say much? What kind of friendship do we have here? I mean, I love a parade, but a parade of my imaginary bugaboos is a downer, Doc." Back then, whenever I got ready to do something, Dave Brown warned me about making any moves. I went ahead anyway and felt wonderful. Finally, I made a long list of things I wanted to do, and, heading the list was, "Quit Therapy."

I wish I could have kept seeing Dr. Brown, so I could tell him how happy I was, not seeing him. We have shrinks and insurance companies, because we don't have other people to rely on. In the good old days, when your house burned down, you went over and sat on a tree stump and felt rotten about it, and your friends either helped you, or they didn't. And you developed a worldview accordingly. Now we have the Good Samaritan Insurance Company, and shrinks. The best advice I ever get is from friends and lovers. Thanks, Dirk, thanks Sherry, Jenny, Paul, Betty, Mike, et al. And thank you, Dr. Brown. When you opened your mouth and took a chance on blowing your whole scene by making an actual statement, I loved it.

Late last night, I went down to the corner to catch the 10Monterey over to Churchill's on Clement and ran into old blue eyes, Betty's Jon.

"Hey, what's happening?" he said.

I asked him the same thing, but he had an answer. He said Charlie Musselwhite was playing at Yancy's, three doors back up the street.

"That's worth checking out," I said. At the door, I had my ID checked, and the guy looked at me and said, "That's amazing." I'm 33, and I don't look it. Dorian Gray or Willie Mays?

Inside, I ran into Dorita, "Hí, Dorita, how you doin'?" She barely says hello. Instead, she says, "Wait a minute. I want to talk to you." I step aside, while she seals the

deal on the sale of the Transamerica Pyramid or a kilo of the world's finest hash. Then she comes over and says, "Why didn't you call me? Like you said you were going to?"

I remember carefully not saying that. I say nothing. Instead, she says, "You're a shit. I was thinking about the other night, when you were over, and I remember you said you write a lot of things down."

"Yeah, I do. I write a lot of things down. Was there something in particular you didn't want me to write down?"

"No, nothing specific."

"Just the whole thing, huh? Well, I thought Charlie Musselwhite was playing, so I came in here to see if he was, but if he's not, so..." I started to leave.

"Yeah, well, goodbye," she said.

It was an affront that I had run into her without calling, and then wanted to leave, without further ado. It's incredible to me how easy it is to sleep with someone, and later, to have it mean nothing, even though there's the sense of a blood-pact, the lingering sense of revealing a private thought in a moment of fleeting closeness. You turn to a fellow passenger on an airplane, when the plane struggles in turbulence, and admit fear. Later, in the airport, you catch eyes and look away, more at ease with other strangers than with the one with whom you were intimate.

Play it Safe, Tag Your Bag

I'm sitting in the Southern Pacific train depot, waiting for Jack to come up from down the peninsula to spend the weekend. Jenny is bringing Rachel tomorrow. The train station is doomed. It's scheduled to be torn down. It's now nostalgia, anachronism, decay, museum and movie-set rolled into one. Jack will come into this train station, where I will meet him, and a year from now, the entire place will be gone, and ten years from now, Jack and I will have memories of this place I'm now in, that we were once in, that no longer exists.

There are genuine neon signs:

*- TO DINING ROOM - COFFEE SHOP - COCKTAILS - SANDWICHES -
SNACK BAR - COFFEE - JUICES - NEWSSTAND - TELEPHONE -
(blinking).*

The station has high vaulted ceilings that are probably responsible for the blended, indistinct echoes. There are big clocks, fans, long wooden benches that curve at the base of the back and high windows streaked with soot.

One wall has a very large photo of a Southern Pacific diesel and the inscription, “*Serving the West Since 1869.*” There’s a newsstand with every imaginable verbal distinction:

JEANE DIXON ON JACKIE’S FUTURE, DREAMS ARE SAVING LIVES, FEVER, THE HUNT FOR A NEW KILLER VIRUS, SEXOLOGY, PAPER MONEY CATALOG, MODEL AIRPLANE NEWS, TRUE STORY, TRUE ROMANCE, TRUE EXPERIENCES, TRUE CONFESSIONS, TRUE LOVE, MEN, STAG, REAL WEST GUN WORLD, NEEDLEWORK, LIVING WITH LESS OIL, PLAYGIRL, GLAMOUR, THE TURQUOISE MASK, THIS SHROUDED NIGHT, DEATH MERCHANT, THE BIG KISS OFF, ONE GRAVE TOO MANY CROSSWORLD PUZZLES, NEW LEADS ON PATTY HEARST

The people waiting are 1975 Central Casting, except the pace is easy and slow in San Francisco. People look at each other and talk to each other, there’s no frenzy in the waiting, some boredom. The door of the soon-to-be-no-more *RESTAURANT AND COCKTAIL LOUNGE* swings open and shut, allowing jukebox Latino sounds out like a hand fiddling with the volume on a radio.

It’s 6:45, still light and cool in the breeze that commotion causes. I look down a half-mile of track. Beside the track is a poster with a picture of Van Amberg, a local newsman in a blue ski-jacket, smiling broadly with his arm around two anonymous, middle-aged women in print blouses, cotton coats, and glasses, also grinning. The poster reads, NEWS PEOPLE IN TOUCH WITH PEOPLE.

The train arrives at the station. Track 29. Right on time. Ten minutes late.

Too Marvelous for Words

I was watching Michigan over UCLA when Joe Johnson, according to the announcer, *created a foul situation*, which means he hit Andre McCarter on the arm. The kids are asleep in the other room.

“If I come and see you playing around like this, one more time, I will turn off the record, and off goes the light, and no more bedtime-playtime.”

The record is *Ding, Dong, the Witch is Dead*. Rachel, who is five, came in the kitchen when I was doing the dishes, carrying her medicine and said to me, "Here's our medicine, Nick, or whatever your name is." Nick is Jenny's boyfriend. I said to Jenny, earlier, "I can see Nick's influence on Jack. So, uh, quiescent."

"Yeah," she said, "I was reading Nick's journal today, and he's so philosophical. None of this, 'I got up this morning, had breakfast, etc.' If you read that he's thinking about death, you might realize that's the day he broke his arm or something. He's really been good for me. I used to yell a lot at the kids, and one day, he said, 'You know, that's silly.' I don't do that, anymore. I don't know why, but he gets these moods. He's in a depressed mood, this weekend."

That, I guess, is why Jenny was in town on the weekend, by herself, and sitting, talking to me for a whole hour. Or maybe it's what I said. First, I said, "Do you want some coffee?" and then, "Jesus, Jenny, you got tits again. What happened?"

Flustered, she said, "Uh, I don't know. Sometimes, I don't wear a bra. I've been sick." When she left, I said, "Well, Jenny, it's been nice talking to you and staring at your chest."

"Stop that."

"I can't stop that. That's my life."

"What is?"

"Doing that and saying that."

We talked about our respective careers. She told me, "My principal said today he doesn't believe in self-contained E.H. classes." So much for her value at the Buena Vista School. Then she said, "Everyone I know is unhappy and going through a lot of changes."

"I'm happy," I said, "ever since I quit writing poetry."

I was leaning in and energizing my eyeballs. It makes her seem even more attractive. I told her a story, "When I went home, over Christmas, and my father was into his bullshit with the phony brain tumor and his premature senility routine, Mark gave my mother a hug, and her arms were just hanging there." I looked at Jenny. "I realized that I usually go home and entertain the folks. Always before, I would engage them and they would respond. But this time, I watched them, instead of trying to get them to be different. I don't think their indifference, their bullshit, their coldness, necessarily means they never wanted us around, but they sure don't want any kids around, now. Anyway, I began to wonder how many of my relationships are like that, where I get all worked up

with energy and entertain, trying to get some kind of response. Well, hell, it's OK, but without doing that... nothing."

I was aware I was practicing what I was preaching against. When she left, I felt happy. I imagined a possibility of loving and living with her. I like to do that. But I know it's out of the question, and I like that, too. I know that whether I want to or don't want to, it's only my want. I can't control her and I don't want to, but I sure like controlling myself. The "bigger tits" business is a stab at freedom. It's being at ease in my contradictions, with no submerging, no politeness and careful misery, a small bit of being nasty, nervy, loving, and alive.>NNL&A.

We talked about Jack's bedwetting. We dealt with it. We talked about Rachel's don't-touch-me, five-year-old touchiness, and then, godbless TV. I watch "Dark Passage" with Humphrey and Lauren Bacall. Lauren is a painter who sneaks a killer into San Francisco under a blanket in her station wagon. I said to Jenny, after describing two couples we know in common, "There's no accounting for couples."

The cab driver in the movie tells a story about a goldfish bowl. It reminds me that Betty's goldfish is dead. I fed the fish every day, and every day, the water got darker and more viscous. My dutiful efforts were for naught. The fish floated in the water, like a dead fish in a New Orleans cemetery, buried standing up. The food didn't spread when it hit the water. There was no movement. I spun the bowl around, and there he was, mouth open, halfway up, halfway down, dead as a mackerel. I

I went into a long internal rap about responsibility. I followed Betty's instructions, but I knew the water needed changing. You change a kid's diaper, but you don't repot a plant every two weeks. What about putting down roots? How about a change of scenery? And poor George, Bogie's friend. "Poor George. Who'd ever want to kill poor George? All he ever wanted to do was go to Peru and play that trumpet."

And the toilet is busted. I jiggled the handle so much, trying to stop the gurgle that it broke clean off. After any visitor uses it, I have to go in and flush for them. Like I did for Andy Linder, two days ago. He's a big time speed freak designer in a Cardin shirt, and he wants Betty to take over his apartment. "It's a reproduction of a 1938 apartment," he says. He leaves a note for Betty. I'm sorting socks, when I hear him from the other room, "Oh, shit, I can't write that. That's no good."

"What?" I holler in at him. "A sap," he says. "I just wrote, 'Call me ASAP.' Shit that's not too cool." He's putting in a new Union Street restaurant and niteclub, with

30s French Hot Club décor. “The new landlords are fucked, crazy stupid,” he says. “Sometimes, I wish I wasn’t self-employed.”

Suddenly, it’s raining like a sonofabitch. Blowing. Hail. The windows crackle like straight pins thrown against a mirror. This building that sags, also rattles. I think about Irene Jansen. Lauren Bacall’s erstwhile boyfriend hears Irene tell a particularly chilling story, and he replies, sardonically, “High-larious.”

Friday, I scared myself silly. I went by Intersection Theatre, to talk to the manager, and I booked myself into the place in the fall, in October, to do a one-man show. When the man said it was on, it’s strange, I wanted to cry. I don’t know what to make of it. I can only liken it to other times when I feel that way, times when I think I’m close to being happy, when I don’t have to try to be happy. I think that when I don’t have to laugh to keep from crying, I’ll start crying.

“Bullshit,” I say, suddenly.

Last night, I took Jack to see *Evolution of the Blues*, starring Jon Hendricks of *Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross* fame, at a funky old theatre in North Beach. The sight of a live stage show exhilarates me. It’s the true amusement part of chemical thrills. The old Adrenalin Roller Coaster. It isn’t fear of being on stage. It’s fear of the unknown. Being on stage is the constant thrill of the unknown. I have until October to prepare for it. I have to carry a good script into the unknown. I thought Jackson would be as thrilled as I am by the prospect of the stage, but he isn’t. He watched it with some pleasure, it seemed, but he shows no interest in that arena for himself.

Dark Passage has a wonderful ending. No ending. The mystery of the murder is unsolved. The man’s guilt or innocence is unresolved. He and the woman simply go on. He goes to Peru and she shows up later. The song on the record player in the background in the movie is “You’re Just Too Marvelous. Too Mar-vel-ous for Words.” Great line for a writer, too marvelous for words. Great line for a life story that gets more marvelous and less explicable as it progresses.

O Neil, Tell Me You’re Not Dead

Now is the hardest time to write. The newness wears off. The thrill of it as a kind of writer’s adventure fades. I begin to see in what I’m writing something of what it is. I hear a lonely man who has talent, energy, and desire. I see a man who likes and is afraid of people. Stephen Vincent says he has an expression to describe his low productivity

and self-satisfaction, *Hero Zero*. So I'm sad, unhappy, and lonely. At a time like this, I don't feel eloquent. I feel embarrassed at my inability to talk about this part of my life with any style. It's the part of myself I hide and not too well. I show it, but never do I believe others will respond to it in any way that doesn't embarrass me. I expect my friends to fail me at a time when they could truly be my friends. So I have no friends - only a desperate syllogism.

I'm watching Arthur Hill racing, in slow motion, toward a waterhole, after twenty days in the desert. The worst time is after I make love to a new stranger. The adventure is gone from that, too. St. Patrick's Day, I went on a blind date with a beautiful, twenty-three-year-old from Muscatine, Iowa, named Leah Lindstrom. The date was arranged by my bar friend, Jerry, and his young girlfriend, Kit, who is best friends with Leah. We drove to Chinatown for dinner on my suggestion, in Leah's brother's white Camaro.

I said, "Follow that car."

And Leah said, "All the way to Chinatown?"

"Well, of course, brother Larry said, "It's a yellow car."

I smiled and said, "That doesn't deserve a response."

After a great dinner of Szechwan at the North Star, we came back to my place, and I showed my books, manuscripts, paintings, and scripts. We drank wine. I listened to Leah speak with the vernacular of the not particularly well-educated Mid-West, "And he goes...and she goes..." instead of "he said, and she said." The story of her relatively short past is told in the present.

At the restaurant after dinner, I said, "Leah, I love you. Let's get married. That's what's supposed to happen after a blind date, isn't it?" That made her feel good, I found out later. And women bleed and have feelings, are insecure and want to be liked, just like men do. Amazing.

When we walked out of my place, bound for an Irish bar, I took her hand and suddenly we were good, old, and fast friends and lovers. A miracle. At O'Shays, in a pit of the swaying, drunk-wet sons and daughters of the Old Sod, Leah and I were entwined in kissing and caresses. She told her brother he was free to make his way in the world, and Kit told Leah and me that Jerry had said that as far as he was concerned, their relationship was no longer *viable*.

Jerry is a law student, and Kit is distraught, after coming all the way from Iowa to be with him. Leah and I came back to my place, and she undressed for passion, and I undressed for peace, for comfort, for giving in and giving up, and drunken sleep. I told

her, "I'll make love to you later. Right now, I'm too drunk and tired." Later, I did arise and arouse, but even later, I realized she was ready and I begged off, and later, I took her, when she was out of rhythm with it.

At 7:30AM, she was awake and wanting to get to know me, the stranger. She began to babble. It was charming babble. She drove a truck for her father's company. She misses her family and cried. Only a tear gave that away, and I was surprised to see it. I told my story, gratuitously. Once upon a time, I loved telling my story.

"I was a good student in high school. Not an athlete, until high school swimming. I was captain and All-American. I did some theatre, and I had a girlfriend I made out with everyday for two years. Those were the good old days." I laughed. "In college, I did everything, and that became the model for my life. I was captain of the soccer team and the swim team. I was an actor, a painter, and I danced every day for four years, went out with dozens of girls, I was in politics, peripherally, and I edited a humor magazine. I met Jenny, went to graduate school in art, dropped out, and went to work in a factory.

We decided to get married, but her mother wouldn't put the announcement in the paper until I got a decent job. I got a job teaching in California for a year, then back in Illinois for a year, where I drove a truck for my father, and I ran an art gallery. Jenny got her teaching credential and, since we were into Women's Lib, we went next where she wanted to go, to Connecticut, where she taught school and I taught, for two years. Then I came out here to get a Masters' Degree, and two years ago, we separated. We've been divorced a year, and I've been writing." Boom. Whole story. Omitting great chunks. I told her she was interesting to me, because she could "talk so easily."

"I listen to everything I say," I said, "I try not to say the same thing twice."

She took offense. There was no way for her not to. I was criticizing her. She said I made her feel like a dumb little girl, and I felt like an over-educated corncob. I fell asleep. In a dream, I was in college. I picked up Jackson and put him on my back as burden and comfort. I saw Rachel dive face-first into a snow bank, without a coat on, having a ball. It worried me that she was so out of control.

Then, I stood outside Jenny's house. She came out, and I was happy. I went into her house. I argued with a man who was staring in the window. He puffed up his chest, and I was afraid but determined. We went into her bedroom, as the kids played, behind their closed door. Just as we began to make love, I stopped and couldn't or wouldn't continue. When I woke up, the dream was vivid. I wondered if I should I go to the past or the future? Do I have a choice?

Leah wanted to go. I wanted her to stay. And I wanted her to be gone. She got up, got dressed, made herself up, and came back in the room, with her lips glossed and apparently wet for the kissing. I remembered the tastes of the night before, and I fought resentment.

“Maybe I’ll run into you on the street, sometime,” she said.

I said nothing about seeing her again. I remembered saying, during the night, “I love you,” three words I seldom use. I told her how surprising it was, and wonderful, that I felt so much at ease with her.

In kindergarten, I had a girlfriend named Katy. Twenty years later, I visited her in a hotel for stewardesses in Chicago. She and her roommate got rid of a perfectly nice guy from down the hall. They said he was nice, but he was too nice, too lonely, too desperate. In that moment, I became wary of ever appearing desperate. I tested Leah’s *Desperation Acceptance Quotient*, and her *Role Delineation Quotient*. All night, I held her in my arms, as the saying goes. Then I scrunched down and sought succor and refuge against her breasts. As far as I could tell, she didn’t fathom anything I was doing. She went out to the front windows and stood waiting for Kit to pick her up.

“I liked you from the start,” she said, “I don’t usually get into things with guys, because they give me such a bad time.”

She’s tall, extremely attractive, relatively well off, and self-assured, beyond her insecurities. What else is new? And I’m a hot-shit, creative, semi-genius, artist-type.

“I like that,” she said.

And I’m a quivering mass of desperate jelly. During the night, I had another dream, in which she and I, despite all precedence to the contrary, spent two days together. When she left the apartment for real, she didn’t yell goodbye. I was shaving, at the time, wanting so much to be at ease and in love.

I had a miserable day. I wandered back and forth, buying staples. Literally. Staples. Swingline Cub Staples. My stapler takes regular staples, and the staples don’t fit, by the fewest of millimeters. There’s no reason not to have a universal staple. Which, of course, is love, and it is not fitting, and that’s a sad story. The Owl and Monkey is closed. Dave Heisenberg called to tell me he has recommended me to a friend of his to play the male lead in his friend’s space-cowboy soap opera. I typed the corrections to my own soap-opera satire, *O Neil, Tell Me You’re Not Dead!* (A not-so-subtle reference to the playwright, Eugene O’Neill, the writer of a high quality soap opera of his own.)

"Scott, you've destroyed our happiness."

"Tell me, doctor, will he survive?"

"I'm afraid that's asking too much, Ramona."

"I know that, as a doctor, and as a woman, Lorna is concerned about Don."

Don't give me this banal banter; I want *real* communication, like "Now, Dale, I may be mistaken, but I think Bart has designs on Sandy." And, "Lucy has been shielding the truth from her attorney."

I want a cigarette, bad. I haven't smoked for several days. I don't think it's just a physical addiction. Anymore than any other good/bad is just an addiction. It reminds me of having breakfast, a few days ago, in the *Holy Sunshine Vegetarian Luncheonette*, when no one in the place can find anything on the menu that wasn't carcinogenic. A year ago, a roomful of poets, some of the best minds of my generation, so to speak, had popcorn after a poetry salon at Marilyn Schenk's house in Oakland. Her erstwhile husband, good old Stringy Bob, made the popcorn, without using any oil or butter. It was like eating buckshot. It tasted like last week's driveway. When someone asked him why he didn't use any oil or butter, he gave a knowing, soulful sigh, and said, "Does the word *carcinogenic* mean anything to anyone?"

"No, you jerk-off, the word has no meaning, beyond its social cancer causing properties when spoken by a complete dip-shit like yourself."

Ha, ha. Very funny. But what about Leah?

Mystery Man

I got a card from Betty in Mexico. It's a photograph of the beach and the front of a row of buildings. There's a hint of ocean in the reflection of a window tucked away amid the architecture of old and new Mexico. She says the wildlife is beautiful, "but" she's surviving. As a capper, she asks, "How is my fish?"

"In a word, Betty, dead."

A woman in Churchill's, last night, said to me, "You're a mystery man. And I've learned that with a mystery man, I have to, uh..."

"Watch out?" I supplied.

"Yeah...watch out," she said.

There was a poet, across the table from me, reading a well-fingered and underlined, annotated copy of a Richard poem, lifted from the Norton Anthology. I

looked at it, revealing, mistakenly, unfortunately, that I, too, was a poet. I remarked that it read like Spenser, and the guy launched into his analysis of the poem.

"Hold it," I said. "I'm not up to it."

It was my night to be world-weary. Word weary. That's threatening to my entertainer syndrome. Talking to Jerry and his friend, Jim, I made the point that several things had combined to compound loneliness, "Sex is a time of intimacy. Sex is easy these days. Loneliness is fatal, if it's revealed to a new partner. Sex is a time of revealing."

Jim guessed it was a condition of formerly married men, to whom the bedroom is the crucible of whatever closeness the marriage had and whatever depth of suffering the marriage consoled. In a dream, later, I shared a shower with Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon. A whole bunch of others joined us. Someone suggested we divide up, men and women. I said that if we did that, it would increase the sexuality by creating such a clear separation. I began talking and joking with Gerald Ford. He was drunk, red-faced and effusive. We kidded around about how a jerk like him could get to be President, when it seemed only yesterday he was a janitor, crossing the street in front of city hall, and then he was President. He showed me a heavy, smiling face and kissed me on the lips. He did it, again, and I had to escape. I left. I went into a movie theatre. An old college friend suggested I go see a live play. It was better. I talked to the director. It was a play called "Anger," directed by a man named *Anger*. He and two others told me how my writing was flawed, that it was a cheap shot, a copout.

"How is it flawed," I asked.

"You reveal yourself too early." They all agreed. I didn't think that was bad, and if that's all their criticism amounted to, then I'm all right.

An Old Woman Shaman

Homosexuality is a tiger that seems to pursue me in my dreams. On Mike Douglas, a woman talks about confronting and conquering whatever is chasing one. South Sea Islanders tell their children, "Never run away in a dream." Dream confrontations are a workable influence in our lives. I ran away from Jerry Ford. I suppose it was brought on by the poet in Churchill's. He had gentle, loving eyes, and when he gave me a lift home, I built a fear of him. The guy made no overtures, but he was handsome and feminine. Not effeminate. I left the car, abruptly. He may simply have

liked me. In college, I worked, for a time, for Bob Glompie, who ran a restaurant. I designed and painted his logo. One night, after work, he drove me home. We drove to the edge of town, and he stopped the car. He talked vigorously and aggressively. Then he drove me back to my dorm. I never trusted him, after that. Ten years later, I ran into Glompie when I gave a poetry reading at my alma mater. My old English Lit professor, Jim Kissane, took me out to dinner at Bob's restaurant. Bob was pleased to see me.

I asked him to cash the check my professor had given me for the reading. He started to, and then he told me to come back, later, he could cash it, then. After dropping off the professor, I started back. I thought about skipping it, altogether. "No, I decided, "I don't live like that, anymore." Bob gave me a scotch from the bar, and I followed him into his small office. I sat, nervously, on a straight-back chair, while Bob, pink-faced, smoking a cigar above his big belly, leaned back at his desk, smiled broadly, quite pleased to see me, and asked me what I'd been up to, for the previous ten years. We chatted. Finally, I broached a decade's unanswered question.

"Tell me, Bob," I said, "are you gay?"

"Well, it's all OK with me," he said.

"Because, for ten years, I thought you were gay, and I was wary of you."

He acted surprised. He said his statement about everything being OK with him was out of consideration for my possible homosexuality. I concluded that it was his aggressive friendship that frightened me that I chose to believe it was sexual. I often worry that some male friends have sexual motives. But I suspect my female friends of having sexual motives, too.

On the other hand, Bob was a politely slimy sort of politico, as easily sexual as he was untrustworthy. At sixteen, I thought homosexuality was a nonproductive form of love. Love meant having children, so therefore homosexuality was an unloving form of non-productivity. The study, a few years ago, that overpopulated rats mug each other and form homosexual relationships didn't encourage my sympathy, but I hold dear the love of men. I love to be physical with men. To hold, touch, and love other men is important to me. It bothers me that sexuality has to cloud the simple beauty of healthy affection. The social upheaval of the last decade or so allows me to imagine doing anything and everything I can imagine, sexually, but "fuck any orifice" doesn't seem like a loving encomium to me.

I go into my "Oh, my god, I'm a faggot," routine whenever I'm without a woman I love. Fucking women I don't love seems as pointless as fucking men, sheep, knotholes,

or myself. David Fallows said to me, "You'll never have a homosexual experience, until you wake up in the morning with a cock in your mouth." That's my idea of an unappetizing breakfast. It sounded like a plug, on his part. David was just shooting off his mouth, to coin a couple of phrases. Does my reproduction ideal mean I need to love the possibility of conception to enjoy intercourse? Maybe I do, just a little, somewhere in the package, even if it's metaphorical.

When Paul got Mindy pregnant, they both knew it was a clear possibility, and it increased their excitement. She had an abortion, and it was an awful experience for both of them. They believed they'd had one night of unfettered love, desire, and union. Jenny and I believed the nights of our two conceptions were magical, special, a wonderful release. When I'm having sex with someone, I generally have the feeling of shooting my wad in a jar, while the rest of my body is caressing the woman, madly and sensually. I love the idea of planting sperm way up inside a woman, traveling deeper into her than I can reach. That's a thrill. Sherry said, "I can feel you all the way up to my throat."

Nothing any woman has ever said to me got to me like that line did. So, what do I get, in lieu of fertilization? I have my quota of two kids per. So what's up in the sex department? I'm not sure, but I think there's more to it than a personal problem. It's a problem whose solution is not in all the love options that are otherwise available. My ex-mother-in-law got pregnant twelve times, and she didn't even like kids. I like kids, but I'm a lousy provider.

I'm really unsure about this. This talk is current, because I might (watch out for the mystery man) be in love. Suddenly. I'm with someone with whom I can at least imagine love, with whom I can begin to feel it. My mother said, "Stephen, you make love to a woman, you love her and you sleep with her because you love her." And the woman I might love, to whom I am referring is my young blind date from Muscatine. She's a great big beautiful woman with big thighs, nice breasts, a head of hair, big eyes, full lips, and she's 5'9" plus three-inch heels. She's beautiful. Her daddy's rich. She has a half dozen brothers and sisters, and she says, "You are the most unique guy I've ever met."

A problem is due me from her generation's ill-educated manner. A sentence will suffice, "And she goes, well, Jerry and them wanna go dancin'." Her English, otherwise, is just fine, with an occasional "most unique" thrown in for good measure. She isn't stupid, by any means, but it's painful to my ears to hear her talk. She says I can teach

her. So far, I haven't, because she's upset by my corrections. I'm curious to see if I have any influence left in me.

She has the problems of any tall, beautiful, young woman. Everybody wants her to be a part of their lives, but nobody wants her to have any life of her own. But she's feisty. I wondered, out loud, on our first date, if she might give me as much trouble as I gave her. She did. We went *dancin'* at the Olympus in North Beach on Columbus. It's a new spot in town, with a great dance floor. On the dance floor, you can find nearly every example of the human species gathered under recorded sound, while bright colored lights play on them and on the walls. The first time I visited Olympus, there was a blond mountain of a woman, in flowering organza, at the door, with a deep voice. She was a six-foot-four-inch queen, wearing a two-piece playsuit with a painted belly button. Black, Oriental, Chicano, White, you name it, they have it. The music never stops, the records overlap.

"I need a break," I said, after a while. Time flies in such a place. There's no pause that refreshes. We took a table on the side. I danced with Kit. It was fun and easy, because it didn't count. I danced with Leah, and we were stiff with each other. We picked on each other. She poked me in the belly and called me the Pillsbury Doughboy. She danced lackadaisically.

"Am I going to have to do this all myself?" I said.

"Yes," she said.

I don't know what specifically prompted her to turn her back on me, but she finally did, so I poured a trickle of beer in her trailing fist. We left, and I apologized for the beer, "I'm sorry," I said, "I'm giving you a lot of shit, tonight. I'm testing you, and that's lousy. But I'm tired of kiss ass games." So, I invented a new game, a *kick ass* game. The next day, I asked Paul if he wanted to meet Leah. I invited her and Kit to come over, and we talked a bit.

"We were going to come over and cook some cornbread for you," Leah said.

We drove to Paul's to get his food stamps and then off to Leah's to get money for wine, but Kit was tired, and there wasn't enough motivation in the air.

"What are we going to do?" I asked.

Paul said, "It doesn't make any difference to me, one way or the other."

"Leah," I said, "are you in charge?"

"No."

“Well, I can’t be in charge,” I said, weakly, “I’m not man enough to be in charge,” and that’s what I thought. An embarrassing, far-reaching truth? Paul says I am the All-Time Champion Hypochondriac and that applies to every imaginable ailment, physical or psychological. I said, “I don’t see any real energy to do anything. Kit’s tired. We should take her home, get some wine and go back to my place.”

Done. I was scared that deciding what to do meant changing course. Boom. We were back home, and Paul was asking Leah a string of questions, starting with, “What are you going to do with your money?”

“Having money has given me everything I’ve ever wanted,” she said, “and nothing but pain.”

Paul and I started the fourth fifth of wine. Leah sat on the edge of the bed, her hair pulled back, occasionally touching my boot with the outstretched toe of her boot as Paul talked.

“You know what you should do? No, I can’t presume to give you advice. But you should go to Guatemala and find yourself an old woman shaman and learn from her. Oh, fuck, I’m just talking to myself.”

“I don’t want to have a lot of money, but I don’t want to suffer, either,” Leah said.

One morning in the kitchen at Jerry’s, I listed all the things I wanted: a car, a tape deck, and new boots.

“I’ll get them for you,” Leah said.

I said, “It feels good to live on the edge, where you can distinguish between the things you want and the things you need.”

It seems the central problem I have with Leah is her money. All the picking at her is in lieu of the big question. And good for Paul, who says, “I come from money. I know what’s bothering you, Leah. Can I call you Mimi? You remind me of someone.”

“Leah, Mimi, it’s OK with me,” she said.

I kept my mouth shut. Paul was drunk and energized by Leah’s beauty, their common experience with money and Catholicism, and he was running, well-oiled, down the right track.

She said, “I came out here, to San Francisco, to do something. I don’t know what, yet, but I feel good about it.” I put my arm around her and said to Paul, “Didn’t I tell you this was a good woman?”

Paul looked at Leah, “I like you. You’re a fine lady.”

I imagined what my own life and choices would be with any real money. We drove to Paul's house, then came back to my place and got in bed. She got up to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"I can't get in the habit of staying here every night." A woman full of surprises.

The Perfect Pass

Paul and I went to a concert in Kezar Stadium, held all day Sunday. The \$200,000 net profit from the concert was to go to support athletic programs in the financially beleaguered school system. Then somebody found two million dollars lying around in a drawer somewhere, and Bill Graham decided to spend the money to benefit the poor. Marlon Brando showed up and exhorted everyone to expect the death of society unless we get our resources re-ordered.

"There's a lot of power behind this concert money," Paul said, as we sat among enough mellow young people to populate a small city. Then Joan Baez suggested, "This sort of thing should happen every day, until we wipe out poverty." A little Baez fantasy.

"Bill Graham is the mayor of the underground establishment," I joked.

As I looked around at Graham's citizenry, I wonder about their connection to the use of the money. One citizen of Graham City, in the paper the next day, said he didn't care where the money went. For his five bucks, he got fifty bucks worth of entertainment.

"If these concerts became a common avenue for change," I thought, "I wonder how they'd think of them, then."

It was an unusual crowd. One of the big surprises was the response to violence. As Joan Baez sang *Amazing Grace*, a fight broke out and spilled over the lowest railing, onto the field. The crowd booed. The two fighters were pulled apart, and the violence dissipated. There were three disturbances in six hours among 70,000 people. A man passed a football, playing catch with seventy thousand buddies. The ball came back to him, after flying around the stadium.

"Jesus, what a great way to throw a ball," I thought, "You can give up entirely to the throw. There's no need to worry about distance or accuracy. Every throw is perfectly on target."

There was an air of change, a feeling of breaking down old patterns. Paul saw a drunken kid, working his way down the row, accidentally kick a girl's foot. She flew into a

rage and, turning to her boyfriend, spit out, "Did you see that? He kicked me! You ought to kick his ass! That sonofabitch!"

The boyfriend looked at her in amazement, "Hell," he said, "he barely touched you. Forget about it." He went back to watching the concert: The Doobie Brothers, The Chambers Brothers, Jackson Browne, et al.

Domestic Poetry

Paul and Schutzman went over to the Page Street Library to see Beau Beausoleil read. Paul told Beau, "You sound like a man who's either going to blow himself away, or else your work will be around five hundred years from now."

Beausoleil says he's going crazy, but his writing reveals almost nothing of the daily details of his suffering. On the page, the voice of the poems is hard and angry. When he reads, his voice is soft and gentle, at least of the sounds. It's almost a lilt. Paul says he's fasting and reading Mayan literature, but his greatest struggle is against isolation. Without a community of support, you go crazy, he says. Beausoleil has tapped into a transcendent voice, and he's a good writer, but the man is hard to find in his poetry.

Stephen Vincent says, of the five *disturbed* men, that I'm closest to Beau. I was glad he said it, although I'm not certain what he meant by it. I talked to Stephen about the prose I'm writing, as we sat in his kitchen eating turkey tacos. I drank his unwanted beer. He was loaded on wine. I told him I sometimes feel the influence of poetry in my writing, and sometimes I lose it. Someone asked me if I was writing a journal, and I said no, because a journal is addressed to yourself.

"I started this prose as a letter to a friend I hadn't seen in ten years, someone I like, who likes me, who's a long way off." That's a good definition of the kind of reader that's important to the writing. The right kind of reader is important to the quality of the product and to its production. My favorite teacher at SF State, Nanos Valaoritis, told me something that stuck. He described a thing called domestic poetry.

"I don't know what's so bad about domestic things," Stephen said.

"I don't think Nanos means that. The kind of poem he's describing is like a miniature house, and the only value is in looking inside it. The poem never becomes the reader's experience. It always remains the writer's poem."

Nanos had a story for it. A telegram is delivered to the wrong house. The woman who answers the door reads the telegram, YOUR HUSBAND HAS BEEN KILLED IN THE WAR. She knows her husband is in the back room, reading. The message is not for her. The messenger takes the message to the right address, the house across the street, and at that door, the woman who reads it bursts into tears. The first woman recognizes the force of the message and sympathizes with the second woman, but the message is real only to the second woman.

I once read Eric Segal's "Love Story" on an airplane, after buying it in the airport, just to see what all the fuss was about, and to take my mind off my imminent death (*Poet Dies in Tragic Fall From Sky*). Anyway, when the fatuous broad died, in the story, I cried. But it was a trick. I didn't care about the girl who died. Instead, I was reminded of my own wife, and of the time she was hospitalized with thyroid cancer. I was touched by my imagination of a parallel story. As a senior in high school, reading "Of Human Bondage," I threw my sweaty copy of the book angrily across the room, in disgust at what was going on in Maugham's story. I made the story real.

A poem is a success because of how much it becomes in the minds of the readers. They take the poem to themselves. There's an indefinable quality that's achieved by good writing. The reader doesn't write it, nor is he or she simply witness to it. The true poem occurs in the magical distance that seems to occur between writer and reader. The reader can see himself in the poem, and he can see through the poem to the writer, but the poem is poem, distinct from either writer or reader. It touches them both. Poets are not fictionalizers. But neither is their work their personal, private, revealed truth. It's an odd product. Its value is somewhere called poetry. The notion that poets are lovers of apparent beauty and purveyors of abstract truth has worked to the detriment of reading and writing poetry.

Sometimes, it's like going to a disturbing movie without a happy conclusion, but one that's so genuine, there's a joy felt coming out of the theatre. I said something to Paul about life and games.

"But life isn't a game," he said.

No, life isn't a game. Life is *like* a game, but it's not a game. And art is not life, either. It is of life. It is of love. Without being identical to either. I think I love Leah, but it isn't Leah, and it isn't me that's become the possibility, it's the love between us. Love hangs between us like a charged space. I can't describe what's in that space, because I can't see what's there, but I'm willing to attest that there's something there.

I wrote this poem for the upcoming collection:

The Ocean in a Bottle

*I don't see through you like I said I did. My obsession
is not insight. I am a body turned to gas under its own pressure.*

*Sometimes I am lost outside my bones, and I look so hard
for them, I think I see other people's bones under their flesh.*

*When I feel their bones and their flesh, temporarily, I quit looking
for my own. I thought I found my bones under your flesh.*

*When I told you I was embarrassed to know you so well
as to become you, I was confessing a terrible emptiness.*

*When I look down and see my cloudy transparency,
I become afraid. My ambition to be full doesn't diminish you,
but it makes you unbearably desirable.*

*I cannot become you, I cannot fill myself with you. If I alone
ghost the space between us, I will succeed only in vacating myself.*

I'm listening to Pink Floyd and watching DNA do its thing on TV. A baby boy has just been born. The new baby is wrapped in swaddling clothes. It wails. It comes face to face with Mama. Mama is sweaty. Baby is bloody. I was born, down the hall, in the same hospital, the same day as Jenny Garretson, and if I knew then what I knew later, I would've found a way to crawl out of my crib and hit on her. I took Jenny Garretson to the Senior Prom. Years later, it's hard to realize the achievement I thought that was at the time. I loved Jenny from Eighth Grade on. Nick Demos beat me out, in Ninth Grade, in the race for Jenny's affections, and I never stood a chance, after that. I saw her thin, curvy legs pass by, in the hallway outside Jack Dye's Civics class, when I was delivering a talk about Adolph Hitler, and I experienced my first mental orgasm. Jack Dye might have

taken me for a budding fascist, for that and thanks to the essay's last line, inserted by my helpful, typist mother, "Adolph Hitler was a man of great power. It's too bad he didn't turn his power to good, instead of evil." How simple it all seems, when you put it like that. Dye said to me, "Did your mother help you with this paper." I knew immediately how he could tell.

Jenny was cute, smart, popular, and whatever. I was smart, I had a big nose, and I was not yet an athlete. Mrs. Garretson told my mother, "Steve is getting better looking, every day." A backhanded compliment, if ever I heard one. In the last two months of my senior year, my fortunes took a bold leap, and I became socially acceptable. Credit my being named captain of the swimming team. Credit my being a star of the senior variety show. I wore a cap and gown, came on stage as Professor Jack Cass and did a satiric reading of *Mary Had a Little Lamb*. I asked Jenny to go with me to the Senior Prom. Her boyfriend at the time, in a brief communiqué from the University of Illinois, where he sat in his Corvette, combing his hair, said, "I'm not going to a damn high school dance." Or words to that effect. That's all my resentful clairvoyance could pick up. So Jenny relented and gave in to my request.

"OK, I guess I'll go with you, Steve."

As I dressed and applied my Clearasil, with enthusiastic subtlety, my father stood in the doorway to the upstairs bathroom. He spoke in a hushed, serious tone, "Steve," he said, "tonight is the kind of night you will be tempted to do something you will regret for the rest of your life."

I couldn't imagine what he meant. Kill someone? Dance naked with Miss Roseburg, my Honors English teacher, who, in one hour, by actual count, said *perhaps* fifty-four times and whose favorite poem was "Richard Corey" about a small town guy who surprises the whole town, when he goes home one day and puts a bullet in his head. I was the bridge dummy at the dance. I filled a vacancy. Suddenly, I was driving home from dropping Jenny off at her house, after the party, after the dance. A pleasant kiss and, "Well, goodnight, Jenny, I guess I'll see you in school on Monday," and "Goodnight, Steve, and thank you for a very nice evening."

Halfway between her house and mine, I remembered my father's advice. I had done *nothing* I might regret for the rest of my life. I spun the car around and headed back toward my appointment with disgrace. I banged on her screen door. She came out, wearing a robe over her merry widow, a useless garment on her svelte figure. She received me on the sun porch, where I assaulted her for an indeterminate amount of

kissing and whalebone caressing. When I left, finally, and reached home, I was not disappointed. I knew she had not succumbed, and I hadn't done anything truly regrettable, but at least I had done something. I called Jenny's mother, when I was home over this last Christmas. I told her I wanted to say hello to Jenny. Her mother seemed distracted, "You know Jenny is married."

"I know," I said.

"Oh wait," she said, "there's someone at the door." She came back, breathless. "I thought it was Jenny," she said. She gave me Jenny's number and then another number.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I gave you my number by mistake."

I called Jenny, and we had a chat. I talked to her again, just before I returned to San Francisco, just after her husband had been transferred to Kansas City.

"Bye, Jenny, it's been nice talking to you."

I liked her so much I married a girl named Jenny. There were other reasons I married the second Jenny. People thought she was from Connecticut and I was from New York, not to mention she was a great kisser, and we danced well together.

I'm reading *Six Crises* by Richard Nixon, and I feel sympathetic. He exhibits himself to be a crazy person. I get the impression from reading his self-analysis that he has absolutely no integrity. There's no man behind the man. He remembers what others say about him, and that's what he believes himself to be. It sounds familiar. I sometimes think I have no idea how to be a human being. So I listen to what other people have to say about it.

Jeannie Cooper, told me, in her apartment in Iowa City, when we were both in art school, "Steve, you're a phrasemaker."

Paul Goepfert told me, "You're a combination court jester and desperate man."

Keil Stein said, after I had nonchalantly put my hand on some woman's breast at his party, "The reason women chase you is that you do the unexpected so easily."

My college drama director, Richard Meyer, told me he had faith that I was the kind of actor who did better in performance than in rehearsal, after I had, unbeknownst to me, stunk up the audition.

Curt Mackey said, "Steve is looking for what's real, not effects."

Anne Valley Fox said, "You have too much love for one woman."

Alice Mallory, after my reading at SF State, my alma mater, said I was brilliant. My mother thinks I'm irresponsible. I think I'm a lazy hypochondriac. Nixon says he always gets stressed before he does anything. He once claimed the ailment he was suffering

was called “Walnuts.” He said he always got it in late September. His doctor said there was nothing wrong with him, and he didn’t know of any respiratory affliction called “Walnuts.”

Sherry Harrelson said, by way of praise, “You’re not a nice person.”

Carl Mellenbach said, “Brooks, you’re crazy.”

My wife’s shrink said, “You don’t need a shrink, you’re your own shrink.”

Paul said I always had my thumb up my ass, taking my emotional temperature.

At ten, I thought I might be the Second Coming, but I remembered stealing a candy bar from Keith’s Grocery, and I knew Jesus wouldn’t do that. Goodbye, Messiah. Hello, Anti-Christ? I have no idea how to not give a shit. I exist. I believe everything I say and everything said to me is the truth. I have no sense of constructed drama. I believe that drama, both comedy and tragedy, are concurrent. As somebody once said, “This is not a rehearsal for your life, this is it.”

The Reverend Cecil Williams is giving lots of people kisses and hugs. I’m watching everybody at Glide Memorial Church applaud. I want some applause. I did a dialect, halfheartedly, the other day, and Paul said, “Are you sure you don’t want to reconsider going on the stage?” Paul is cautionary. Paul is always saying, “Don’t do it.” But he wants it as much as I do. If I have value, it’s that I’m scared to live, and I’m still going to live, and when I get into living, I live like a sonofabitch.

“I’m a dumbshit from the Midwest,” I say, but if there’s a lesson, it’s that life is everything wonderful and everything terrible, when you jump into it. A talent agent asked Zero Mostel what he was, and he said he was a comedian. The agent said, “You’re a comedian? So do something funny.” Zero picked up the man’s typewriter and threw it out the window. I love that, and that sort of thing scares me. I wonder if I can throw my own typewriter out the window. Tom Philips, in college, told me, “Steve, you always have one hand holding the rug you’re standing on, ready to pull it out from under you. You always blow your own cool.”

Ted Pearson burned all his writing, one December day. I admire that, but did Ted think it was funny? When life gets crucial, irony is thrown out the window. “Death is breaking up that old gang of mine,” I said, when I heard of the death of a guy I barely knew, and no one laughed. All were being appropriately somber, even for a guy we barely knew. People demand you give life enough sobriety. They’re right, of course. Groucho Marx called the police to complain about the noise at his own party.

Everybody loves a movie about insanity when it's a kind of wonderfulness, but few call themselves to the bar.

I decided to call Leah, just as she called me. She's coming over. Thirty seconds sooner, and it would've been the other way around. What about the criminal who dies thirty seconds before he begs God's forgiveness? Sorry, sucker, time for eternal hell fire. He barely missed the train to Eternal Bliss. Time is a continuum, to be continued.

Holy Moly Captain Marvel

I wanted to be alone, and somebody dropped dynamite in the Sunset Tunnel. I'm not alone. The light is not at the end of the tunnel, as I imagined. It's an open coffin with flashing lights, like a tiny Fourth of July, bursting from within.

Jesus looks down from the cross at his beloved mother. He winks, "It's OK, Ma, I'm not really dead. They're going to put me in a cave and cover the door with a rock, and in three days, they're going to push the rock away, and a helicopter is going to come and I'm going to fly away to Heaven. Ha, ha!" Blessed among women, his mother looks up at her deranged son, the adoration fading from her eyes.

Leah is thinking about meeting Jenny. She told Kit she wants to get all dolled up for it."

"Don't do that," Kit said, "she'll want to get back with him."

"That'd be great," Leah said.

She wonders if I don't want to be back with my wife and kids. I like Jenny. I think I love her, but we have different ways of living our lives. We spent eight years trying to convert each other. In the end, I'm sure this is the way I want to live. My life is too important to me to give it up in order to live with my kids. It's no easy conclusion. When I feel good about myself, I feel good about the decision, but I don't always feel good enough about myself to keep up the belief, the ruse, the delusion.

Betty got back from Mexico, and the first time I saw her, Jon was trailing behind her into her room. Both of them were loaded. At my door, I made an introduction between them and Leah out of syllables.

"Leah, Betty. Betty, Leah. Leah, Jon. Jon, Leah. Goodnight."

The next day, Betty told me she didn't really want to see Jon, she never missed him, and why didn't I introduce her to Leah?

"I did," I said. "You were distracted."

In a minor elaboration, I said, "It's a good relationship. It's just what I want, right now. It's no heavy romantic thing but really nice. There are a lot of different kinds of relationships," I said, with tepid sincerity. "This is good, right now, whatever happens later."

The other night, after dropping Leah off, sitting in her Red Firebird, I thought it was like driving a Stolen Moment. I went down to Spec's in North Beach and ran into Gerard Cienna, a twenty-one-year-old surrealist poet with angular features and long, red hair, conked forward and barely parted at the crown like a cheap wig. Gerard is blossoming as a poet, enough to be sought out for readings. He was chewing on that, worrying that his writing is too personal, that he has no urge to write or read for an audience.

"You've got to trust that what you're doing, right now, is the best thing for you to be doing," I said. "If it wasn't, you'd be doing something else."

Drunk as he was, Gerard laughed a little knowing laugh. He's going through a writer's development in stages. I think he's eight years ahead of where I was four years ago. I have four years recognition on a guy who is twelve years younger than I am. I have seen a certain gap in my life that shows up as a two-year gap in my writing. I notice that I write, and the writing is wisely ahead of the events I describe. I catch up to the writer/seer in about two years. The writing is a seer, even when I'm not.

I worry about Elizabeth Taylor. There she is, acting, in the movies, the very sort of person she acts in real life, without, I think, any awareness afforded by the drama. I'm embarrassed for her. How awful to be living a transparent life that's opaque to the central character. I'm not sure my own awareness is much more clear. I went to Mark's apartment with a bottle of Jim Beam, one night. We drank and talked, and then we hit the bars. Later, I read a story of his about that night, in which he describes me as having terrible bad breath. He never told me. He was quite content to watch me turn my breath on people like a garlic flame-thrower. I seek self-knowledge. I want to know what I'm doing. I don't want anyone to spare me the facts.

Maybe wisdom isn't *understanding* something, maybe wisdom is understanding the same thing so many times, you're comfortable with it. I've begun to see that when I'm talking to Leah, Gerard, and Betty, I'm talking to myself. The affair with Leah feels terrific. I don't know what it's leading to, and I'm apprehensive, but I think it's what I want

to be doing, right now. She gives me back a healthy sense of calm and a good sense of age, and then I start criticizing her.

She goes. She said. He goes. He said. They go. They said. I go. I said. I give up. This guy gives up. She left a trailer full of her worldly possessions at Jerry's sister's house in Inverness, north of the city. Going up to the country to get it, I made up a country song, "Hot Soft Flesh and Cold Hard Cash," with the lyric, "It's been a long, cold night, and I'm short on fight."

"It was good being with you during the day," she said, "instead of just at night. It wasn't exactly an exciting day, exactly. Well, it was, sort of."

It was exciting for me, being in the country, north of the city, in the warm sun, among hillsides of green, broken with gray stone outcroppings. We got the trailer back to the city, and it was landlord hassle time. Mr. Demopolis came down the street from his liquor store to help solve the problem of Leah's predecessor, the deaf tenant, who, contrary to expectations, wasn't already gone to Miami, like he was supposed to be. Instead, he was sitting on a nail keg in the kitchen behind coke-bottle glasses, eating pork and beans. He smiled. Leah cried.

"It's OK," I said. "We'll deal with it." Demopolis suggested that Leah wasn't due in until Friday, not Thursday. He said the guy would be out, definitely, by Friday noon. I asked him what we could do about the trailer." He said, "Well, you can put it in the garage." But we had already tried that. Jerry did an ace job of backing ten inches too much trailer up to the door. He and Kit took the trailer around the corner to his place, and Leah and I went to the liquor store. At the light, she was upset. She said everything was going wrong.

"Hold on," I said. "The best thing to do is to hang around and talk to this guy for a while. We'll see what we can do."

Over the counter, next to the yogurt and the Playboys, we conversed.

"If you don't want to rent the place, I will give you your money back."

"We want the place."

"This man," he said, "he was waiting for his ride, and when it came, he didn't hear them, and he missed the ride."

"I don't think there's any need for us to talk about him anymore," I said.

"It's terrible being a landlord. It's nothing but trouble."

"I'm sure it's no fun, but it's no fun wanting to move in, when you can't move in. It's no fun being a renter, either, but I guess we're not doing this for fun. What are we supposed to do about the trailer? Do you feel any responsibility for that?"

"No, I won't do anything about that."

"We would like to drop this cleaning fee. We'd rather do the cleaning ourselves. We can do a better job than you can, in a couple of hours, tomorrow. This isn't a deposit, this \$75, this is a fee, right?"

"Yes. OK, I'll give you back \$7, for the day, and I won't charge you the \$75 cleaning fee."

Leah and I brightened considerably. Demopolis stuck out his meaty fist and I shook it.

"It was nice doing business with you," I said.

Outside the store, on the corner of Ninth and Clement, across from Churchill's, in the Russian District with all the Chinese restaurants and Green Apple Books, next door, I asked Leah how much it cost for the trailer, per day.

"\$2.00."

"Two dollars? Jesus, if I'd known that, I might have been a little less righteous about leaning on him. Well I saved you eighty bucks."

"You're wonderful." She smiled and grabbed my arm.

I was grinning, happily, almost gleefully. Like a couple of kids, we tripped the Clement Street Fantastic. Not exciting, she says. Damn! On the way to Jerry's, in adrenalin exhaustion, I was hungry, sunburnt, pumped up, and happy. Later, I played basketball. We went to Japantown for dinner and then on to Henry Africa's for a Pernod. Leah had her ID checked and all the men gawked at her. She became uncomfortable, so we went to my place. On the way, I dropped my cigarette between my legs, and while I was digging it out, she smiled.

"I like your attitude," I said. "Some people would freak out about their seat covers. 'Oh! Oh!'"

"I don't care much about material things. They're nice, most of the time, but I'd rather be happy about myself," she said, still holding onto my arm.

We watched a study of the Kennedy Assassination on TV. She got spooked by the Zapruder film. She was nine years old in 1963, like the kid on the cover of Esquire, watching Jack Ruby on TV shoot Lee Harvey Oswald. In 1963, I was 21, and November 22 was my first date with my future wife. Jenny didn't watch the miseries of the Sixties. She

wouldn't watch William F. Buckley. Even talk upset her. Leah was upset, but she wanted to see. I liked Leah all over again. Betty bitched about her collection of dolls since my kids played with them. I was alone, and now people are bumping up against me.

This morning, I told Leah I wanted to be alone for a while, and she was up and out of my place, like Wyomia Tyus out of the starting blocks. "I admire you," she said, "partly because you're older and you've been through a lot, but I admire that you've decided to live the way you do." I don't want to get too worked up about this girl, but Holy Moly, Captain Marvel!

The Names of Things

If I can write my name, a little bit, a few times, in lights, in the dark. To have a name that's worthy and then be worthy of the name. To remember names, to say names, to know the names of things, and, in saying the names, to name the things, tree, house, chair, woman. My father drove down the road and read the signs, Coca Cola, Pfizer, DeKalb, John Deere. There are names that become generic. Kleenex. Coke, Jello. God.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God, and it was a trip. Je suis le mot. I am the word. Le mot juste. Just the right word. To find the right word and say it. To say the word. Just say the word. My brother has a shaky faith in language. He sees that language is a game, a crucial game. To get scared and be afraid to talk. To be afraid that what you say will make it real. Leah, you are tall. Leah, you are beautiful. OK, not so bad. But Leah, I love you?

The Story Behind the Story

Curt told the story of being cold-cocked by two guys, and one of them was the nephew of a local Mafioso. I thought he was finally telling a story that showed some vulnerability.

"He cold-cocked you?" I asked.

"No, I cold-cocked him."

"Oh."

Paul came into Vesuvio, drunk, his eyes gone to chicken soup. "Curt," he said, "the last time I saw you happy was walking home with Anne, the other day."

Two blows: one against Curt's unhappiness and one against me, who dreams of Anne. But Curt and I are happy talking to each other. It's a blow that doesn't do any real serious damage. I wonder what the real story is, behind everyone's autobiography.

Silence in the Firebird

There was sun in San Mateo, lemon trees, an Easter egg hunt, and a big turkey dinner. Everyone played lemon toss, over the top bar of the kids' swings in the backyard. Our host, Dennis, tossed his lemons at Leah. We were among wife-swappers. I was jealous, uncertain, and uneasy.

"I like to touch people," Leah said.

Jerry and Kit took pictures. Leah grabbed me and pulled me into the picture, while she was hugging Dennis. I pulled away. It's lonelier to be pulled into a place where I'm politely wanted than it is to be pushed away. Before the party, we dropped the kids at Jenny's. Rachel kicked me and told me to go home. She was being cute. Jackson and Rachel never give notice of the breakup that happens every weekend. They say, GO! There's less pain, that way. After the party, there was silence in the Firebird. I turned on the radio.

"I watched you and Dennis," I said, "It upset me. No, not upset, it hurt me."

She laughed, "But that's ridiculous." We stopped for gas. I said what I was feeling, and the attendant scrubbed the bugs and listened.

"I don't care what you do, but I want you to know what it does to me."

"I never want to hurt anyone. I don't want to hurt you."

"I don't think you do it on purpose, but I want you to see what happens. Dennis says he likes EST, but EST preaches responsibility. He's a charming asshole. I watched him. I watched his wife, Marianne, off on the sidelines, suffering by herself. Men find you attractive, and I like that. Jim liked you and talked to you, and I liked that, just fine."

"But I hugged Jim in the picture, too."

"There was a difference. You were attracted to Dennis, and you pulled me into it. That didn't feel good."

"You're not like other men I've known. You're sensitive. Most men treat me like shit. They just want me around. I usually tell them to forget it, or they tell me to forget it."

"Maybe I'm too old for you, but I want to talk to you. When I saw what Dennis was doing, I saw myself, the last couple of years. Maybe you've just got more of that kind of energy than I do."

"I don't think you're too old for me."

"I don't want to stop you from enjoying other people, but this hands-under-the-table shit, I don't want any part of that."

Earlier, she had suggested I wanted her chained to my belt.

"There are two ways to go," I said. "I don't want to keep you in my pocket. You can do what you want, but I want you to know what you're doing, when you do it."

She was affectionate with me, during the party, but I was jealous. She went into the kitchen and asked what she could do to help.

"Just stand there," Dennis said. Tall, blond, bone-handsome, he was a dentist. We met him the week before, at Jerry's place.

"He called, the other day, and said he was in town. I was going out with you, and I was glad I was. I'm satisfied," Leah said, and we kissed hard.

"If you wanted to make me jealous, you did it." It was a new feeling.

"Damn," I thought, "she's worth it. She takes care of me."

She flicks my hair out when it gets stuck in my collar. She got Easter baskets for my kids. She wants to find out what vitamins will help my skin when it gets dry. The thing with Leah, I think, is age. I'm feeling responsible for a younger woman. But I think it's also feeling responsible for myself. I feel monogamous. In a room, crowded with *sexually liberated* attractive and miserable people, I wanted to be in love with one woman. That woman was Leah. It's like the word and the thing. The word recognizes the thing. Love, as frightening as it is, as a word, can't hold a candle to the real thing. As I say it, it makes it all the more real.

The DeSoto Model

I'm using an India ink pen. That's risky for a lefty. A southpaw is unable to teach in West Africa, where it's forbidden to lift chalk in the dread left hand. The left hand is the piss hand. In penmanship, the left hand follows behind the outthrust pen. Left-handers push the pen out ahead of them. Righties spill their words out behind their pen. As a lefty, with fresh ink spreading out ahead, and the trailing fingers dragging across the trail, the bulk of my hand covers the words as I write. I only see the word I'm writing.

Righties leave a trail behind, which they can review as they go. Lefties keep diving into the blank future, mindless of any recent achievement.

"It's simple," I think, "like almost everything."

The fountain pen, the DeSoto model, is lying on Leah's kitchen table. She's using half an unfinished quilt for a tablecloth. The pen is lying on a yellow legal tablet, across a list of upcoming purchases. Leah is a buyer. It's a freedom granted to rich girls with a brand new apartment.

Guttural Syllables

I'm sitting in my maroon chair, listening as the neighbors speak in tongues, like a low murmur along telephone lines. I can't tell which neighbors they are, below, or next-door north. Birds squawk as they nest in the heating vents. Banks of cumulous clouds crest the hillside. A dog is barking guttural syllables, broken by a high, frantic yap. Water gurgles in the toilet like spring run-off. The gas heater burns evenly, an unending aspirant. My own breathing is barely audible in this din of city life. It rains a little. The sun breaks through. I know it's really the clouds breaking apart that's responsible for the good feelings that break through with the sun.

The Night of the Three Times

Leah is sore. Three times in one night, after a long, dry spell, did it. The next two nights, I cultivated a don't-give-a-shit attitude about making love. It's weird, anyway. I still don't know who she is, and I'm so afraid of love and/or the lack of it, I analyze what little I do know into irrelevance or over-significance. On the night of the three times, I began by elliptically demanding total love and devotion and then telling her she's too precious about her body. She puts a little perfume on, almost automatically, whenever she goes in the bathroom. I told her I want to make love to a woman, not a pretty object. She got her robe and sat down beside me on her puffy, big, new, gorgeous, brown, corduroy sectional couch, and she agreed to listen to my criticism. Within minutes, I was telling her how lonely I was.

"I noticed that, when I first met you," she said.

I thought about telling her a story of loneliness from ten years ago, but I was my own best illustration. She cradled me and took me to bed, and I clung to her, suctioned

against her, pore for pore, muscles in harmony, and got her good and sore. She didn't sweat, but I did, and it was enough for both of us.

A Treatise of Imprecise and Elaborate Confusions

I took Leah, along with my new play, the do-it-yourself soap opera, *O Neil, Tell Me You're Not Dead*, over to Barb and Sam's house to try it out as a parlor game. I had written the lines of the play on note cards. The cards were distributed among the guests, and we read them, in a circle, around the room. The accident of unlikely lines following unlikely lines created a kind of herky-jerky humor, as the mind tries to make sense of the newly connected lines, as if a real conversation is taking place. I had a hard time speaking my lines to Leah. It was easier to speak them to Kit, Roger, Sam, Barb, Winifred, and Jerry. But I knew she was there. I saw Roger eyeballing her. I eyeballed Winifred, who played the game well, but when she talked about it, her analysis became a treatise of imprecise and elaborate confusions.

Sharks are Circling

Yesterday, we got up in the morning after sleeping at my place. The hot water pipes at her place sounded as if they were being struck by sledgehammers. The water pressure, or heat, or some other mysterious phenomenon, drove us out. George Demopolis said it was pretty common and should go away, but it didn't. We drove to Tiburon for lunch, like any young couple with lots of time and money. I was in a bad mood, and no matter how I tried, I couldn't enjoy anything. One spoonful of mushroom soup tasted good, but otherwise, the hours we spent, going and coming, were a washout. I simply didn't want to go anywhere with her. I wanted to be alone and working.

"I wish I could be a wonderful person all the time," I said, "but sometimes I'm stiff and unpleasant, and I'm sorry." I could have said, "I need to work, I'll see you later."

It's the same routine I demonstrated with Sherry. I'm not used to demanding my own time. If I had a job, the problem wouldn't be a problem. But my only job is in my head, and Leah climbs into my head, too, and my head gets jammed up. I know she accepts that I'm a writer, and she respects that. All I have to do is tell her what I want, and she'll fall all over herself, setting it up for me. So I did. I told her I needed to be alone, every day, at least to allow for the possibility of something being written.

Then I drank Cutty Sark in a ceramic coffee cup, with slices of Monterey Jack and cucumber, and I went to sleep on the floor in front of the couch at her place. That puzzled her, and, in the morning, she said she thought I was crazy. In the past two days, she's laughed a forced chortle, recalling a dream I told her. I dreamed that a shark was attacking me. I had a metal band around my torso, like the tread of a tire, and I told the woman I was with, in the water, that the band was enough defense. "Don't worry about your legs," I said, "they won't bother with them." I fended off a shark that nosed my ring lazily, but by then, it wasn't a full circle of protection but only a small shield, and a second shark appeared behind me. I sat, bolt upright, in bed and rationally told Leah, "A shark just bit me."

She laughed at me and my dream, but I love my dreams. She laughed at a dream I was in the middle of, like I was a fool. I felt ridiculous. I wanted to confront the shark. How do I confront Leah? We're starting to become closer, mostly by spending a lot of time together. I don't usually feel like I want to get away from her, except when I would want to get away from anyone. I like to make love. It's an activity I can enjoy while I'm with her. It involves both of us in a mutual exercise, but I have a *consuming* theory of love. I imagine each lover, consumed by the other, and both consumed by the love itself. There is some prior reference, in this relationship, to this theory, if you will. Leah has said, "Whatever you want. I want to find a man I can give myself to."

But she doesn't have a job, either. She doesn't need a job. She has money from Daddy and a life with me. These circumstances make me nervous. I have small unemployment checks, for which I am extremely grateful, and a career I make up out of whole cloth each day. Each morning, each day, each night, it's gossamer, floating in an amorphous state of consciousness like cobwebs in a mist.

Love works on my brain like alcohol and cigarettes, oily wet and smoky, my thoughts don't give me much to base a sense of substance on. I'm left to posing, worrying, analyzing, and hiding, when I'm not working. Truly working. Right now, in the middle of this morass, I'm a mess. I feel smug and displaced. A month ago, I was counting the days to eviction, and now I have a party game to market for millions of bucks, a collection of poetry coming out, a one-man show to mount on stage in the fall, and a girlfriend who's devoted to the good life, who wants me to join her in the bubble bath.

I keep asking myself, "Can I live outside of despair and still make a life for myself?" The four cornerstones of my life are crumbling. Loneliness, despair, poverty, and failure are turning to dust. The building, under construction, for which I am

designer, architect, builder, and tenant, is losing its lease. The bonds are dissolving, and grass is poking through the sidewalk.

I'm a six-foot Nebraska sunflower, swaying brightly in the middle of my own sidewalk, and I'm being eaten alive by sharks/ She thinks it's cute, and she thinks I'm crazy. Sharks are easier to deal with.

Viva la Revolución

I'm sitting in Vesuvio on a misty Monday afternoon, with dark beer and a bag of beer nuts. Cars, trucks, and buses go by in a haze of dirty window. Then they shine in the clear view of the one open window. A woman says, "Nurse!" to the waitress and points at her empty glass like it's a full bedpan. I bought Julia Vose's long poem in defense of not mourning the suicide of a famous poet. It has all the cold, colorful energy that Julia can muster. I thought, "When Julia goes, next time, she will go by fire AND ice." I look at pictures of the beat artists of San Francisco in the Fifties, and they look clean and unpretentious. They pose with innocence in their fury.

I feel like I'm in Paris in the Thirties, after Paris in the Twenties. "You should have been in San Francisco in the Seventies," I speak, to some future audience. I still feel energy, and I see energy in the city. It feels good. And good people are still around. Good and crazy. I talked to Beau, last night, about poetry. We tried to categorize the differences between us. The rain has picked up. Columbus Avenue looks like a hosed-down rubber mat. I'm sitting at a round table, embossed with a floral print. All in all, it doesn't look like we're in a Depression, as some say we are. Everyone's too well dressed for a Depression. It's like the sinking of the Titanic. The passengers weren't issued rags before the final plunge. Carl Culbertson wondered about the panic going on in Saigon, the chaos there, and he imagined San Francisco like that.

At the Mission San Juan Bautista, a couple of hours south of the city, where Leah and I went on a sightseeing drive, the brochure proclaimed that the earthquakes in the neighborhood were never silent. "Don't be disappointed," it warned, "if you don't feel one while you're here. Some are almost undetectable."

Leah wants a poem of mine for her wall. I hesitated. Which one? Why any at all? I think of my one-line poem, "Heat your body to warm your dreams," but riding on the Fillmore bus, I thought it might be vice versa. "Heat your dreams to warm your body." It works both ways. Isn't Vice Versa the name for Italian crime poetry? I wonder about my

body. One puff or sip and I'm drugged. Is that healthy? Am I healthy? I must be. When Leah gives me vitamins, I piss lime-green. My brother Scott writes from Honolulu that he runs four miles a day. Soon, Scott will be webbed by his crossings, like the time-lapse photo in Life Magazine in '57 of the housewife moving around her kitchen with a neon bulb tied to her apron.

At Karen and Leslie's reading, Paul Vane told me, point blank, holding my shoulders, staring into my eyes, "Steve, you will always be a poet." I almost cried. I felt welcomed back into the fold, back under the unflappable wings of the muse. Beau writes as if there is a muse. Hilton writes as if there is one true way. I write with the message, "Keep dancing, you can beat the devil, if you stay awake."

"Invest in love," I wrote Scott, after he said he wanted to see me, after I told him about Leah, after I said I'm glad he's married to Liz.

I told Leah, "My cock is in my pants like a caged animal." Pause. "Do you want to write that one down?" she said. Her crotch still hurts, and I'm worried. She's balled six men in her life, and she's never gotten off. So I crowd into her, like a fraternity in a phone booth, and make three damaging calls.

"I'm not a believer," I told Hilton, "And because you are, I don't feel comfortable with you."

On TV, a wrestler from the University of Oklahoma told the camera, "I'm a witness for Christ when I wrestle." I watched him throw a Full Nelson on the Devil, in the guise of a big kid from Lehigh. True believers think they have the devil beat. "Jesus is right here, beside me, and as long as I affirm Him as my exalted shadow, the Devil is beat." I don't think the Devil is beat by such trucks. Neither Hilton nor Beau uses poetry for working out personal anxieties. I don't either, but as Beau, former good Catholic, is obsessed with immortal icons, I wonder about the significance of my icons; pickup trucks and radios, Beautiful Leah and her Fire Red Firebird.

The Department of Commerce is sending me a brochure telling me how to apply to keep my literary products from being pirated. If I send the government a Xerox of my children, will that prevent them from being kidnapped? But I want money from my play, and there's the rub. That's what could be stolen, not the baby itself. The kidnappers demand a million in child support. They won't give up the kid, because he's so cute. They want him to grow up and become a successful doctor or lawyer. The U.S. is importing babies by the shipload from South Vietnam, to be raised here as a *constant*

reminder. Hilton recommends reciprocity. Send President Ford to Saigon to be raised in a refugee camp. I want all the truth, not just some of it.

What if the Symbionese Liberation Army said, in their communiqué, “Sister Tania, a.k.a. good old Patty Hearst, has come over to our side, but she’s a boring dumbshit crybaby. Come and get her, we don’t want her. Vive la Revolución!”

Beau got into Leah’s red Firebird, and he was amazed. It smells like a brand-new 747. “Jesus,” he said, “I can’t even hear the motor run.” Leah’s Firebird is a fucking beautiful machine. The cost for loving it is the fucking up of the world. Leah said that if her cunt didn’t hurt, I could fuck her all over the house, any time I wanted.

There’s a line in the paper about a man who wants to lend an ear to anyone willing to listen. “Friends, Romans, Countrymen, here’s a basket of ears. First come, first served.” I wonder if anyone is listening. If you are, my message is; you will survive. Keep smiling and watch out for the mystery man. I told Leah I was sore, too, and that made her feel better.

All These Icons

I’m watching a preview of the Oscars. They are due to be *presented* to the *recipients* tomorrow. Hooray for Hollywood! A man from Oregon says everyone in California is obsessed with the movies. Once upon a time, in the Twentieth Century, there was a tribe of Americans, living on a volatile shelf on the edge of the continent, whose primary preoccupation was looking at imagined stories of fictitious people, whose lives were full of extreme misery, violent death, fantastic joy, and outrageous success. I’m watching *A Shot in the Dark*, with Peter Sellers. I got up to invite Betty. She was watching the same movie on her thimble-size Sony.

“I couldn’t get the Lincoln thing,” I said. “I was starting to get interested. I’m writing, and I was getting distracted, so you can come in and watch with me, because I put on *A Shot in the Dark*, and I’m going to watch that.”

It’s easier to watch something that doesn’t involve me on any deeper level. I use the image flow as background, like scenery in a drive across the country, like a collection of images, available as material, to represent some deeper internal sense. If the images have any power in themselves, I have to put aside my inner awareness and pay attention to something external. It’s a trade-off, but both are good, both valid.

“Oh, that’s OK,” Betty says, and then she tells me about a guy named Wayne who came by to see her. He’s in love with her. He stops by her store three times a day. He chases her at Yancy’s, and now he’s chasing her at home.

“He blew it,” she says, “I like him, but I want Jon.”

“Well, you make do with what you got,” I say.

“It was a bust with Pablo, I guess, because it was a vacation thing.”

Pablo is her Mexican boyfriend in Puerto Vallarta. Betty and I have a hallway debate over who should buy either cigarettes or cookies, but not a whole pack of cigarettes or a whole box of cookies. Leah calls and asks, “Where did you park my car, last night?” I was embarrassed to be talking to her. I feel like I dumped her, tossed her over, and abandoned her. But what is it, really?

She seemed distant and didn’t want to bother me. I cherish my solitude. For a week, I was in the lap of luxury, with a lover who didn’t sweat or come. No strife or struggle. Paul suggested I might soon be writing sappy musicals. I think he’s jealous. I relish the treat, to me and Leah, created by this night spent alone, without explanation, after our talk about her vaginal miseries. “Most of it is up here,” I said, pointing to my head.

Betty drinks Diet 7UP and worries about five pounds. I’m afraid and excited. I can lose Leah with a night’s indiscretion, a moment’s stupidity, or the revelation of a rainbow of character defects. At the same time, I’m certain she’s not worth my time, effort, concern, or love. I imagine her with harsh morning breath, a stern look of criticism on her plain, undistinguished face, her breasts diminished to the size and texture of dollar pancakes, her thighs expanded to gargantuan proportions, hair sprouting everywhere, saying over and over, “She goes, he goes, she goes, he goes...” on and on, in a flat, Midwestern twang. Finally, she goes on a diet, shrinks to nothing, sells her Firebird, renounces me, and enters a convent. While she’s there, she writes a treatise, describing poets as posturing, ineffectual palace monkeys.

It’s raining. I go to The Colonial for sugar snacks; comfort food for Betty and me. Once again, I notice that I get wetter when I run in the rain than I do when I walk. I buy a Butterfinger, some black licorice, a pack of Kools, and Haribo Fancy Raspberry Flavored Candies, which includes Agar Agar.

When we were at the Mission San Juan Bautista, Leah and I heard that a major fault line runs between the Grandstand and the Rodeo Corral. Is that any way to run the Power of God? I watch, on TV, as a Black man examines, with embarrassed attention, the

shape and size of a safe deposit box at FIDELITY SAVINGS. All these icons. My cigarette tastes awful. There's nothing KOOL about it.

From the Fillmore bus, I saw a man sitting in a storefront called, The Fillmore Merchants Association, trimming the hair from his nostrils. We should all do the best we can to make the most of our personal appearances. On TV, I watch Hitler address the Austrians. Local boy makes good. Hitler's a vegetarian. Ah, if Nixon could only have worn a uniform. There are plans to give Nixon \$250,000 for a Nixon Interview Special. The Nazis march across the floor of a stadium like boxes of bullets. Killers set fires of bodies and buildings. Poets set fires in the soul. Or is it lovers that set fires in the soul, or fan the flames, or enflame the fans? It's 9:30, and I'm desperate for Leah. I have run the pleasures of solitude, like stakes for the tent of self-sufficiency, into the ground, and no one can live in my tent, but me. He must be a Bedouin. He lives intense.

Shoot Them All

I look at a small picture frame, which reminds me of a frame and a picture I sent to Debra Murray, last fall, when I was courting her, long-distance. I wrote her dozens of letters, full of purple prose and golden pleas. I met Debra when I was back home in Illinois. I went home, because my father had blackouts, a brain tumor, and was dying. At least, we thought he was dying. He didn't die. He went through a life crisis, acting crazy. He seemed to be possessed by a great reluctance to grow old. He acted like a hot-rod teenager, driving maniacally, but with great skill. When I saw the skill, I realized he wasn't losing it, but trying to find it. He was supposed to have a brain tumor. The doctors at the Mayo Clinic pointed at a cloud formation, called a brain scan, and said there was an inoperable tumor in the middle of the clouds. Two weeks later, they said it was gone.

I met Debra at a popular dance bar in Davenport, Iowa, not thirty miles from where Leah was born. Debra was the prettiest girl in the place. We dated, sort of. I came back to California, and we corresponded. She said she was coming out, but she changed her mind. I was embarrassed to make such a play for her. Now, considering the circumstances, it seems only logical. Now I'm back in my adult hometown, doing what I care about, and looking forward to putting on a stage show. It's scary but exciting. Still, I don't know what's going on, anymore than my father does.

Last night, I went to Leah's place, crazy with fear, drink, and antagonism. She sat through my angst-ridden monologue, until I was finished. We went to bed and made

wonderful love. Slowly. This morning, I came into the room, broke my sentence, overcome by a jolt of love, and dove on her, with a kiss.

"I love when you do that, out of the blue," she said.

I love it, too. For a long time, I thought it was just impulsive bullshit, but now I love when it happens, in my throat, in my gut, in my arms, in my heart. I felt it again, downtown, on the street. Then Leah went into Joseph Magnin's on a buying spree.

"Consumeritis, acquisitiveness, gimme-gimme disease," I said.

I left her there and went to Macy's to check out new boots for myself. The clerk showed me some boots and then turned his back to talk to another clerk, and I was suddenly angry at him for his inattention. On the elevator, I realized it wasn't the clerk, it was me. My ten minutes in Joseph Magnin made me a snob. I wanted the clerk to be servile. I resent Leah for being able to blow a hundred bucks on a few items and I can't buy the shoes I need. Whenever I feel poor, it pisses me off. On the way home, we went to see the new St. Mary's Cathedral. It looks like a giant washing machine agitator. However, inside, it's all spacious grandeur.

On TV, the Little Rascals are eating soup that suffers from the accidental inclusion of a box of mothballs. They wince politely, because it's a formal dinner for a beautiful new teacher. The teacher wisely begs off the soup, saying it's too rich for her.

I give Leah shit about money, but it's as much my problem as it is hers. I drive her through the Hayes Valley Housing Projects on purpose, wordlessly, to make the point of cultural contrasts. She has charge cards, but she hates to see the bills. "You can tell the wealthy when you see them," she tells me, "especially the women." I want to leave her alone. She knows I'm troubled about it.

Betty came in and told me about three men. One of them, Wayne, is devoted to her. He just wants to see her, meaning more. She has to spend ten minutes with another guy, because she has a thirty-dollar bet with him about some precious stones, and they have to go to a lapidary to settle the bet. She wins, and the guy promises to take her out for dinner. She dreads it. Even the ten minutes is too much. And then there is Jon, her *fucked* boyfriend. She spends the afternoon listening to music with him and she feels at peace, happy.

I feel happy and peaceful with Leah. I'm wary of such peace. I'm without it. I'm skeptical of it. I misunderstand it, and I misrepresent it. My aunt Teddy symbolizes my apprehensions. Sitting in her upholstered marshmallow mansion in Newport Beach, she told me, "They should just shoot all the criminals. That would solve everything." She was

referring to the riots and unrest among the black citizens of New York City, where her sister lives, terrified of her black brothers and black sisters, who, she is certain, are all criminals. It's my confusion of wealth and ease with peace. I feel peace with Leah, but I look around at affluence and ease, and I suspect myself of falling into a dangerous trap. But it's really love that shakes and frightens me.

"I want to take a chance and go with this adventure," I say, finally, to myself.

Love American Style

Ah, a can of Progresso Spaghetti with Meatballs. It's bachelor life, again. A bottle of Famiglia Cribari, the Evening News, an open dictionary, and *Kiss Hollywood Goodbye*, by Anita Loos, the redoubtable brunette of the *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* reputation. On the news, the world continues to disintegrate. Or, as Miss Loos tells it, Broadway is always dying. America is the Big Apple of the world. It's a great place to get mugged, bugged, drugged, slugged, hugged, and, pardon the rhythmic break, rugged.

I moved my maroon chair into the window well, from which I draw sunlight and moon shadow, on the word of Nola, who looked into my room and said she liked the chair. I told Betty I wanted to fuck all her friends.

"Nola?"

"Yeah."

"Shelly?"

"Yeah."

"Candy?"

"Yeah."

Gloria?"

"No, not Gloria."

"But she likes you, and she doesn't like anyone."

All of Betty's friends have big chests, with the exception of Wendy, who has a bra-full of energy. I'm playing Bob Dylan again, "Life is sad, life is a bust, all you can do, is do what you must." I'm drinking my wine like wine, like water, like wine, like the Sunny Southland (as Keats would call it) into my throat. I tap the wine glass, and my yellow Bic FineLine falls onto the floor. Oops.

Leah sent me home, today, to test our love, to take a few days off. It's just as well. I become critical of her. However, the natural elements conspire to make the day

sunny. The sky is cerulean blue. I'm compelled to the dictionary. *Cerulean: sky blue, azure.* Azure as I'm sitting here. The billboard, lit against the cerulean sky, now says CARLTON IS BEST. Whoever he is, it's his time, but soon, it's back to Kansas for you, buddy boy. I'm watching Orson Welles from Kenosha, Wisconsin, a man given to life, who gives life in turn, a noted fat man. The TV tower on Mt. Davidson is obscured at the top by clouds, like a thumb-smudge on a crystal clear, still-wet oil painting. After three weeks of growing marriage with the beautiful Leah, I'm feeling my oats, but I look in the mirror, and I look terrible; puffy red face, hair like a knit cap.

I go to the closet, change my homely, checkered shirt for a ribbed, nipple-revealing shirt, into the bathroom for hair brushing, splash my face with water, into Betty's room for turtle oil to combat dryness, and then back to my chair, to Ry Cooder's big bass, good-natured, white boy blues. It's funny how one becomes foil to one's current roommate. With Paul, I was a loveable, distressed, cocky, fumbling Midwesterner, who acted like he didn't understand what was happening in the city. With Betty, I act the calm, mature, reasoning influence in her erratic, victimized, hyperkinetic, can't-handle-it life. I'm available for momentary changes in whatever five-second influence blows me away, apart, up, or down.

Walking by a row of blossoming spring bushes, in college, with Louie Unger, I was overcome by my inherent love of being alive. I started whistling, and Louie said, "Brooks, I never believed it possible, but you whistle worse than you sing." I know what makes me love myself, and I know what makes others love me, but I only know it when it occurs. Anita Loos describes her attraction to Don Juan types, and I think I recognize myself in her description. It's a quality of bravado, boldness, and brashness. Throw out the rules and talk straight to people's love of themselves, often metaphorically, directly indirect, a kind of induced self-hypnotism. I said to Shelly, sitting at her table in the sunlight, in the Owl and Monkey, her blouse open to the belt, "It's a wonderful day. Everyone gets to unbutton their shirts."

Fiona, Betty's most buxom friend, came by the flat. A guy told her it's either him or Yancy's. She works there. He told her he could give her money, if she quit. I said, "You should have said, '5,000 bucks, for starters.'"

"But he's a nice guy."

"Nice guys aren't immune," I said.

She put on Jimi Hendrix and began to dance. "I don't know what I'm doing," she complained, softly, rhythmically.'

"You mean you didn't come over to see me?"

"Oh, no."

"That's too bad."

I want to throw her on the bed. I think she'd love it. I think she loves it that I don't throw her on the bed. Betty said Roxanne might come by. She's a radio personality, a voice in the room, sultry and hip. Roxanne is to me what she is to thousands of others. She gives me the chance to eavesdrop on a rich, woman's voice, speaking in my ear, knowing it's not just *my* ear, but believing it is. Betty is a manipulator who loves a man who won't be manipulated, without exacting a toll.

"Most men, who barely qualify as men, are mere bastards," she says.

"I'll tell you what," she says, "I'll do your dishes, if you take your garbage down." It's a deal. I finish with my garbage, and she's still washing my dishes. She knows she's worked a bad deal, so she adds, "You know what? We're out of dishwashing liquid."

I go to my notebook, to throw the balance my way, and then I think about Leah. *Life is sad, life is a bust.* I go around to The Colonial, and Sam the Arab student is watching TV, glancing incidentally at the customers, and peripherally at the business. I imagine a movie. Mobs of starving Americans storm local groceries, the few remaining storehouses of sustenance in a dying world, and the clerk is watching TV. The clerk's final screams are for a different channel, "Channel Five, Channel Five, I want *Love American Style*."

Stephen Vincent called and advised me that Nevada is offering to convert itself into Formosa, thanks to Howard Hughes. Stephen said that he and Barbara are going to Saratoga for the mud bathes and a glider flight - from the flogging pan into the flier. I laugh at my little joke, as I write it.

"What are you in such a good mood about?" Betty says, from the other room.

"I can't begin to tell you," I say.

Fire Eaters and Sword Swallowers

I'm in the Owl and Monkey with English Breakfast Tea and a small Danish. I notice they're beginning to hold poetry readings here. Earlier today, I went out to San Francisco State to see a poetry reading, thinking about the possibility of running into some woman who might prove a test for my lustful energies. Actually, I didn't feel all that

lustful, but I still thought about it. I smoked cigarettes and drank coffee from a machine. I lost fifty cents trying to buy yogurt.

The readings are held in a theatre-like classroom, slanted and colorless. The room is dark, the reader stands in front of a home-movie screen, there's a light shining on the screen, with three other spotlights on the poet and a color videotape is made of the reading. A TV at the back of the room shows the poet in vivid color, more vivid than he or she is in person, under the lights, where every poet looks like an open wound being operated on.

At the end of each poet's reading, there is applause. It's appreciative but not joyful. The man behind me clapped like rifle shots. During the reading, he patted his thighs, nervously, with both hands. He seemed to be a violent person, but I thought, "I don't know if he's violent or not." I imagine a scene. I tell the man to be quiet. He stands as if to fight. I invite him to step outside. He rages out of the room. I remain in my seat. When he comes back, I tell him, "I'm sorry, but you already lost."

The second poet told everyone, "I started out as a simple-minded nature poet, but I've spent the last four years, indoors. I'm still simple-minded, though." He's good. The third, and last, poet was an engaging, easy-going, professional reader, who made it all very pleasant. At some point, I realized my anticipation of lust was lousing up my let-it-happen attitude. I stood around, afterwards, and spotted a few women I knew. Leslie Scalapino wanted to wait another night, a while back, to consummate our titillation. I let it go. Paul went out with her and concluded, in his own inimitable way, that she saw physicality conceptually, in the same way that the blind imagine color.

I left and went to the Information Module to apply for reimbursement of my lost half dollar. I got it, and I made a point to appreciate how easy it was. At the reading, I wondered about the disappearance of fire-eaters and sword-swallowers. It was a pleasant reading. I felt calm and good. I bought a box of Junior Mints at the bookstore and checked out all the stuff for sale on the common. I flashed my Muni Fast Pass and took the LTaraval over to Beausoleil's job at the Taraval Branch Library.

We moved among the stacks, discussing books and love. Beau said he's been telling the story of my suddenly being face to face with love and success. He said *Love* and *Success* are the two dogs he wakes up to, each terror-stricken morning. He said they stare at him as he lies there.

I told Beau that Leah and I are taking a brief hiatus, to test our love. He laughed. We agreed that being an artist requires a special wife or lover. He thinks he probably

has to live with another artist. Anyone else simply can't understand. Maybe not. Leah is an amateur painter and a craftsperson, but she's not an artist. She does have a strong self-interest and a sense of self-reliance. Later, at home, I thought about her some more, "What's all the shit I give her? Am I merely testing her? Why?"

Because she's got to accept all the weirdness. She can call me crazy, that's OK, but she can't reject it. Not at home, not at first. Never! What an outrageous requirement. But what choice have I got?

Alone with Another

When I wrote my first play, Jenny thought it was ridiculous. She wanted me to leave the house, every day. She couldn't stand to have me around when I was working. I felt kicked out, every day. I don't go to work, but I'm at work all the time, and I want support. I need support. There has to be such a relationship, so I can get up and go to the writing, or sit still and withdraw to it. It's a difficult thing to live with, I imagine. I'm afraid it would have to be a lousy marriage. Maybe all the talk about Don Juan is a concession to the unlikelihood of finding a wife. Blake's wife danced naked with him, in the backyard, with angels, and they both had dinner with Biblical prophets. Einstein's wife brought food to his door and left him alone. Regardless of genius, the inclination and the necessity are the same. I need to be alone, and I don't want to leave my woman alone to do it, and I don't know how to do that.

The Bite of the Vampire

I missed Leah. I got a taste, again, of loneliness. She's one smart cookie. I knew a bottle of Ten High was only going to accentuate my misery. So I smoked dope. I took three hits off Betty's joint, last night, after she went out. It was powerful stuff. I watched a Channel 2 News story about a 31-year-old man who jumped off the San Mateo Bridge and died of internal injuries on the way to the hospital. After I saw that, with all the increased identification that marijuana induces in me, I went through an excruciating fantasy.

I left my apartment, on my way to the bridge. At the street, I whispered to a neighbor, "Stop me." It was so soft and so lacking in desperation; the neighbor didn't believe the message. At that point, in my fantasy, I became a man totally overcome by

self-destruction. It was frightening, sunk as I was in marijuana's loving embrace. I wondered if that deep, emotional response to a brief news story wasn't what happens to everybody, all day long, without them recognizing it. Marijuana slows me down to the point where all my responses are as available to me as instant replay, without the delay. And I'm an empathetic person. It isn't acting or imitating that I do best. It's becoming. I'm a born *becomer*. I'm wary of people, because of my tendency to become them.

In college, I often felt as if I was becoming the person walking ahead of me, until I was so sure the person was aware of me doing it, that I had to break it. I was afraid and embarrassed, and I always thought it was a terrible affront. I felt like a vampire, like I was stealing their lives, like I had no life of my own, like my life went out of me and their lives entered. Even so, I thought I was taking something from them.

Gene Berman said he wanted to kill me, a couple of years ago, because he thought I was a vampire. At least, that's what he said. At the time, I felt empty and emotionless. My marriage was coming apart. I couldn't make a cogent argument against his complaint. I knew Gene's girlfriend, Monica, for years, and occasionally, mostly in my imagination, I made clumsy, failed attempts to get close to her. At a large, drunken party at Stan and Anne Rice's house in Berkeley, I joked with her about the apparent vacuity of the soul. Gene told me later he remembered six comments I made, and he remembered me biting Monica on the calf. I remember doing that, too, having fun, faking a bite that never touched the skin. I recall saying, in the midst of the surging throng of mutual insanity and good clean fun, that I expected to meet everyone I knew from high school, embodied in others, and that everyone was a recurring ghost of themselves.

Gene was deep into his own psychosis, and taking lots of LSD, and for the next five days, he came by my house, in married students housing at SF State, intent on killing me. I wasn't at home, or I didn't hear the knock. It's curious. Maybe he didn't actually show up but only hallucinated it. I wouldn't be surprised, but I like to think it was true. I like the idea of being the target of the deep dark plots of tormented souls.

Gene Berman is one of the gentlest guys I know, and Monica thinks she's a witch. So I've been told, and that may not be far off the mark. She never acknowledges me whenever we encounter each other, on the street or on the bus. It's a bizarre experience to be face to face with someone you've known for years, and they move away, in the same way one would shake off a bad chill. Monica's poetry is painful. She sees herself devoid of love.

Gene attended Duke University with Jenny's brother Daniel. When Gene and I first met, we were thrilled by the connection. I was happy when she said he wanted to read my poems. I gave him just about everything I had when I first got to town, good, bad, and indifferent. The next morning, bright and early, he dropped off the poems, with the brief remark, "I'll be in touch."

I figured he didn't like what he read and didn't know how to say it, but he ran the Northern California Poetry in the Schools Program, and I went to work for him, at one point. Let bygones be bygones. Bizarre behavior among poets is not sanctioned but not surprising. All this is said to lend example to my fear of being lost in a woman. The closer I get to them, the crazier I get. It feels like I'm having a total body transfusion, not unlike a total body orgasm, only the reverse. Both constitute a sense of ego loss. It's the most feared and the most desired state of being. It's the claustrophobia and the vertigo of intimacy. It's the release and the freedom of belonging. And it's all mine for the asking.

Blowing in the Wind

Betty wants me to remember a story for her, about picking up a man. She was sitting with three guys, all black, in Yancy's. They professed curiosity about her personality, after sharing with her their appreciation of her very sexy, silken dress. "We don't want to fuck you, but we sure think you're terrific," they seemed to be saying. When all three split to the necessities of bar life; cigarettes, pissing, and dancing, she turned to a homely white hippie, and said, "You want to go fuck?" He was flabbergasted and said, "Sure."

She tells me the story as if it's a breakthrough. It's no more than typical for her. She avoids rejection, once again - her rejection, or his rejection, anybody's rejection, directed at whomever. I think about Anne, and I want to call her. I want to say to her, "Anne, you're the best-fleshed friend I've got." I seek temporary refuge in the flesh of a friend. She's an enticement, especially when I know she's safe from love. I advise Betty, "You need to pick one man out, anyone, and on the sole basis of an experiment, say no, and tell him the truth. Say what you want. Once. An experiment. A start."

I worked in Betty's store. Like my father before me, I'm a lousy salesman. I present myself as a good product, but I don't sell it. I'm slightly intimidated by the customers. A fellow put four quarters on the counter for his dollar purchase, and I failed to mention the sales tax, because I didn't want to offend him and his companion. I

know Leah wants me to challenge her, and I challenge her only by my willingness to be absent from her. I'm willing to lose, but do I dare to succeed? I wonder if I have the killer instinct, so necessary in love. When I get my opponent down, in basketball or in love, can I finish him or her off? So far, I ease off anyone I think I can master. It's not the woman in the love I need to master; it's the love in the woman. And, it doesn't have anything to do with mastery.

Billy Martin, on the TV Game of the Week, between Oakland and Houston, is giving a rookie umpire a piece of his face. He leans into the umpire, like a small, angry boy leaning over a reflecting pool of water. After Billy is ejected, he blows up and dances around, like crepe paper in the wind, in front of a battery of umpires. He throws his hat down, kicks sand over the plate, and prances out of the game, like he didn't want any dinner, anyway. He retires to his room where he chews on torn-up paper and a tootsie roll, assured that he has performed well, never mind the fine due him from the guys in the front office, who love it and pay the fine themselves in appreciation of a wonderful show in the face of defeat. His team is losing 7-4.

I piss, again, and I'm transported, thanks to the print curtain close to my nose to the florid vegetation of India. "A woman would never experience this particular pleasure," I think, "since they turn their backs to this curtain and sit to piss. It reminds me that my experience is primarily male, despite Stephen Vincent's preoccupation with androgyny.

I think, "I'm a writer, but my preoccupation is raw nerve. In my last life, I must have been a finger-tip, a tongue-tip, or a cock-tip, touching everything sooner than others, needing protection, like a glove, a rubber or a fiction." Vulnerable to intense and immediate sensation, I'm fascinated with distance and reflection. Can an appendage of sensitivity find happiness in a world of blunt instruments? The Texas Rangers are looking for an established left-hander who can be counted on in relief. Faced with my Major League debut, can I be the one? I believe all I say, hear, and do is symbolic and meaningful. There's end to the laughter, but there's no end to the seriousness, either.

"Let's laugh," I choose. "We may know better, but we can't do better."

Dear Biographee

Dear Biographee,

Congratulations! You have been selected to appear in the Bicentennial Memorial Edition of COMMUNITY LEADERS AND NOTEWORTHY AMERICANS. Certainly this honorary recognition will be cherished by you, your family, and friends, for years to come. Naturally, there will not be another edition for 100 years. You owe it to yourself and posterity to preserve your biography in this special volume.

I look down the list of Editorial Advisory Board members, and I see the name of Russel Vlahovich, Poet, Writer, and Self-Celebrator, a likeable surrealist, whose book, "Flaming Bedsheets," is a fiery fulsome fulmination of the title. Welcome to the great American Hype, and thanks for the form letter compliment.

It's a temptation. At the end of the school year, Ninth Grade, in homeroom, to kill time, we all made lists of how many times we thought our faces might appear in the upcoming John Deere Junior High School Annual. I guessed I would win the American Legion Award. My classmates hooted and hollered at my audacity. It was only logical to my young mind, and I mean *only* logical. I was beaten out by another kid, because he was an athlete, and I wasn't. I became one, later, but no matter. My willingness to be honored and my potential for it, didn't qualify me for the award.

Don't count your chickens before they're hatched. Lay your eggs. Love laying your eggs. Accept the Oscar, but only after you've given the performance. I'm giving myself more advice.

Life Yet Unimagined

We forecast our futures by the stories we tell of our past. I think I tell stories of humiliation overcome, stories of authorities who mistake me for something I'm not, stories of eventual success, stories that laugh at my life, that mistake it for clowning, that recognize later on, in private moments, its power and value, stories in which humiliation becomes humble recognition.

Some people are like verbal diuretics. I see them or talk to them, and my tongue or my bowels begin to loosen. There's a release and a flow. I called Curt to tell him I was ready to do his film. He wants to make a movie called "Looking for Women," about bar life with me as the hero. I called to see if he was up for a social outing. He's coming over. Curt's stories are all of strength, presence, leonine defiance, and wild physical wisdom. I

admire him, but I love my own seemingly sad stories. Never do I believe that I am as truly sad as the central character in my stories might appear.

Wisdom is my new surprise. Can a slick banana like I am, who has been granted the ease of doing what I want, come clear of it? Can I come clear of my past, my history, my limitations, my egotism, and be a wise man who chooses love and value when glory and distraction are so easily assumed? Age and wisdom are my secret trump cards, when I feel so young and so stupid. This thing I am writing is an attempt to show myself without sham or pretense. Even so, I think about Anita Loos, watching her husband through a two-way mirror in his comfy sanitarium...pacing the floor, as he so often did, wringing his hands, and muttering, "Oh, my god, oh, my god."

The doctor orders her to watch him, closely.

"Do you notice anything odd about his actions?" he says.

"No," she answers, "I have often seen him like this. He's always the same."

"Is that all you notice?"

"Yes."

"Look again, and you'll see he's constantly watching himself in the mirror."

I think I'm a monkey, fascinated with my image in the zoo mirror. In my writing, I try to be the mirror as well as the monkey. I admit I'm frightened of life and I'm amazed and thrilled to be living it. It's enough of a miracle to be a long way from ending. As an adult, so far, it's what I dream of being in the middle of, and still, as scared as I am, I'm ambitious to jump in the middle of life as yet unimagined.

Decent Folk

My parents are decent folk, given to belief in their own lives. My father is from Oklahoma, a bear of a man, who repeats his old jokes, a man torn from his roots. I remember a few lines from him, like, "You sound like a cow peeing on a flat rock," when I was standing at the toilet. "I buy you books, I send you to school, I teach you all I know, and you still don't know anything," drawing me into his own self-derogation. "Eat what's set before you and shut up," and when I reached for the rolls, too soon, he stabbed the back of my hand with his fork, like spearing a frog. My mother is a big-boned, stoic, second-generation Swede. "Do this for me, just once," she said, more than once. She was a bright, talented girl, who went to work, when her more fortunate brothers went to college. She said to her Depression Era employer, "I'll work for nothing, if you give me a

chance,” and she became his right hand, in a metal fabricating factory. She was an ambitious, resentful girl who imagined herself *The Dairy Queen*. As a young man, my father dreamed of going to South America as a geologist. He admits to dreaming of becoming an actor. He’s a cross between John Wayne and Mister Greenjeans, half laconic cowboy, half loveable bumpkin.

The Honeymoon’s Over

I’m sitting in Leah’s place, watching Cher on TV. Leah is talking to her mother on the phone, as she sits, squat-legged in the hallway. Her grandmother is dying, and she’s talking sister-talk to her Mom about Kit and Jerry and their steadily declining relationship. The honeymoon is over between Leah and me. We’re talking about it. Can we get it on, without anything to do? Three different fortunetellers predicted that she would get married, this year. I have a few months to find out if I’m the one.

The Dummy is Real

I’m behind the three-tiered jewelry case in Betty Boop’s Second Hand Store, waiting for enough customers to come in and buy something, so I can pay for my breakfast. This is true grassroots capitalism. Jon came in to see about Betty. My hand hovered over my writing, not because I’ve said anything that Jon shouldn’t see, but the way a kid hunches over his paper as he works on his story, *My Summer Vacation*. Except this is *My All-Season Vocation*. A woman comes in, fingers a pile of gloves and says, “Actually, I’m looking for something kind of wooly.”

The shop is full of dresses, utensils, dishes, postcards, jewelry, quilts, bric-a-brac, and other assorted broken lots from the near and the not-so-near past. There’s a line of twine hung across the front window with items clipped to it with clothespins. On the line are: the OPEN sign, a postcard entitled *Miss Foxtrot*, a six by ten inch American Flag, a string of Peking glass beads, a hand mirror, and a black lace mantilla. The windows are dirty, and the store is dark. Betty calls and gives me a pep talk, “Let’s sell that junk!” Maybe a junk store has to be dark and dirty, to give the customers the chance to discover their own consumerable miracles. Who can argue with success?

As yet, I’m still unable to grasp the meaning of the last five days. On Wednesday, Leah said she wanted me to try to stay away until Saturday, and I agreed. On Thursday,

I ventured out, with an eye to other women. I talked to Beau about artists' marital requirements. On Friday, I went to Vesuvio with Curt. We picked up two women, and we slept with them. On Saturday, I saw Leah. We talked seriously and lightly about love and marriage. On Sunday, I was an old married man. The thrill of the near rape of conquest is gone. Leah's body appeared below me like a giant matter of fact. Making love to strangers is exciting, like diving into an absolutely gorgeous high mountain lake, that turns out to be two feet deep. And making love without the excitement of conquest seems flat. And then there's love. Where is love?

Friday night, I gravitated toward a woman in Vesuvio, Mazie, by name, 35, two kids somewhere, Hawaiian by birth, Filipino by ancestry, small and quiet. All night, saying, "Stephen, oh, Steve...." She asked me, three times, what my name was. We balled four times, long and hard, gently at times, every way we could think of. She had velvety soft skin and soft breasts I could push all over her ribcage. Coarse black hair and a tight dry mouth. She lay against me all night, and I enjoyed every minute of it. In the early hours of the morning, I tried, once again, to turn my back to her, but I didn't want to.

We all took showers, in turns, and my eyes caught sight of the weight Curt carries on his back, above the pelvis, and the blond breasts and slim thighs of his overnight lover. We drank coffee and sat talking in the long narrow outer room, with its one window open to the back steps. And there, on the back steps was Julia Vose. I was startled to find I was downstairs from an old friend, in a building I knew.

In the middle of the night, I looked down at the woman I was madly fucking, and I was overcome by a quick rush of terror. For a split second, she was a Vietnamese woman I was raping. For a split second, she seemed nearly dead. It was a feeling from several kinds of emotions and thoughts of racism, from recognition of my deeds and America's, and from a sense in myself that making love to any woman of the Third World is charged with the imperialism bred into my prejudices and talked into my awareness.

It's hard for me to think of going to Mexico for the same reason. Going there, feels like an act of imperialist capitalism. Do I want to put myself into the cardboard drama of being American in the Third World? My friends go there and come back with wonderful snapshots of the glorious temples and the incredibly real natives, and I think, "Yeah, and all those temples were designed for the glorification of gods and autocrats with the blood and sweat of a peasantry now sanctified in the lined faces of their descendants."

Mazie, the inscrutable Asian-American with the patched jeans and the North Beach façade of nightlife boredom, who appreciated the *great fucking* we did, got me tangled up in my contradictions.

Curt's *date*, Clarissa, was a pleasant, even a sweet girl. Curt warmed up to being with her, for weeks, not wanting to sleep with her, because she knew everyone, including Anne, from whom he is still *not clear*. In the middle of the night, he rose up in bed and asked himself, point-blank, "What am I doing?" But then she took off her dress and he said to himself, "That looks good." I consoled him with my all-purpose morning-after line, "It's cowardice not to muck up our lives with these confusions."

He laughed, "There's some truth in that."

So Leah is my solution, my comfort, my solace, my *wife*?

Scott married a Chicana and moved to Hawai'i. But then he's 6'8" and a minority all by himself. His wife, Liz, calls herself *Mexican* and says she hates it. My sense of being a just American is to stay out of other people's business and clean up my own act. Being happy seems like a revolutionary act. Leah decided to be happy when she was 20. It has taken me 13 more years to make the same decision. I want to take my light out from under a bushel of fear and guilt and let it shine.

There's an open display window on the corner of the mall shops inside the Serramonte Plaza Shopping Center. I bought new boots, with two-inch heels, raising me just enough so I can put my arm around Leah's shoulders. I climbed into the window and assumed my best mannequin pose. Leah spotted what I was doing and walked on, then turned back, to watch ten teenage girls jump when they realized the dummy was real. *The dummy is real*. I caught up to Leah, exhilarated.

"If I get enough of that," I said, "I'll never get drunk again."

The Earth, the Earth

I'm back in the Owl and Monkey, remembering a line from Judy Cleef, "Steve, you're not a creasy-pants person." And Tom Phillips' line, "Brooks, you always blow your own cool." I told Leah I liked her for her looks. She was crestfallen and left the room to get dressed up. Then she got the news that her favorite grandmother had died, and she was in my arms, crying it out. This afternoon, at the airport, where the sounds are like electricity trying to mate with plastic, I told her I loved her when things got

serious. Last night, I bent over her, as she rose up, and we bumped heads, hard. It was a nasty blow, more to her than to me.

She had a headache, all night, and I slept, restlessly. In a dream, I lunged against my father, between the table lamp and the living room wall, beside the sofa, in my teenage home. I held my father down, by force, and gripped him by the neck and shoulders. I wrenched him up, yelled at him, and then fell into his arms, sobbing. I hugged him, for a long time, clinging with relief, until I was embarrassed, excited, and disgusted.

Leah reminds me of my mother. Both are attractive in the face, clean, well groomed, tall, small-breasted, with long, thick thighs, serious, demanding, sensitive to criticism, clumsy in response to affection, and solicitous when appreciated. My parents met on a blind date. So did Leah's. I asked my father why he was attracted to his wife, and he said it was because she was tall and clean. My mother married him, on the condition that he stop making puns. That has resulted in 35 years of rusty machinery. Better for her, I suppose, in her lack of ease at his excess of ease, her attraction to it.

Kit was at Leah's, yesterday morning, opening a birthday package from her older sister, including the book, *I Touch the Earth, the Earth Touches Me*, by Hugh Prather. I saw that book, once before, when Sherry gave it to me for Christmas, in '73. I saw it as banal platitudes by a weak pretentious poet who tapped into a popular market. Leah and Kit cooed over the book. Leah said, "I love this book. I've read it so many times." Kit read the book at random, as I watched. I saw two people who genuinely appreciate the words and the messages, and I softened. I read it. It wasn't pretentious, sometimes banal, but reasonable, gentle, insightful.

"I tell you what I need," I said to Leah, "I need a heavy dose of humility." Leah is Leah. I barely know her. I remember a line of mine, "Give it time, before you despise the woman."

A Light Surrealist Excursion

John Wayne has a terrific toupee. It looks like a fungus that's overgrown Mount Rushmore. In the full-length mirror, I look like an Indian. My hair is dangerously close to being beautiful. My nose, long and straight, with flared nostrils, appears, from the side, like an art deco arrow. I have high cheekbones, full lips, and brown eyes full of vengeance. My skin is red from the firewater wine. I sit in my maroon chair, my upholstered mare, and I'm tall in the saddle. Why do I feel this way? Another beautiful

woman found me attractive. Betty's friend, Candy, told me stories of my attractiveness and her attraction to me. She was married at 16, annulled eleven months later. She talked slowly and resourcefully, as only a beautiful woman can, relying on her beauty as the glue to the conversation. Such women are free to ramble, free to spout nonsense and mundanities. I was the sucker in a card game with a pro and a stacked deck. She had creamy breasts and an enormous rolling ass. She caressed herself with each torrid step. Her eyes were hooded with self-assurance. Her language was an exciting threat to my intellect. She threw off self-deprecating asides, like flies flicked from the hide of a prize mare. I excused myself, as she and Betty gossiped, like kids collecting postcards.

"Allow me to retire to my papers," I said, "I've been well fed."

A little while later, I looked up to see Candy lounging against the doorframe, like Rita Hayworth in an outtake too lurid for any movie at the time.

"Would you like to go for a drink?" she said, "I'm buying."

"Yes, I would," I answered, too quickly for textbook timing, but nice in its cheerful directness. She was softer and more sensual than Leah was. She said she was a poet. She said my first book, which Dennis Koran called, "a light surrealist excursion," was "terribly personal. You're so quiet, but I feel I've gotten deep into you, in this book."

She cut me to the quick with that remark. So, of course, I thought, "I don't love Leah. She's only another perfect solution that doesn't solve anything. I'm crazy. I don't know my own mind."

My cock is all beat up, and here I go, down another bridle path. The horse of my desires is barebacked, riderless, and reeking of locoweed. I can be had. I'm a banana in a jungle of tongues, an aging reprobate with the face of a juvenile understudy. These are the fantasies of the average American male. It's a tease, and it challenges Leah.

(1975: Candy is the stranger I talked about seeing in the Owl and Monkey, last month, the one I called Raquel. 1976: I found out that Candy was a high-priced call girl at the time we had our rendezvous. Nothing is what it seems.)

A Parking Lot for Worms

The lined paper below me looks like a parking lot for worms. I sit and wait for the first line image to come to me, fishing in a dark lake, my pole above the still water, with no notion of what fish might bite, or when. I'm listening to the last two minutes of the

Warriors-Sonics game on the radio. The announcer, Bill King, is going crazy, as the Warriors lead by one. Beau went to the museum to track down his muse, after seeing him or her in a news photo. He told the curator that the single, glaring fault of the de Young Museum (Sonics by three, 1:09 to go) is that, despite the ancestral heritage granted to the Chinese, Africans, Indians, and the Oceanic Tribes, the White Man's heritage begins with the Impressionists. Beau is enamored with the Etruscans, whose culture was stolen and submerged by the Romans. Sonics by one, Clifford Ray calls a time out, too late, Sonics win 100-99. And so the Sonics beat the Warriors, and our White Heritage consists of landing on the moon. Beau looks to the past for enduring icons, and I look at my icons to get some sense of the past.

I watch *Forget Me Not Lane*, on PBS, and I feel tired of fighting myself. Let go! I jumped out of bed with Candy to answer the phone from Leah, in the hospital, in Muscatine, with a concussion, and the entire family preparing for a double funeral, thanks to the 33 year old, unemployed poet from San Francisco who took pleasure in crowning their prize daughter with a two-by-four. She was wonderfully witty and easy, describing her ass, black and blue from needles, the trouping in and out of banks of relatives, her weeping mother, and all the questions about *the Sadist from San Francisco*, *the Aquarian Axe Angel*, *the February Flat Iron*. I sat with Beau in the Tennessee Grill, across the street from the library where he works. Beau was asking questions. I listened, I spaced out, I wondered how he might respond if I said to him, "Rise and come go with me, and I will make you a fisher of men." He said, "Your poetry leaves something unsaid. I get off on it, but I get the feeling there's much more that you aren't saying."

Paranoïd, not knowing how to respond to his clarity, I sat in the Tennessee Grill, on a pleasant afternoon, not drunk, and I imagined Beau's whiskers against my cheek and his shoulders in my arms. I thought about the dream of my father. I felt happy and sad and confused. I felt Messianic. I thought, "I do have messages. I do have love." My fears of sex with men and women are not my desire for it but my mistaken confusion of sex with love. At my car, as Beau returned to his library post, I reached for his arm, and I hugged him. "Good to see you," I said, "take care."

I drove off, thinking, "I did it. I did what I wanted. I hugged Beau, when I was afraid it was sexual. And I fucked Candy, when I'd just as soon have hugged her. Well, maybe not that. Anne is right. She said I have too much love for one woman. I want to love everyone. I want to get it straight. I want to know what's what. Beau repeated Stephen's

assessment of my poetry that I work to name my enemies. I think, "That's not right. It's not true. I don't think about enemies. That's Stephen's sense of himself. He imagines enemies. He sees me naming enemies. I see myself trying to name my loves."

Right now, that's what I want to believe. I'm not sure I really know the difference. The multitudes don't come to worship Jesus but to feel his love. There's aren't enough fish to go around, but it sure feels like there are. Beau repeated a line I told him when I was drunk, one night, at a party at Robert Duncan's house. I said, "I feel the driving spirit of the revolutionary in me, but I don't see anyone or hear anyone's revolution I can follow." So, today, I'm an avatar.

"When I read your poetry, I want you to be Rimbaud, as well as Brooks," Beau said. His words got me pumped up. I remember Gordon Craig making a point to tell me I could be a leader. I remember all the others I've met who saw in me the flesh of their own dreams. I told Gordon I wasn't interested in being a leader. I waved it off. It's exciting to think Leah might be a Mary Magdalene. I was happy to learn she's still a believer.

I can't touch a non-believer like Anne, who has no faith to enjoin, no faith to transfer, none for me, none for her. Henry Miller describes *the writer* as someone who *wants an impossible world in which he is the uncrowned puppet ruler, dominated by forces beyond his control*. Sometimes, that's what acting and poetry are all about. I wonder, "Why do preachers speak in the Name of God? Is it because they are too embarrassed to speak in their own names?" That goes for actors, too. I imagine myself on stage, in my own name, an actor of satiric characterizations, performing as an evangelist, then becoming an ordinary man and never leaving him, shouting, weeping, loving, feeling the spirit move inside me, letting the spirit direct my words.

The audience turns to itself and says, "This guy is no longer funny or sad. This is real. This guy thinks he's God." It's exciting and frightening to think I might become what others want. Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce was a wise man whose wisdom was to tell the other chiefs what they said and then becoming the focus of their different views, ending with two truths, "I know what you say," and "I do not know the future."

This is making me nuts. Jesus could turn water into wine, and I manage to turn wine into water. My mind is an alphabet soup of ambitions, desires, blindness, and awareness. I'm listening to Eddy Arnold, the Tennessee Plowboy, sing, "Oh, please meet me tonight, all alone, for I have a sad story to tell you, a story that's never been told before." I think, "It's been told, but when it's told, it's never been told before. We

forget, and it's all new. I've been working to become what I want to become. I've only begun."

I've been obsessed, since my youth, by the notion that the world exists only in me, that without my consciousness, there is no reality. I suspect everyone feels the same way. But, I can't give up my egocentrism. Others seem willing to give themselves up to me, so why don't I give in to their giving up? I see crazy people with such foolishness in them. Beau seemed crazy, a while back, and yet, he makes me cry to be with him in his wisdom. And, like always, it's my wisdom he describes. Has there ever been a savior with such a *mein kampf* as this? I told Beau, "It makes me nervous to know I can tell what people want to know about themselves."

Bonnie Maddow told me she felt like stripping off her makeup when she was with me, because I was so simple and honest. I want to embrace all these people. I love them all. I'm a lover, not a fighter. Was Jesus a wino? Candy told me, when she was lying like a Madonna on my blue quilted bedspread, "I'm a good stranger to know." And I'm the kind of person people find immediately familiar, because I reflect themselves back at them. I'm not Orpheus, who walked through the mirror. I am the mirror. I want to be the mirror of love. It's a strange ambition for a guy who doesn't know anything about it.

Years ago, a guy said to me, "Get out of the car. You kissed my girlfriend. I'm gonna beat the shit out of you."

I said, "No, you get in."

He did, and he began to sob out his story. For an egotist, I'm a pretty good listener.

I need to tell a story to relieve myself of this self-idolatrous bullshit. Marilee Martínez said to me, "Steve, you come on too strong, and you fall too hard." And that's true, even in myself. I don't even know how to love myself without getting lost in extremes. I want to say, "I love you, Leah," but I don't, because I'm an embarrassed animal to think I'm an angel. What is my angle, except to induct myself into my own personal hall of fame, to create a heaven called love and be the god of it? What nerve. This guy deserves a comeuppance.

The picture on my black and white TV has the stark contrast of newspaper photos. I sort of like it. I switch off the sound on the third *Sonics-Warriors* game and switch on the stereo FM. I listen to Bill King, with better fidelity, but I'm so used to the three-inch speaker in the TV, I almost go back to it. I have to get used to better quality.

On the FM, I can hear the ball bounce and the rubber soles squeak. As the first commercial comes on the TV screen, I realize the radio runs different ads than the TV.

As a stagecoach crests a hill, driving in dust toward the camera, Ricardo Montalban says, "I want to introduce you to a totally new driving experience."

As a man pulls a tire from a rack of tires in a gas station, a mellow voice says, "Looking for a bargain in stereos?"

A voice says, "Americans and Danes have one thing in common," and a handsome man, with a moustache, affectionately pats the vinyl top of an automobile.

Warriors win this one, 105-96.

I Ruined Three Lives

Geoff Edwards, the host of Jackpot, catches himself in what he terms a Freudian slip. He says *dog eat dog is canine capitalism*, instead of *canine cannibalism*. He and the studio audience guffaw at the slip. From lying on the couch in his shirtsleeves, a man rises, grabs his wife's hand, and explains, "There's something I never told you. I just didn't think it was important. You see," he continues, in even softer tones, "I killed my father, and Clay, my brother, resents me for it." It's the *Search for Tomorrow*, and that's always a tricky business. "Lisa Shay has a secret that threatens to ruin three lives; the woman she hates, the man she loves, and her own life."

I Ruined Three Lives. I love the idea of a ruined life. My Messiah complex is another case of identifying. I'm easily infected and affected by others. Beau Beausoleil is the new Priest of Poetry, and I'm a sucker for faith. "It's easy to convert a believer," I said, but it turns out I'm the believer. I told Paul that Leah still has one foot in the faith. He said he thinks he has the better of his mother, a true Catholic, because he's in both worlds, belief and non-belief.

Yesterday, I began again. No drinking. It's simple. Unless it's simple, you don't bother doing it. I dropped by Curt's, and he admitted drinking heavily for the last three months. This morning, I woke up to the sun, feeling good. I began to miss the tea-totaling mindset I get into when I'm not drinking. It's a sense of saintly purity. I swear off one vice, and it's off to the races, damn the vices, full speed ahead, into my St. Francis act – no smoking, no drinking, no sex. My thoughts turn away from the mischievous anarchy I pursue when I'm juiced. I become a good again, sickening at age 10, ridiculous at 33.

A Sure Bet

I was back behind the counter at Betty Boop's, when a man's voice on the phone assumed I was Betty and continued, "Is this Miss Boop? Oh, Miss Boop."

I recognized Paul. "Listen, lady, I don't need this crap," I said. Paul said he was in a fix. There's an old man on Carl Street, Chet, who walks very slowly and is always friendly and courteous. He's dying from several things, and he's an alcoholic. He has no reason to live, he wants to die, and he's a most engaging, friendly old fart. He's a small, gray man, with a courtesy and a generosity that's not enough to survive in the world. He told Paul about three long shots at Golden Gate Field, that all came in and paid off big money. He told Paul of one in the 6th race, at 6-1, and Paul was calling out for a betting partner - one with a car. He had no success, whatsoever, and he thought it was a test of the tip. He thought it was all the better that he should have to struggle. It was a good story. I suggested I could borrow seven bucks from him, bet five, and recover enough to cover my negative \$4.37 in the bank and the nothing in my pocket. It was tempting. "It's a good story, Paul," I said, "but no."

One day, I went to the racetrack with Paul and Curt, and I came out ahead. My winnings paid for the day, and I won a few bucks besides. Coming back from the racetrack, we got stuck in the traffic, and suddenly, I was in a circle of hell. At the races, the horses ran around the circle, and the fans fanned back and forth between the circle and the windows. Curt and Paul were in a frenzy. I was only a witness, willing to be drawn in, but I was not. The horses were beautiful. The people were fascinating. The dope sheets were sufficiently intricate and magically cryptic. There was big money to be gained, nine times over. Chet's tip is even better magic. All the excitement is a tribute to Chet. To fly to the racetrack on Chet's tip is to affirm Chet. To lose it all is to affirm Chet. To win a bundle is to affirm Chet. Chet is the oracle, but the advice he gives takes the same chances, outside the presumed magic of his counsel, that anyone else's does.

My 8th Grade Math teacher said to God, as his airplane took a belly full of lead over Italy, "Dear God, get me out of this, and I'll serve you, forever." He got out of it, and all God got was the chance for succeeding generations of dumbfounded and bored 13 year olds to hear the same tired story. I got off the phone with Paul, and an ample, homely, young matron came in, wearing crème-colored slacks and a leather jacket, a nice hairdo, with big glasses that lent the air of the cute to her round face. She was out making purchases - a couple of interlocking brooches to make an imaginative belt

buckle, an ashtray, and a ring. "No, not the ring," she said. "You know, sometimes I feel just like a bored housewife when I'm buying things."

"Well, don't fight it," my clerk mentality wanted to say, "keep it up, you just paid for my lunch."

I read an article in the April 1929 issue of *Vogue*, about how a young married woman from substantial people was forced to live on \$5,000 a year in a Midwestern city. The article was entitled, "\$5,000 a Year? It Can Be Done!" All the ads tell how to appear young and be mistaken for a woman of distinction. "Youth – On 30 Seconds a Day." "Gorgeous as a debutante, with the wisdom of Forty. She is the most dangerous woman in the world." Able to leap from tall buildings in a single bound. Faster than a speeding Depression.

Determination Hurricane

Something strange is happening. I feel a new sensation of determination growing in me. I see it in the things that take my attention. Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, convicted of murder, nine years ago, maintains his innocence, has no TV or radio, never leaves his cell to participate in prison *activities*, says he wants no opiates, no distractions, nothing that lessens the single-mindedness of his determination to be free. To be free.

Poetential

I wanted to write. I built up to it for days. I was afraid I wasn't able to. I thought about coming down with something. Maybe it was fear. Each new page, each new day, each new poem, is a kind of starting over. A man might write a readable and translucent, not transparent, book, and some might say, "Hey, I could write as good as that," and I thought, "Well, if you can, then do it." That's my dilemma, every day. If I think I can do it, then I should do it. I'm using the tools of my trade. It's nighttime, and the Big Thompson River of Imagination, sometimes called TV, is rushing by in the front yard of my consciousness. I have a yellow legal pad supported on a large black drawing book, a 25-cent Bic pen, and a half-pint of Daviess County Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey. I switched from Ten High, because it went over \$1.50 a half-pint, and if I'm going to drink cheap bourbon, it damn well better be cheap.

There's something bubbling beneath the surface. That's the great weight I feel, when I don't write for a time. I think about what I might write, and all sorts of associations associate themselves into all sorts of other things, to the point where I'm carrying around a suitcase of associations for potential pages. (I just wrote *poetential*.) I watch Linda Ronstadt, formerly a sensual cowgirl, who sings barefoot. She's on Cher's TV show, and they have her all dolled up in ringlets, chiffon, and gold pumps, her small breasts teasingly revealed and untampting. This is Big Time Entertainment.

I have a terrible feeling the characters I describe don't seem real. I worry that the book of my life has only one character. Narcissus loves his pretty face *and* his not so pretty face. This self-consciousness is coupled with a reluctance to take the same chances on other people, that is, being critical, loving, and conclusive. Trying to describe the people I know feels like invasion. And foolish, besides.

That's probably why I'm a poet, not a novelist. If all the characters in this book were fictitious, I'd have no compunctions about raking them over the coals or building them into demi-gods. Most of the characters in my life aren't fleshed out in reality, either. They're real when I'm with them. In moments of thinking about them, it's their place in my imagination that feels fleshed out. And thus it is that I am fleshed out by them. I populate my sense memory with hundreds of intimacies, many of them desperately curtailed.

I have made love to, balled, fucked, was intimate with, have known, so many women, in the last two years. I loved several of them, or so I thought, at the time. The rest I needed to believe I loved, and then I disappeared the next morning, or later, with clumsy embarrassment and discourtesy, when I realized that I didn't, or wouldn't, love them any other way. It's easy to be disappointed. I need to brag to myself about these women, because I think it's all I have to show for it. I believe in the instant intimacy of lovemaking, and I'm hurt when it's over, in a few hours or a few years. And I'm amazed when one of these women still talks to me, still desires me, or even wants to know me. I went to the flea market with Betty. The flea market is where she gets a lot of her merchandise.

Jack and Rachel were in town, and we were having fun. I ran into two women I know. One is an artist who lives in a loft in the Mission District. As Jack looked over some books, spread out under the screen at the Alameda Drive-In. I told her I wanted to see her place. I was amazed to feel myself not desiring her body or her love, but simply

wanting to know her a little better, and to see her loft-studio. I ran into another woman, an actress name Carol Ann.

A year ago, I desired her, as I watched her dance nude as the Climax Girl in Michael McClure's new play at the Intersection Theatre, where I'm scheduled to do my one-man show, this coming October. I asked a friend, Alicia, who was playing her cello as part of the show to introduce me to her, and she invited me to her house. We ate chicken, I made a pass at her, and I ran away. It was the same weekend I made a weeping attempt to get back with Sherry, and I was crazed. Carol Ann got me stoned, and my sexual apprehensions catapulted me into typical paranoia. Standing in the blistering heat of the Oakland sun, on tired feet, she introduced me to her mother, a dumpy, kindly, sweet smiling lady, visiting from Ohio. As we talked, miles away from the flattering stage light of the theatre, I notice Carol Ann's lined face, protruding teeth, and her sumptuous breasts.

After being showcased as an actress in an avant-garde comedy musical, with her nude photo in Time Magazine, she's now working in a bath and kitchen boutique on Chestnut Street. She tells me to call her, and I say I will. I don't think I will, and that's not funny. There's only one woman who might come close to being fleshed out in this story, if that's as important as I seem to think it is, and that's Leah. I hope so, anyway. I hope I allow it. She called from back home, and she says she's been delayed with a setback of sorts. No fracture, but she's still under the gun, at the temple, with her head aching.

"You don't miss me, do you?" she says.

I didn't reply. It's true. I didn't miss her.

"Why don't you say something?" she says.

"We're drifting apart," I say "We don't know each other very well. It's been a week and two thousand miles."

I do miss her. I miss her in ways that confuse me. I don't long for her body. I never have. I pegged her as a wife type, and I got lost. Beyond that, there's the opening of the flower that takes place secretly in my spirit. I feel good with her. Is it just that's she's beautiful? And if so, is that bad? I'm bold enough to tell her I love her beauty, but can I tell her I love her? Do I believe it? I've been footloose and fancy free, off and on, for the last three years. Can I stop? Do I want to stop? Already, since Leah, I've been with two other women. On top of that, I have a blistered cock.

A doctor says herpes is sometimes caused by nerves. I'm sure I have VD from Mazie. I've had infections, twice in the last year. I'm convinced that it's punishment for

fucking any possibility. And then, it goes away. There's no ledger book in heaven, after all.

And what about books? The only really good shrink I've ever known, Bill Sides, told me, years ago, that the only thing he knew about poets was that poets love words. I went into a panic. Did I love words? If I didn't, I couldn't be a poet. In the years that followed, I realized that not only did I love words, I loved sentences, paragraphs, pages, books, language, and I loved love. I do, can, will, and must love. Love is the hardest thing, and it's the only thing I truly want to do.

I wonder about drinking. Is it the price for letting loose my tongue, my love, and the message of love on my tongue? I love my children, and it's just as difficult to be with them, as it is to not be with them. The last two days are like the last two days, repeated a hundred times, over the last two years. My kids and I are shy and clumsy with each other, on the first day. By the end of the second day, we are father, son, and daughter, close and in love. Then *Goodbye*. Driving them home, I say, "Now, this time, when I leave your place, I want you to come up to me and hug and kiss me and say goodbye. No more of this kicking me in the ass or not showing up as I leave. I want to say goodbye, because I love you, and I want you to do the same. OK, Rachel? OK, Jackson?"

Baby, It Must Be Love

I was oddly anxious, impatient, and clumsy, as I finished my Swanson Chicken Dinner. Stuffing the trash in the wastebasket, I caught the edge of the paper bag. It caved in, and the aluminum tray, with three bones, the crust of mashed potatoes, and vegetable juice, wouldn't slip into the bag, easily. I became upset and angry, jamming it, and I backed off, nervously, as I tried to calmly readjust the simple maneuver.

Last night, as I picked up two coffee cups in one hand, to carry them to my desk, I thought, "Well, let's see if I can spill this coffee," sensing there was an awkward, tentative balance between the cups. They slipped against each other, and the coffee spilled.

"Shit!" I said. I grabbed away the books and papers whose edges were damp with brown stains and wrinkles. I'm in the sort of mood that acquires accidents. While washing dishes, I might break a glass and gash my finger or cut myself on a submerged knife.

I think about baseball, the national pastime. I'm reading *A False Spring*, by Pat Jordan. I'm drawn to it because it takes place in my two hometowns, McCook, Nebraska, and Moline, Illinois. And, it's a good book.

Walking down Eighth Avenue, true to my nickname, *Talk It Over*, I said, to no one in particular, "Baseball is a powerful way to watch people struggling painfully, succeeding gloriously, falling apart miserably, quickly and slowly, dramatically, right in front of your eyes, and that's what makes it the national pastime. America's pastime is success and failure in all their glory and ignominy." Baseball is slow and inexorable. The glory boy of last season goes bad, and he struggles, until pitilessly, he's driven from the spotlight. Denny McLain wins thirty games, and the next season, he's in the minors, drinking too much, and losing. The magic is delicate - pitchers' arms, batters' eyes, and runners' knees - they all go. All these athletes dying young, each player defined in every detail. Teams rise and fall, and each player is alone.

Football is the anonymous clash of forces. It has the same elements as baseball, but they're covered over. Basketball has the same elements, but they're speeded up. Basketball players have dozens of opportunities for every single, excruciating death that the baseball player faces, but the luxurious time frame of baseball accentuates each moment.

Like books? Like this book? Tito Fuentes goes to a voodoo doctor to cure his aching back. I have to talk about what it is that aches in my life. I have to talk about Leah. She's back in town, with her head still aching, and she seems puffy in the cheeks. I took her home, and she went to bed. We talked about the meaning of the blow to her head. I suggested it was no accident. We were in bed. She rose up, just as I bent down, and CRACK! From my side, I kidded her that I was trying to get inside her skull. From her side, I said it was curious that she hit me, and she's the one who got hurt. We joked about not wanting each other, about not missing each other, and then it changed.

"I worried about you," I said.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because you weren't here. I couldn't see you. I mean, how you were doing."

"I told everyone about you."

"I'm glad you're back."

"It's like I never left."

"I didn't miss you. It was like you never left."

I put my hands on her breasts. “You’re softer than I remember. I had you flat and tough, in my mind.” At the door, I lifted up her sweater and gazed at her pretty breasts, and I said, loving the shallow deception, “I kept myself pure for you.”

“Yeah, running around with other women while I was gone.”

I could swear she knew, but neither of us cared. She didn’t know if she wanted a boyfriend, right now. Hell, I don’t want a girlfriend, either. We’re perfect for each other. Baby, it must be love.

I Forget the Antonym

In *A False Spring*, Pat Jordan describes a particularly satisfying memory, when he struck out a notorious fastball hitter, three times, one evening in the Quad-Cities, (Davenport and Bettendorf, Iowa, Rock Island and Moline, Illinois, adjoining towns that bank the Mississippi River). He did it on nothing but fastballs, so fast that the man fell to one knee, trying to hit them.

“The sight of him on one knee was what I pitched for. I love such moments, even more than a satisfying career. I know that, now. I had neither the patience nor the vision to develop those moments into a successful season, much less a satisfying career. My career was not an esthetically well-made movie with rising action, climax, and denouement. It was a box strewn with unnumbered slides.”

I jumped up and down, “That’s my story!”

So this book goes: a box of pages, a page of incidents, a paragraph of scattered lines. Of course, there’s a difference. This book is being written in the present, and I don’t want to deliberately organize any particular time or episode. Jordan’s life may be slides, but his book is a clean narrative. At best, my book allows moments to occur in and of themselves, only as they belong in the present past. Today’s past.

I went to Betty Henderson’s loft to get the taste of it, and I left with a nose full of ancient dust. I ended up sneezing the breath of the building for hours. As often happens with someone I haven’t seen for a long time, the *apologia pro vita* that follows had me explaining this book as a dream, or as a book written in dream form. The incidents of the day, mingled with memories of 33 years, mingled with what seems to never change, all the fears and expectations. As any dream can teach, it also stirs up and spills out, without concern for will. Like a dream, there’s a unity to trust, regardless

of the absence of any apparent unity. I dream write, not like trance writing or automatic writing, which seems to me as pleasurable as making love on drugs seems.

I stay up late, I don't sleep, I drink, I doze, I turn my attention to other things, I decide to get up and not try so hard, I fall asleep, I sleep like a rock, I dream, I write. Dreams are not magical voices that reach hauntingly across the swamp of the unconscious to instruct one's life. Instead, and this is more romantic, our minds are doing what they do best while purely dreaming, all the time, and I mean, all the time. If it weren't for the externally imposed details we have to keep in mind in order to survive, in order to see the streetlight and the traffic in the other lane, people could and would be dreaming all the time.

I'm not proposing the avoidance of life. I'm proposing the incorporation and the enjoyment of everything at once. My intention is to develop this state of being. That makes me an apparently lazy person and a seemingly directionless one. But, as in a dream, where no image is without meaning, so in life, no experience is without meaning. If my dreams have meaning and a marvelously all-inclusive relatedness, then so does my life.

I suppose I propose that death is waking up from the dream of life. I imagine spending the afterlife deciphering the meaning of this life dream, with about as much success as I have with these absurd, engrossing, exciting, confusing dreams, these episodes of reality, these ordinary days and nights.

A year ago, I decided to write down my dreams, every morning, for a year. I made it from January 1 to March 15. I found out I could increase my capacity to remember, simply by doing it and by wanting to do it. I got to the point where I could remember seven dream sequences from each night. It required that I have no pressing plans in the morning. Any job that needs doing imposes its worldly necessity. I began to spend nearly two hours every morning, writing my dreams. I began skipping days. I delayed the task for hours, sometimes until evening. Finally, I lost interest. There wasn't any carry over. I decided that dreams are but dreams, true, in and of themselves, but I was unable to convert them to poems or stories. I had 150 pages of brief, bizarre, and sometimes violent narratives. A year later, I think dreams are valuable as they silently and secretly instruct and release us in our so-called conscious lives. We make an ethic of our characteristics. I'm a *dreamer*. I drift off, at dinnertime, while my brother and mother call my name.

"Steve. The butter. Pass the butter."

"Stephen, would you please pass the creamed corn?"

"Steve!"

"Stephen."

"STEE-VUNNN!"

Finally, my father would say, "Steve, wake up and pass the butter."

"Huh? What? Oh, OK. Sorry."

"Where were you," Mark might say.

"What could you possibly have been thinking about?" my mother would say, puzzled, but without any real interest.

"Oh, I don't know. Nothing, I guess."

At Christmas, in '74, Mark described a situation for which he expected some sympathy. He's a talker a stammerer. A stammerer is an interrupted talker. He went out for dinner and drinks with an attractive woman who worked the desk at the new YMCA. After dinner, they went into the bar and sat by the fireplace. They talked for a couple of hours. At some point, Mark was deep into a reverie about his days in San Francisco as a musician in love with a waitress. The woman leaned over and interrupted him. She touched him on the arm and told him she was bored. He was outraged.

"What did you expect her to do? You were in a reverie. You weren't talking to her, you were listening to yourself tell yourself a story."

"She should have shut up and listened. She should have enjoyed the story or just tuned out."

"But it was you who tuned her out."

"No, I didn't. She was free to listen."

An uneasy silence followed, as a mutual friend agreed with me, not with Mark, so he retaliated.

"What about all the times at the dinner table, when you drifted off into never-never land? That's inexcusable."

"No, it's not. I'm not bothering anyone, and I'm not imposing it on anyone else."

"Yeah, well, you won't pass the salt."

"Why don't you get it yourself, if it's so damn important? That wouldn't be so bad. There are social rules that apply when you're with a date."

But it was no good.

"The dinner table has rules, too."

Jeff thought I was wrong, too. It ended in a stalemate. Jeff thought we were both crazy, but you could tell he loved it.

Pat Jordan describes a play in which his first baseman takes a throw from the shortstop, and then, inexplicably, the ball drops from his glove. He stares at the ball with a look of *nescience*, Jordan says. After a brief trip to my favorite book, *nescience* now replaces *aphasia* as the word that describes a state of mind, or lack of mind, that I'm in, sometimes. When I worked for the Iowa-Illinois Gas and Electric Company, one day, Jerry Frisby sent me to the truck to get a crescent wrench. OK. Simple. I went to the side of the truck, dropped the bin door, and stared. Nescience. Nothing. Nada. I knew that I knew what a crescent wrench was, but, for the life of me, I couldn't remember what it was. I went back to Frisby, and I said, "What's a crescent wrench?"

"Huh?" Frisby was astounded. After a moment's pause, during which his suspicions were confirmed that all college kids really are stupid, he said, "It's the one that's shaped like a crescent, and it has CRESCENT written on it."

"Oh, yeah," I said, and a *truck* is the thing with wheels and windows and an engine and all the tools in the back.

When I was teaching school, my first job, at RLS, The Robert Louis Stevenson School for Boys in Pebble Beach, California, I took a break, one day, as my boys worked on a test. I strolled into the teachers' lounge, a small room, across the open-air patio, next to the library. As I did, I came upon the librarian and an older teacher, one Major Davis. The school was staffed by retired military men and by young, untrained teachers like myself. The librarian looked up.

"Ah, here's Mr. Brooks, that bright, young English teacher. Let's ask him."

I grinned I was in like Flynn. There would be no inner-circle exclusion for me.

"We're having some trouble, here, Mr. Brooks, perhaps you can help us out. We're looking for the antonym for indigenous." (Or some such word.)

I blanked. "What's an antonym?" I said.

I knew what an antonym was. And, as soon as they told me, I had an answer, but it was too late, the damage was done, it was gone, the slate wiped clean. The brain goes blank. Nescience. Sometimes. I have a lousy memory. My memory is not photographic. It's photogenic. Such wonderful pictures. I can't develop them fast enough. I think it's valuable to be so afflicted. It keeps me in the present, always fresh to new experiences. Even old experiences seem new.

It makes me a lousy scholar. The Dean of the English Department at the University of Connecticut asked me, generously, during my interview for graduate school, what books I was reading. I couldn't remember one. Nescience. Later, on the drive home, a long list came to mind. During my orals for my Masters Degree, I was asked what I thought of Samuel Beckett as an example of the Theatre of the Absurd. I had absolutely no idea. The meaning of the word *absurd* escaped me. I had just finished writing an absurdist play of my own. I do a terrific job of becoming the question rather than answering it.

If I have a goal in life, it's this, from Pat Jordan's book. He describes Whitlow Wyatt, his old manager in the minor leagues, "He found his satisfaction in life's minutest details, which were hidden at the base of its most stupendous pleasures. I've often seen this quality of Whitlow's in older people whose lives, with age, are no longer filled with stupendous pleasures, and so they develop a more refined sensitivity to life's lesser details, and, with greater age, even lesser ones, until finally their satisfaction comes from life itself and every detail is a pleasure."

At this time in my life, I look for five epiphanies a day. For a long time, it was one that overwhelmed the day. As things are going, it's into the dozens, the hundreds, that make the future of my aging even more pleasurable to anticipate. It brings to mind George C. Scott, who says, at the beginning of *The Day of the Dolphin*, that a dolphin's body is so finely tuned, so sensitive, that the dolphin, who never stops swimming, who never rests, lives in a state that can be described only as constant and total ecstasy. It lives in a state of *life-long constant total body orgasm*.

I'm fascinated with age, with the old. One of the characters for my show is going to be an old guy. I have the suspicion that senility might be an ecstatic state, brought on voluntarily. All the moments of ecstasy from ninety years of experience at one's tongue and finger tip. And why is it the mentally retarded seem to be affected by the same characteristics, and who do so many of them seem so damned happy? They are described, as they edge into their middle years, as being about seven or eight years old, mentally. That's an external judgment. Short people, crippled people ugly, crazy, stupid, they all end up ringing bells to the greater glory of God, lusting after love and courage, like the rest of us.

I'm drinking Sunny Brook Bourbon, smoking True Greens, nursing a head cold, and watching the A's at Kansas City. My neck is sore, as I roll it on the edge of the three pillows, behind me. I wear a grimy MHS Basketball sweatshirt, as I lie on top of a blue

and white bedspread, looking at myself in the closet door mirror, puffy faced, stringy haired, with a gut like an ad for Hostess Twinkies, and a cigarette smoking itself on the edge of a clear glass ashtray. Leah and I had a talk. We came to an understanding. And it's getting increasingly more difficult for me to write about it. She called and waited for me to tell her why she called.

"You called to see if I'd say I was coming over."

"Well, why don't you come over?"

"That's no good."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Use the words, *I want...*"

"OK, I want, uh...I want you to come over."

"Great. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

I got there, and we listened to the Warriors beat the shit out of the Supersonics and watched a movie about Wild Bill Hickok, at the same time.

"When you get around to saying you want to go to bed with me, you'll enjoy it more than me saying that I want to, and you saying OK. There's a big, wonderful difference between having everything, being able to get anything, liking some of it, and really wanting something. When you want it, especially when you say you want it, it's so much better. I'm not going to stay, unless you want me to."

"I decided days ago. I want you to stay."

"Great. I've been drinking wine, and it will take quite a woman to overcome that."

"I'll do it." And she did. It was wonderful. I had what they call a *glorious erection*. It was explosive. I forget the antonym.

I Dreamt I Was a Woman

I dreamt I was a woman. I woke up, feeling like I'd been busy all night. Leah sat on the bed, punching at me.

"That's not very feminine," I said.

"I told you. I'm not feminine," she said, smiling.

"You're trying to regain control, pushing me around."

"I never push you around."

"That's true. You just push at me."

"You're a big bear."

I don't know what I'm doing with this woman. Hell, I don't care. She's perfect. She leaves me alone to enjoy myself at home, in a way I prefer to having an audience. I can go get an audience, later, if I want.

The Dark Velvet Cavern

I'm watching Stephanie Powers on *Petrocelli*, unjustly imprisoned for the murder of a cad who tore her dress. It upset me, very, very deeply, to see her treated so unjustly, because Stephanie reminds me of Lacy. What about women? One night in *Spec's*, three young girls from Sacramento, in town on a lark, picked me up. I took them up the back stairs to the GARDEN OF EDEN to see my friend Marilyn, a split-tooth poet-dancer, dance the *Naked Dance of Love*. I fell in fatuation with the Japanese stripper, on stage, as my hands roamed the bodies of all three girls. I love women. It makes me feel ridiculous, but hardly ever lecherous. I don't want anything from women they don't want to give. I want to give back what they want to give me. The more I lie back, the more they want to. I end up on my back, a helpless dog, with my erection flagging the air, like a coon-tail on a rubber antenna. What irony.

I remember Susie Sutter refusing to stop walking, or even turn to say hello, when I yelled at her from my Tastee-Freez ice cream truck. I was sweating profusely, in the 115 degree, extremely humid, heat; inside the hotbox from which I dispensed cooling refreshment to insanely obsessed children. Susie went blithely on her way, oblivious to my existence, and I remember the scenery, a miniature collie frolicking on the corner lot, and a house on blocks, about to be moved.

Stephanie Powers shoots the cad, in the prosecutor's flashback, and runs out. She stops by the swimming pool, as people call her name, wearing a black dress and a string of pearls. I'm suddenly, once again, in love with Lacy. I miss her. I woke up in her bed, in a crummy rooming house above Carol Doda's nightclub after a lousy night trying to sleep, and I was so happy I was laughing.

"Jesus, I said, "I feel like I'm sleeping on a dead raccoon. This is the first pillow I ever slept on with internal organs."

Lacy and I looked like a couple. Emilio Montanez said so. How can you argue with a guy named Emilio Montanez, even if he's a boring poet, whose greatest love is baseball?

Leah said to me, "I'm not smart." That hurt. "Jesus, I love smart women," I thought. Leah is blessed enough to be a smart-ass woman. It turned out that Stephanie is playing twins. And who is Lacy's twin but the specter of escape from Leah, with whom I'm getting in deeper and deeper, like a small boy in a cardboard box sinking in quicksand dreaming he's an aquanaut exploring a Caribbean reef. This afternoon, I warmed up for this fantasy by catching sight of the front page of the National Observer, *William Holden and Stephanie Powers in Love*. Much older than she is, he says, "She's beautiful, and she's brilliant." I read that, and I want that woman. I want the magic woman, beautiful *and* brilliant.

As it turns out, she killed the guy, after all. She was pissed when he tried to break off their relationship. She came in, disguised as her more flamboyant sister and goes nuts when the guy enjoys the transformation. The guy gets suckered and dies. I try to wash away my fantasies about women in the shower, but it won't wash. It seems that I enjoy it when my cock disappears down that dark velvet cavern.

The Curiosity of Ideals

I'm in the Owl and Monkey with a pack of Old Gold's, in honor of my father's emphysema. The Old Dog writes a very straight letter about work and weather, with only one light remark, calling me the Moline Mimic. My Old Pappy. There are other men I like as well as I like my father. I ran into two of them, yesterday. One is Peter Cohon, who goes by the name of Peter Coyote, and the other is Curt Mackey. Normally, I'm not competitive, until I run into a man I consider an equal, and those are two. Others, like Gustafson or Andrei Codrescu, have a blazing beacon of brilliance I enjoy but don't consider a challenge. Their light may be far greater than mine, and for that reason, they're beyond comparison. Normally, anything anyone wants to do, can do, and does, is OK by me. As Stan Rice said about computers writing poetry, "The more the merrier."

Once in a great while, I run into a guy who mixes it up and blossoms all over the hillside. I consider that man a challenge. I compete for respect - his, mine, and everyone else's. I went to college with Peter, a big, handsome kid from New Jersey. I remember great stories about him, mostly apocryphal. Coming across the Mexican border, at 17, with a toke in his lungs and a kilo under the seat, he smiled all the way through the fruitless search. Then, just as he was about to be set free into America, he laughed.

"Better not look under the seat," he said. He won six months in the cruel and romantic Mexican pokey.

After two years at college, Tim Monroe said, "If Peter did everything he says he did, he'd be 75 years old." And yet, he was so full of himself, he was bigger than himself, he was bigger than the rest of us, and because he was so full of life, mostly his own, he was wonderful. A girl said to him, once, "Why do you think so much of yourself?" And Peter said, "You don't like me because I won't fuck you." What amazing gall. Peter was an actor, writer, singer, politician, the prince of the beatniks, (the intellectuals) on the strength of his talent and his energy. Not particularly exceptional at anything, he was exceptional at being exceptional. Always on stage, he came to San Francisco and became a Digger and an original member of the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

In our senior year, he told me I was the only guy on campus he considered a true rival, and then he warned me about Jenny, my future wife. "She'll like you for what you can do, not for who you are." That was OK with me. That was the only reason I could imagine I liked myself. As Peter Coyote is a leader, a chosen figurehead, I am a loner. I do as much as he does, but without the acclaim. Peter Coyote embraces his public persona, and I admire him for that. Yesterday, after ten years, I ran into him. His deep voice grabbed my ear as I passed his vaguely familiar form on my way to the poetry reading at San Francisco State. I dropped my umbrella, like the dot thrown at the base of an exclamation point, "Peter," I said, "Jesus Christ!"

We spoke briefly in the crowded hallway. We exchanged numbers for getting together, and he gave me an envelope addressed to *Peter Coyote*. I flinched. I thought about a clownish little fellow, running around the city in striped underwear and a cape, wearing a beanie and galoshes and calling himself *Peter Pussydog*.

Peter's new name is hard to accept. At the same time, I wish I could make up and use my own dramatic and romantic nom de plume. Peter looked run-down. He still had his voice, and he was still the leaning tower of interest in others that makes them shy. I wrote my zip code on the paper I gave him, and I felt foolish. At the same time, I felt wise and mature, the feeling I get around anyone I really like and respect, whose presence somehow lets me feel better about myself.

Peter is a legendary presence a lot of people resent, but he was not an athlete. One sunny Grinnell *Spring Day*, he refused to participate in a softball game between student leaders and faculty members. I thought he could endear himself to those of us who stood in awe of him, if he played and struck out, or if he ran to first base and

tripped over the bag. Bouncing around the stage, during the rehearsal for Modern Dance Orchesis, I farted, over and over, and I saw a friendly welcome, and forgiveness, from my fellow male dancers, who had envied and resented me as the male lead. It's the gift and its shadow, envy. We envy success and despise genius, when we are young and future failures and geniuses.

When Peter's father died recently, he went back to New York and tried to run the investment-counseling racket. He gave up and retired to a Vermont commune. I remember that he can seem a clownish character. Sometimes, he wears his royal robes over ragged underwear. He was reported to have a recording contract. But nothing came of it. He predicted that Bob Dylan, then little known, was a flash in the pan. At the end of a paper he read in Craft of Fiction class, with the who's who of campus literati in attendance, he concluded with a quote, out of context, from Alan Watts. It was the single word, "Why?" The professor belittled him. I'm inclined to side with his bravado, but I also gloated to see the idol's feet of clay, as he fumbled for some kind of justification.

I showed my own ersatz fumbling mastery of the academic theatre. In Sheldon Zitner's Senior Shakespeare Class, the same student crowd was in court to Zitner's scathing wit and searing approval. At slightly more than five feet of delicious arrogance, Zitner was a masterful teacher. He called a pop quiz on Hamlet. It was material I hadn't bothered to read. I was up all night, the previous night, painting one new masterpiece after another. As I sat scanning the papers of the pretty girls to my left and right, Linda Pullam and Pam Evans, I resigned myself to a blown quiz. Zitner spotted me, stepped to the front of the podium, and as the class looked up, during the painfully pregnant pause, said, "Mr. Brooks, are you taking this?"

Without pausing to think of an answer, I said, "I'm taking it in stride."

I looked around at my stunned classmates. Silence. No one laughed. Zitner didn't laugh either. I was in a pure rush of adrenalin, my seventh heaven. On that day, I passed the only test I cared about. I take private pleasure in public. Odd people appreciate me, and each member of my audience is alone in his or her appreciation.

Peter Coyote takes pleasure in being public. He steps out ahead of people and pleases them, and he doesn't embarrass them.

Grinnell hit a peak in 63-64. Then I was at SF State with an especially good batch of poets from 69-72. Now, I feel it coming together again. The years 64-69 were sloppy, miserable, lost, angry, ecstatic, and insane, for me, for everybody. "Everybody's an artist," the hippies said. "Everybody's a bum," the President said. '68 was worldwide

turmoil in Chicago, Paris, Mexico City, My Lai. *Do your own thing* destroys all relativity. Nothing is good, because it's all good. Nothing is bad, because it's all bad.

If you're different from the rest, and there's no climate for difference, you struggle to survive. There has to be a mixture where values are proposed, cared about, and fought for. Difference needs support. Not mass support. Support is the possibility of support in the air, from a skeptical audience, a discriminating audience, a receptive audience, brought to the theatre of ideas by the curiosity of ideals and a choosy sexuality in the affairs of human kind.

Not everyone is worth fucking. I followed a pretty girl, when I went into the generic toilet, in this un-generic coffee house, and I smelled her farts. They were sweet and acrid. We are what we eat. We fart the gasses of our digested lives.

A Base-Stealin' Girl

I got together with Peter Coyote, tonight, In Miz Brown's Pancake House on Chestnut, and now I feel sad. I don't know how it happens. When I see old friends, or when I'm with people who let me feel real, it touches something. He turned out to be more, not less, than I imagined or expected him to be. We talked, and it was good, easy, serious, and sad. He said I looked calmer. He told me stories - sad stories. I broke away, in the middle of one of them, to get some cigarettes. When I got back, he said, "No, this story's pretty good. It's not boring."

He told me that when his wheeler-dealer Wall Street father died, it left his mother in hock and out of luck, so he donned the costume and face of a businessman and salvaged pin money for her retirement. He's a famous underground person in San Francisco. He has a reputation, he's back in town, and he's himself, calmer, quieter, wiser, and Miz Brown's cheeseburger was like looking through the wrong end of a telescope, the perimeters graduated down from bun to tomato to patty, a quarter on a nickel on a penny. It makes me want to say a few words about bar life.

I have one rule in a bar, like I do for window washing and painting bridges, "Don't look down." It's a pit of suicidal loneliness down there, a tabletop of bay water, a floor like the sidewalk at the base of the Empire State Building. At Churchill's, before Miz Brown's, I overheard a line, "Marlene's a base-stealin' girl." I was supposed to, on the off chance, sort of, if it works out, why don't I, maybe later, wait for Leah in Churchill's, after meeting with Peter. But she didn't show up, so I walked down the block and hoisted myself up the fire escape, pulled the loose window open, climbed into her

apartment, and watched Johnny Carson for a while. I looked at photos of Jerry and Kit in Mexico, a few photos of the afternoon with the swinging dentist in San Mateo, a picture of Leah hugging the dentist, one of me, Lisa, and Rachel under a tree. I looked shaded and perplexed. Rachel is holding my hand and holding her own hand holding mine. There's one picture of me and Leah staring in opposite directions, one of her sitting vacant-eyed on a child's swing, one of me in a Greek shirt, standing uncomfortably in the middle of a stranger's yard.

I left and went back to Churchill's for coffee, black, one sugar. I decided that if the buses were running at that late hour, I would go home. Peter said he's like a monk, these days. Up at 6AM, no drinking or smoking. I said I was reading a lot lately, a terrific substitute for running the bars, second coffee free. He mentioned his long-standing record offer. He said his San Francisco Family Commune is putting out a magazine. "If one page costs \$200, and we have to take a month to get that one page together, that's what we'll do. It's a gem."

This morning, I was supposed to work for Betty.

"I will, if I can," I said.

I showed up, but she didn't leave the key. It's a problem between being an employee and being a friend who helps out. "If you want an employee, you better hire one," I said, "I don't want a job." My moment-to-moment life has its complications and its missed appointments. I'm back in Churchill's.

"I want to see you later," Leah said. After now, in the future, Friday's are best, call me, if I'm not in, I'm out. "Last call, folks. Last call."

The bar is closing, and I need to walk home. Or climb back into Leah's nest and wait for her and the dentist to show up. *Maintenant y jamais, mademoiselle. Ca va?* One little robin is sitting by the jukebox, looking at the waitress, and pointing to his gaping mouth. Last cigarette.

"Closing time, folks. Goodnight, everybody."

Homecourt Advantage

Famiglia Cribari Vino Rosso du Pranza, (another fancy name for cheap wine), The A's vs. the Angels, and Phoebe Snow singing, "C'mon, and let the good times roll." *Mr. Poetry Man*. Setting the stage. "Wine, music, action," I say, to myself. I read Stephen Vincent's poetry. Last night, I was jealous. Today, I talked to Betty. I watched the Rugby

Tournament. There, that's all there is to it. Honesty, like art, is selective. Like the man who had so much admiration for honesty, he saved it for special occasions. Like in a poem or a novel? Like with a woman you love? Like with a good friend, who took a different road, who shows up, acting like yourself, shoulder to shoulder in the same conclusions. Peter Coyote leaned into the conversation with such intensity that I felt two options. Either, fall into his gaze (under his spell) or fall away (off the bandwagon).

Edward R. Murrow glances abruptly at the camera, like flipping silverware out of a drawer. He blinks, like cabinet drawers that fly open and shut. He's talking about Senator Joseph McCarthy, and I have the sound down. Phoebe Snow sings, "Sometimes, this face looks so fuh-uh-unny."

Peter said something about weakness revealed in a moment of trust. It's a rule I have with men friends. "I'll reveal weakness, if you will. Then, we're friends." It's the test I don't believe Curt understands. Paul does. So does Peter Coyote. So do Peter Ellington and Jim Gustafson. I'm afraid to do the same with women. I do it, but I'm afraid to do it. I think it's because they're so damned different. Women are weird. Are they aliens or natives? Why am I compelled to mate with such weirdness as is called *woman*? Betty says I should never reveal any jealousy to Leah. If I can't reveal myself, what's the point? I'm afraid to lose Leah. Actually, I suspect all I am is petulant when I don't get my way.

I stood at the Geary bus stop for half an hour, until 2:20AM, when Leah drove up. Her apartment is fifty feet from the bus stop. What a bum coincidence that the bus didn't come. I had wanted to nail a simple but direct statement to her door about standing me up in our vaguely defined rendezvous, "Fuck you."

After leaving Churchill's, I walked down the block to her door. Searching for a piece of paper, leafing through a booklet left on her front step, I found a picture of a small boy looking in a mirror with the caption, "Life is not always what you expect it to be." I ripped it out and left it as my message. Then, she showed up, before the bus came. Damned luck. I approached her. When I saw the man with her and Kit, my heart became a frozen, rotted cantaloupe in my busted garbage disposal throat. The guy left. He went to his car. I approached the girls like a gutter ball approaching a seven/ten split.

"Stephen," Kit said.

"Give me a ride home," I said. I dragged the door of the Firebird across the cement, trying to shut it.

"Don't do that again," Leah said.

"What?" I said. "It's just a car door, Leah, remember?"

But it was more than that. It was a gesture, whose grating accusation frightened me and satisfied me. We drove in silence. She accused me of acting like a kid, telling me to spit it out.

"You should have left a note, I waited three hours."

"You're a big boy. I thought you could take care of yourself. Go home. You'll feel better, tomorrow. I'll call you."

I went home to bed like a Boston Celtic who had blown his home court advantage. I slept and had a fearful dream, in which I didn't confront the demon. It was an awful dream. I forgot it. I got up and watched the Boston Celtics blow their home court advantage. Then, at the rugby tournament, this afternoon, in Golden Gate Park with Leah, I was conscious of the number of great big, burly, handsome, tanned, and well-muscled men. I was afraid I couldn't keep Leah happily immune from such men. It surprised me to find out how much I wanted to be with her, how jealous I was, how afraid I was of losing her, and how much I had invested in our being together. Peter asked me how much I was willing to give in a relationship. We agreed that we both demanded a lot.

The telephone just rang. I let it ring four times. I picked it up, like de-potting a geranium to check the roots. "Hello," I said. Silence. "Hello, hello, hello, hello." Silence. I hung up.

Henry Fonda is dropping his breakfast on the floor, to make a point about how easy it is to clean it up. I'm afraid I'm making a grave misstep in my life. One revelation of weakness, and I'm done for. They say cats only fight equals. If the two square off, and one is weaker, the weaker one lies on his back, and the stronger cat picks up the weaker cat and hauls him to the border of the stronger cat's territory. That's male cats. And analogies are like loaves of bread. In a few weeks, they're moldy and hard. What about love? I had what I thought was an absolutely wonderful day with Leah, a while back, and she summed it up the next morning, saying, "I felt good about you yesterday."

"Is that all?" I screamed inside my skull, the one with the serenely placid face attached to it. She went to a party of lawyers and she didn't miss me a bit. She wanted to meet some new people. I'm all she has to do since she came to San Francisco. What if she gets a good look around and the doctors and lawyers grow around her like weeds with pretty flowers?

"Well, then," I offer, with bravado, "if she's susceptible to all that, then she's not the one for me." "You're the answer to all my dreams," I told her in Vesuvio on the night of the wonderful day. "Now, get out of here."

"You're not getting rid of me that easy," she said. She has stuck around. She has persisted. But what if she stops persisting? "They all stop," I say to myself, with the finality of a commandment.

Peter said, "What can you do? If she's good, you worship her."

"I always backed off when it got good, before," I said. "Now, I'm hanging around, even when it's not good. I guess that's life. The hard part is hanging around when it *is* good."

A Reverential Silence

Harold Clurman, in his *instead-of-an-autobiography*, "All People are Famous," recalls a concert of the brand-new, entirely original, avant-garde modern music in the Paris of the Twenties, during which the audience hissed and booed. At poetry readings in San Francisco in the Seventies, there's a reverential silence. The most an objecting audience might do is fall asleep or leave. A few are bold enough to walk out. Jim Gustafson and I have a running contest to see who can honestly and genuinely walk out on an objectionable reading first. We walked out on Adrienne Rich, as she belabored her *Miserable Womanhood*, which might make great politics but lousy poetry, and we walked out on W.S. Merwin, from opposite ends of the large hall, coincidentally, at the exact same moment. (Less than a year after writing this, I had moving encounters with both poets on Oahu, in Hawaii).

I once cold-read half a Merwin book to a high school class in Walnut Creek. After 25 minutes, I had an incredible, whirling headache. I stopped, mid-sentence, and said, "I've read this stuff, wanting to believe it's wonderful, but the innate stuffy, airless, oppressiveness of this poetry has brought me to a complete stop. I can't read this poetry anymore." The class gave a great sigh like applause. They were happy that their own displeasure had been recognized. They liked seeing a poet reject some other poet's poetry, and they said so.

I'm elliptically talking about Leah. It's been two days since I got angry at her for not meeting me. I feel petulant and childish, a petty jealousy, without foundation, an egocentric demand that she be at my beck and call. Betty thinks I should be cool, lie back, and give the Ladies of the Sunset their due. Let the little girl ride. It might be that

I'm not up to the task of waiting out her education. I could be a teacher, if I could figure out what's going on in my own life. I think she's bopping along in her post-adolescence. She shows flashes of the woman she will be, but when? Am I up to dealing with the vagaries of her woman-girl split? It's fascinating, like watching a busload of naked schoolgirls cut me off on a narrow mountain road. She and Kit get together, and it's giggle time. She and I have terrific talks about the apparently perfect match we are and about all the good that might come of it. The next day, she tells me I'm cute and she likes me. I get upset, and she tells me to go sleep it off, and maybe she'll call me, if she can remember my name. If I'm so wonderful, I can hang out and be cool, and as Betty advises, let her get wise to the truth, "Where's Steve? I think I love him."

Not That Kind of Warm

A man herds a crowd of people into a large pool. At shoulder depth, he moves with them, as they push left and right. He's shooting them. They die, sink, scream. I stop the shooting. I raise the dead. I get the people out of the water and into numbered rows on the bank. Two leaders are standing on the water. I jump to the surface of the water. I walk to the right arm of the male leader and tell him I will warm him. He's a metallic robot made of tubes. He's frightened that I'll melt him. I say, "No, not that kind of warm." He holds up a hand like striking a match. I say, "No, not that kind, either," and I hug him, as if he's a paraplegic.

In a second dream, I walk through narrow halls of students, passing out chili from a cat food can. My son comes by, older and taller, and I offer him some. Jenny tells me not to give him such bad stuff. I see her inside a hovel with her boyfriend in an air of gloom.

In a third dream, someone tells me to haul a shovelful of dirt through a tunnel to the other side. I pick up a large chunk of clay soil and I start through. I look at the narrow gauge track. I can avoid the train if it comes through, or I can get on the train. On the other side of the tunnel, I walk up to a crew shoveling dirt from an embankment. I ask the crew leader about my dirt. He's disgusted by the orders I'm carrying out. I say I'll scatter what I have. I try, but it comes off in chunks. I run to the train to get back through the tunnel. I get into a narrow compartment. The woman driver is cradling a crippled child. In a moment, I'm in her arms, hugging and kissing her. She has her back to

the direction we're going. I steer the train. It's like a busy highway. "Are you driving," she says. "Yes, I am," I say but it's distracting to have to drive.

In a fourth dream, I'm in a room at the Robert Louis Stevenson School for Boys. A very pretty young man is wearing a dress that makes his fleshy breasts seem feminine. I wake from sleep, kissing a man in bed. We kiss so hard that, when we stop, I say, "You've done the bleeding." In the mirror, I see a gaping virginal mouth and no blood. I caress and kiss the man's breasts, pull the cloth down from them, and I say, "Oh...they stop here." He's very pretty, but his face is deep slits of cheek, chin, lips, and nose. I think about reaching for his penis, but it reminds me of my brother.

I'm in bed with my brother, and I turn to him, out of need, confused and disappointed. The pretty man leaves the room and returns as a woman. He looks like Lindsay Wagner, the Bionic Woman. I laugh and say, "I didn't realize she was a woman, but when she was disguised as a man, I believed it, completely." (Many years later, my brother began living as a cross-dresser.)

I'm Free Again

I sat in Leah's apartment, as she and Kit watched TV. What was I doing, seriously watching Marcus Welby, the story of a man who was berserk in love with a woman who had no desire to see him ever again? The guy followed her, he wouldn't listen to her, he finally raped her, and then he blasted himself and his white XKE into a parking lot stanchion. "Jesus, that's me," I thought.

Leah said, on the phone, earlier, that she liked me; that she cared about me, but that she didn't love me. "Then why do you carry on about our future together?" "I don't know." I don't love Leah, either, but I want to, so I take several good signs, throw in my expectations, throw out my dreaded loneliness, and take it for love.

"If that bus comes," I told Betty, "I go home, I wise up, and I'm cool."

"Oh, shit, Steve, you're smarter than that. Who are you kidding?"

"You mean I'd have brought this on, eventually, anyway?"

As I left Leah's, I said, "Let's have a date, Thursday."

"OK."

"I'll call you, Thursday."

"Thursday?"

"Yeah."

“Well, we got through that,” she said.

“I hope so,” I said, “because I like you.”

Today, I feel great. I got my senses back, without having to push myself over a cliff. Lying in the rocks at the bottom of the cliff, I tell the helicopter rescue squad, “She loved me and then she pushed me over.” When, in fact, I dragged her to the edge and then executed a perfect swan dive.

In a delightfully pleasant aftermath, a little dessert from God, I sat across the table in the Owl and Monkey from a pretty nurse I’ve seen in the grocery store. A couple of weeks ago, I passed her on the street, when I was walking with Marvin Katz, a doctor I went to when I was doing my juggling act of imaginary maladies, two years ago. I told her all that, and we chatted. She said she saw me around, too. I sat in quiet bliss, smiling.

“Are those psychosomatic, psychogenic things ever cured?” she said.

“They go away when I lose interest in them. They’re only shadow illnesses, they don’t have a life of their own, they fade away.”

My hands seem especially sensitive this morning. I felt the laundry before and after the wash, and the cloth felt clean and good. I bought a new tablet from the Rexall, and the cardboard backing felt like deep velvet. I’m full of options. I can do what I want. I don’t have to flesh out the ghost of love. Leah is real again. I’m real again.

If I don’t have a girlfriend, I console myself, “There are plenty more fish on the beach.” I told Stan Rice, yesterday, that what always puts me off about the nude beach is the absence of eye contact. “Stan,” I said, “Eye-contact is the thrill of my life. What if I go to the nude beach and make eye-contact.” Whole new horizons await.

It is a Dance We Do

I have a pain in my chest like an unfrozen Banquet Chow Mein Dinner. On my 12th birthday, I had pizza for the first time in my life, and I upchucked it. In high school, I craved McDonald’s cheeseburger, fries and a coke. In college, I loved pork tenderloin sandwiches, lettuce and tomato, on a toasted bun. Now, it’s ham and quiche salad with blue cheese at the Owl and Monkey.

Eating is a multi-level event. Like taking a shit while reading the horoscope. Like walking down the street, unlike a Hollywood set, with histories behind the false fronts. Each day is an impromptu scenario, with characters arriving from the wings, and this theatre is a wonderful place, with wings, flies, flats, proscenium arches. A room has

furniture, closets, doorways and windows. People have legs, arms, mouths, and genitals. A telephone is like a long tube. Airplanes are rooms thrown into the sky with a slow motion descent. Electricity is a whispered secret in the walls.

When I was 26, I wrote, "Love is a dance we do. Love me. Love me. I cannot love. Love is a dance we do." My brain is like an attic, but when I stick it in the sand, it's a cellar. It grows bats and mushrooms. Kids play and hide in it. An adult, walking into it, is hesitant. I seem to be more than I think I want to see. The dark isn't so romantic, as an adult. It doesn't hide tigers. I wonder what I might find in my dark, but I won't be surprised. I was there when they filled it up. It's full of my mementos.

"Jesus," I think, "I used to dance with the ladies like crazy."

I must be gay. I must love men more than I do women. I must love myself more than I love men or women. I love whatever I think God is, above myself, and I love really good potato soup above everything. Whenever I'm on the outs with the woman of my current idealization, I think I must be a faggot. I left Leah and did a faggot number all night. Dorita has a gay friend and I said, "If he's cute, I'll take care of him," in my accurate-as-hell gay accent. Betty introduced me to Will, her cable car driver friend. She was all over Will. She told him I'm the target of all her friends, and she can't understand why. I told Will, "You'll have to stand in line." I called Paul, to see if I could come over for a visit. I came in the door acting gay, "Is this where a certain Mister Paul lives? I'm looking for some gentle people to share my spirit with."

I kept it up. It made him nervous. I turned straight. "Paul, I love you. Fucking women fuck me up. The men I love are safe and good. It feels good to love men."

I felt like a voice of male liberation, a voice of my own liberation. I remember women a few years ago saying that one of the first rewards of Women's Liberation was discovering other women. I'm doing that with my men friends, those I care about, who aren't uncaring, mindless idiots, who are hurt by life's pain and love when they can, who become my example and take me as an example, when I'm worth it, like my father and my brothers. I don't want to fuck men in their asses. I want to love them in their hearts and souls.

"What cement we make of ourselves," I think. And women hold hands and kiss and hug, and even they talk like bad soap operas about their lives. Stan Rice advises that the FBI can be thwarted when we give them so many of our secrets, they're overwhelmed. It's the fear of revelation that makes their spying potent. (I just wrote *poetent*.)

Come-Across Time

I bum a cigarette and a light from a guy in the Owl and Monkey and then leave his company to return to my lone position. I take out paper and pen, and now I feel like I have to write something to show I'm creative and not just unsociable. There's a poet sitting across the room, fingering his guitar against the recorded music in the background. It's Stolly Beardman, and the last time I say him he was doing a glittering Joe Cocker gyration to the written word, poetry whose value or content I can't recall except with a lingering sense of discomfort, a feeling like jumping suddenly in the middle of the sidewalk, when you remember colliding with an old woman's shopping cart. Skin-scraping poetry.

Leah baked a mean apple pie. And she had a six-pack of beer for my enjoyment, when I came over. I couldn't believe it. I picked her up and hauled her onto a bed of appreciation. Afterwards, as they say in discrete literature, I told her I had a secret. She coaxed me. "I love you," I said, for the first time. "I'm not *in love* with you anymore, and now I'm free to love you."

I repeated it, several ways. Whenever I'm bowled over by a comprehensive truth, I want to cement it into my consciousness. But, as in life, the idea is not to love a perfect or perfectible thing, but to love life. To love life is to love its contradictions and conjunctions. For instance, I was at work in Betty's store, when an attractive, light-skinned, young black woman came in. "I've just been paid," she said, "and I'm testing to see if I'm in a buying mood." She drifted around, disappointed to find she was not. She settled on a stack of old postcards and selected three of them. One was a 1937 overview of Market Street, in garish color. Another was a photo of a Bakersfield Motel Fountain. Another was a black and white photo of a Black woman, sitting on the bank of a stream, washing clothes from a large basket.

She wondered if the motel scene would be appropriate for someone in Alaska. At the glass counter, under the warm bulb of the lamp, we looked over the cards. There was an ease and an attraction between us. It was very nice. It's not difficult, when a counter separates strangers, for them to be conversational rather effortlessly.

She said, "I can't decide whether this woman is Black or Indian. I guess she's Black."

I looked at the card. "Yeah, I think she's Black."

The caption read *American Washer Woman*.

"It's a strange card," she said.

"Polite racism," I said.

"Yeah," she laughed. We became uneasy. We smiled and said something about the weather and she left.

"Bye-bye," she said.

"Thank you, bye."

It wasn't a *perfect* occasion. It just *was*. The delicate embarrassment was good. I felt the loss of the nicer feeling that came before, and the later feeling wasn't exactly a gain, but it occurred and it was good to feel it too. Seeing the ebb and flow of subtle shifts in feeling is a poet's bonus. Loving life makes life worth living.

Leah and I executed my departure beautifully last night. I could have stayed if I wanted. I went. I apologized to Betty when I got back. She's suspicious that the courtship between Leah and me suggests that one or the other isn't serious and is manipulating the other. I, for one, was greatly relieved to be home. God bless love, but God save me from total romantic immersion. Leah said, "I've only known you for a month and a half. I barely know you." A month and a half! That's a complete relationship in these times, when future shock comes with the room like a continental breakfast.

"Take me back to Tulsa, I'm too young to marry," said Bob Wills, in 1938. When I'm in love, I put the woman in a bottle. She and I know that's no good. When I'm sensible, when I'm happy, it seems I'll never forget it, but when I lose it, I can't imagine how to get it back. I resort to idealization, and the air gets thin and hard to breathe.

Harper and Row sent me a rejection for a book of poems I submitted to them. Last night, I checked out Margarita's old apartment to see if I might want to rent it. She told me it was available, but when I got there the bathroom was freshly painted pink, and when I mentioned my kids and my stereo, Mr. C.L. Nichols scotched the deal.

I stood on the corner of Masonic and Geary in a howling wind for fifteen minutes, waiting for a crowded Geary bus, and I felt terrific. I decided to change the title of the rejected book and try again. I decided the apartment wasn't what I wanted. I thought the people on the street were fascinating. A guy gave me a ride and told me the buses are on a totally undependable schedule. He said he knew a woman who seemed to know all the drivers and she can sometimes get a tip on when one might arrive. I said I couldn't imagine what the guys on the corners, the supervisors, could possibly have in their little black books. I suspected they believe there is a schedule hidden somewhere deep in the cosmos and they make graphs to discover what it might be. They make a mark every time

a bus goes by, and they read the times, over and over, to themselves, scratching their heads under their official Muni caps, and they mutter to themselves, "There has to be a system here, somewhere." The city is like a lined and crosshatched palm.

"I see you have a long NJudah. That's very good. But your Market Street's all broken up." I wrote my Uncle Harry and asked him, in calculated business phrasing, if he could front me ten big ones - to get me on my feet and running, to grease the skids. The part of the deal that gets me nervous is that, with ten big ones in my pocket, I would have absolutely no excuse, whatsoever, to not do what I want to do. It's come across time, and that feels wonderful.

Tough Cookies

"Thrill has been improved." A beautiful blond in an off-the-shoulder tiger-print dress is playing backgammon on the carpet, as a muted trumpet plays in the background. I'm watching soap operas. Curt asked me, "What are you doing with your soap opera?"

"Nothing," I replied.

"You should do something with it," he said.

My horoscope says, "Charles Lindbergh was an Aquarius who didn't fear flying. Neither should you, my friend. This week, you zero in on an idea that makes your spirit soar. Before takeoff, however, make sure your seat belt is fastened." Olga gives good horoscopes, enthusiastic and homey. Carroll Righter always recommends that I consult with higher-ups and bigwigs, to take care of financial matters in the morning and relax with friends at night. One weekend I had these two horoscopes: *This coming week you will be knee-deep in mud*, and *The coming week you shouldn't rest on your laurels*. Consequently, I contemplated resting on my laurels while standing knee-deep in mud. Ah, the future, the playground of the dissatisfied.

What about passion? Paul recommends it and warns that civility crumbles in its wake. But Paul didn't use those words. I did. I don't remember what Paul said. He showed me a story Tom Cuson wrote, that Tom feels is revealing of himself, but, to a greater degree, Paul is the one exposed in the story, not to mention Mindy. Tom tells Paul's story of Mindy's abortion. It wrenches Paul to hear it read. Tom's story is made from Paul's words, stolen from a barroom conversation, with words and concerns that Paul disclaims. He doesn't resent the abortion being discussed, but he resents having

his part of it characterized without complexity. Paul, through Tom, is said to think this is a miserable world to bring a child into. Missing in the misery Tom writes about, is the love and the passion Paul and Mindy felt to have a child, and the recognition that they might want the child of their passion.

A woman on Mike Douglas says, "To abort a baby is not to terminate a pregnancy but to birth a dead baby." Paul's misery is to feel some kind of death. To come together in a moment of passion, to see that passion reveal the need for love and the capacity for love, to see the passion aborted along with the fetus, to see that love is a form of passion, even when it's different from what's called passion. Still, this isn't Paul talking. It's me talking. It's my perspective. Paul says he's eager to read what I'm writing, "Everybody will be interested to see how you see them, through your clouded mirror."

I aborted a marriage, and my marriage died. I dreamt about a lecture hall and a professor who loses control of his students. Two students were discussing a point of history. Peter Coyote, with his handsome moustache and resonant voice, made a point of the brief chronology of a concept. Jenny, delicately and melodically, claimed it occurred thousands of years ago. I was embarrassed by her inaccuracy. It was a long time ago, but not that long. I loved her. I was jealous of Peter and Jenny. My teeth fell out. The teacher couldn't regain control, as the debate spread. I removed all my teeth. They came out in my hand. I couldn't hold them. I gathered them like pretty stones from the floor of an elevator with the door open and the progress stopped. I imagined I had a new set of glistening dentures, making me more attractive than before.

Today I want to reveal how petty I am. But I don't have any anecdotes. It's silent anger, bitterness. I react to small hurts I think I suffer, with suppressed anger. Leah and I sat on the sofa, down the peninsula, at Jenny's. A stick, three feet long, used to prop the patio door against intruders, lies on the back of the couch. I gripped it, and I nodded it, unseen, toward Leah's head, fancying I might, I could, smash her skull, and rid myself of the indignities she heaps on me, indignities that are more imagined than real.

She's 21, she vacillates, she wants out, she wants to be free of my oppressive demands. I'm reminded, once again, to pay attention to others and anticipate their complexity, instead of reveling in my own. I think my private wisdom is valuable, and that it's beyond anyone else's willingness to join in my celebration of it.

When I broke up with Vicki Benzer, my senior year of high school, I composed a letter of loving advice and evaluation, that I handed her, one morning, near her locker in the bustling corridor. The letter included the advice that she get better fitting brassieres. In the last year, she had slimmed down, and her cotton bras were crumpled. Under the cashmere sweaters that were the fashion of the day, the crinkled cotton didn't look good. As I strolled the halls, in the crush of students, a few hours later, Vicki approached me. I saw her coming, and I grinned broadly and generously, content in my sympathetic understanding, in the magnanimity of my ongoing love. She came toward me with her right arm drawn back, and in a swing like Apollo's chariot crossing the heavens, landed a haymaker slap across the entire left side of my face. I reeled back, absolutely stunned. A pool of delight and wonder spread in the hall outside the library, where wisdom resides. My foolish chagrin was gigantic, like a blushing pink hippo in the hallway.

When I broke up with Sherry, I wrote her a letter. In the letter, trying to be poetic when I was not, I referred to her "pitiful" breasts. Later, I changed it to "pitied" breasts, but it was no good. I tried to care about her, when I was only being analytical and self-congratulatory. Her breasts were small, and the nipples were encircled by twin sunbursts of scars. She was pregnant at 16, and her body, twelve years later, carried the scars of her pregnancy. She delivered the baby, a girl, in a private home in Virginia. The girl, unknown to her was by then twelve and lived somewhere she didn't know. Sherry didn't have stretch marks but deep scars. When I caressed her breasts, my fingertips rippled across the scars. She was raked and gouged by her experience. There wasn't any creamy fantasy available in flawless skin, or the transcendent flesh of golden globes that I think are so desirable. Sherry was a tough cookie. She made me feel like a foolish idolater. I didn't take care of her. I fucked other women, and I avoided her, until I was drunk and desperate, and she held me in her arms and did not pity me.

The Onanist and the Masochist

The Owl and the Monkey. The Onanist and the Masochist. I have become something of a freeloader. I scrounged up 47 cents out of pockets and the bottom of drawers for a cup of coffee and two refills, and I bummed three cigarettes, in the course of drinking the coffee. I said nothing to Leah in two hours, while driving my kids home. When we got back to my place, I said, "You want to come up?"

"No, I'm kind of tired."

"Thanks for helping me get the kids home."

"Sure, see you around."

"Bye."

That was the mood. All the way back, I thought about Leah's inadequacies and my faults. As we reached the split in the freeway - Fell Street to my house, or Franklin to hers, she took Franklin. All of a sudden, I thought we were going to her house, and my love for her jumped by degrees. "Wait a minute," I thought, "I love her when I think she wants me. Steve, you want total acceptance, or you want out." Actually, she didn't know any other way to get me home. I want total unconditional love, and when I get anything close to it, I go nuts. Then I beat on it, until it cracks, and I go nuts. This is all ridiculous and stupid.

Phrasemaker

"I'm a mediocre poet," I think. Then, "I'm not so bad." As Stephen Vincent said, "It sounds like country and western music." I'm a phrasemaker. I have a good ear. I think I don't go deep enough in my poetry. I hint at depths that others sense. Robert Bly wrote back, after I sent him some poems, suggesting that, yes, they did leap, but the leaps weren't deep enough. I suggest to myself that my recent leaps are greater, but that poetry may not be my greatest release. "I do not and cannot, leap on paper, the way I can, on stage." I know there's a place I can go, on stage, that's a place of magic. I'm a genius on stage, because I'm taken completely out of myself by an experience that feels like what genius must be.

In the middle of a wild party at Mark Linenthal's house, in a room full of egocentric poets, in a sudden, magical moment, I became a Chicano, driving my Chevy in Phoenix, and Kiel Stein, from Tucson, yelled, "I know him! I know that guy!" And then, just as suddenly, I became a Texas father, in his underwear, on his front porch, holding a beer, talking to his teenage son. I reached down to lift my beer can from the floor, near my chair, and he entered my awareness. HIS hand picked up the beer. I watched it happen. I felt the character take over. I moved in and out of him. He moved in and out of me. I stopped, at one point in the father's diatribe, tearful and obscene, accusatory and pathetic, and I said to the people sitting next to me, in the hot, sweaty, vibrating center of the room, "I don't know what's happening. This is incredible." And then I dropped

back into the character. When it was over, I was exhausted. I withdrew to a back room and sat, mindless staring at a tiny TV, propped on a table loaded down with books. I realized someone was sitting next to me in the dark. I had sat down next to Mouse, Stan and Ann Rice's leukemic little girl, Michelle. She was a translucent angel, brought to it by the disease. I identified with her, in some odd way. I was empty of mind and emotion, and I felt peaceful and oddly spiritual.

I'm afraid that if I put together two hours of losing myself, like that night, I may be lost. I imagine the way out of that total exhaustion is to have a script and to practice the characters, but what takes me to such heights is the fear of the unknown, the faith of the becoming, to trust the being that takes over. It's almost religious. It isn't applause or attention I seek but the place in front of people, that asks their attention and gives them absolutely what they want. It's a feeling I don't get in writing.

When I'm on stage, doing what I can do, everyone cares about what occurs. On stage, I feel like I go to the mountaintop, and everyone wants to know what it looks like from up there. I become the spirit, I love the spirit, and they love the spirit. I don't get the same feeling in my poems. I don't get the feeling of the other end of it, the feeling of the completed circle of performer, performance, and audience acting as one. Curt suggests I take those moments as moments only and let them occur whenever they occur. But I want more. I'm determined to isolate the dramatic moment and open it up.

Two Bizarre Faculties

I have two bizarre faculties. I can assume a posture like a mannequin that's eerily devoid of humanity. My eyes go blank, my body becomes disjointed, I become immobile. It drove my ex-wife to say, "Stop it!" It must be a fearful sight to see someone you care about empty of life. And, I can fall down. I fall down so well, it looks like I fall down. That's because I don't just look like I fall down; I actually fall down. That's the trick. The only way to fall down and not look like you're faking it is to NOT fake it. I think about going to the thrift store, getting a suit, a tie, and standing in the park, wearing a sign, holding a feather on a string.

Knock Me Over With a Feather! 10 Cents

If I take a hundred falls, I make ten bucks. At 25 cents a fall, I get rich. And bruised. I need a soft patch of grass and knee pads. It's a simple thing. I stand, I fall, I get back up. I stand, I fall, I get back up. All day long. Kids can knock me over for a dime a shot. Great for the humility and great for the ego. Harold Clurman says of himself, "I have an enormous ego, superseded only by my humility." Knock me over with a feather. Especially a feather of my own devising.

It reminds me how good I feel, right now, today. Without illness or injury, it isn't bad. Then I remember the sore spot on my cock from fucking Margarita. She said I should see a doctor. "My penis is too sensitive," I think. At the very moment I felt her juices go dry, on the left wall of her vagina, I was abraded, scraped raw. My cock is no longer a phallus. It's who I am.

Five White Male Poets

"Put a Tic-Tac in your mouth and get a BANG out of life," I sang, as we came out of the recital hall and walked to Mindy's plain, gray SAAB with Paul and his new roommates, Jane and Luci. We went to a music/dance recital in the Mission District. Jane and Luci were portraying singing, dancing birds in a golden oldie, avant-garde musical piece, a reprise from the Thirties. Jane showed herself to be an actress in the role of a nightingale, as Luci acted the clown as an ostrich. I got caught up in the show and left my gym bag under the seat, and I had to run back for it.

It was a great night. I liked soaking up the ambience. We got to watch the narrator, Scott Beach, a local celebrity, display his professionalism. A year ago Sherry worked in a recording studio, and she said Scott Beach could do a single reading and it was a take. He wore a dark suit and a conservative bow tie. Paul tapped my arm and pointed at Beach's Eskimo boots. He had a large, oval stone around his neck. At one point in the show, the tape ran out on the engineer who was seated upfront. He signaled Beach, who paused, reincorporated a line, did some loose revising from earlier material, the tape was started, the man signaled his appreciation and admiration, and Beach was back on track without dropping a beat.

At intermission, a charming ancient roué approached Mindy in the courtyard, demanding that she must be in *the theatre* because she was blessed with such a striking face. Mindy was confused. "Why don't people say things like that when I'm feeling good?" she asked, rhetorically. The second half of the evening's presentation was a

piano recital by Claus Bancule, playing his discordant pre-war (WWII) tunes. He did a selection of American folk ballads in the same style, including a stirring rendition of *Erie Canal*. He talked about Charles Dickens' disappointment in the three-mile-an-hour pace of the barge mule teams. I looked around the audience of well-dressed and polite culture lovers. The evening was magnificently amateurish. The singer with Bancule was a young Black guy, wearing a white dinner jacket, inches too big at every point of its cut, who sang with obvious skill and pleasure.

During the rousing and generous applause, he reached for Bancule, and they greeted each other in the joy of the moment. The old guy couldn't quite hear the spoken compliment. "Me, or you?" he said, shyly, under the applause. At the curtain call, the old composer did a little jig in gentle mockery of the dancers. The leader of the dance group was a tall, Portuguese guy, whose hair was a tribute to Self-Styling Adorn, as was his performance.

The opening dance piece, that Bancule was also responsible for, was like a class assignment. Ten dancers played ten birds on trial for their idiosyncrasies, in the Parliament of Fowls. It was a silly, witty, charming narrative, interrupted by the dancers in bird suits, doing their best to use their limited tools in proof of the unremarkable. Most of the eager young actors grinned throughout their performance, despite whatever their animal was reputed to possess as character.

"It reminds me of the chariot race from Ben Hur," I said to Paul. They went round and round and round, one odd bird after another. We giggled and poked each other like mischievous boys, sitting down front at a church service. The night was cool and the room was aglow. It was the kind of show that might have been tremendously enjoyable at the Bauhaus in 1928.

Earlier in the day, I attended a poetry reading at San Francisco State, during which Stephen Rodefer cut to shreds the hero worship of the older generation of poets, including Robert Creeley, Gary Snyder, and Robert Duncan. He took a few swift whacks at Stephen Vincent, as well. Tamara O'Brian, sitting next to me, covered her eyes in amazement. I leaned to her and said, "It must be the end of an era." She nodded, woefully, "Really."

After the reading, Beau and I sat in the Tennessee Grill on Taraval and agreed that it's time for *A White Male Poet Resurgence of Self-Respect*. "Let's dump the old heroes, and get on with business," he said. Beau said that small presses in the Midwest are clamping an embargo on White poets writing American Indian poetry. If you tell a

While male poet he's a White Male Poet, he recoils in disgust at the heinous accusation. Beau recounted a gathering of poets at which he used the inclusive *we*, when he was talking about White poetry. Teleo Barnes jumped up and said, indignantly, "What d'ya mean *we*?" Beau looked around at the gathered poets. Everyone in the room was White. It seems there are no White poets, anymore. Larry Felson says sometimes he thinks of himself as Jewish, but never as a White Male. What a sad story. Ten years ago, to be a Woman poet meant you kissed the powdered ass of the Ladies' Home Journal. Soon after, to be a Woman poet was to speak to and from the best kind of awareness.

It's time to be a liberated white male poet. Sunday night, at Stephen's, I was surprised to hear him speak of himself as a *reasonably* sensitive man. "Shit, Stephen, you're a *very* sensitive man." Hilton spoke the mood of the room, when he declared, "Who cares?" Larry suggested he might have three poems that someone might be interested in, possibly, maybe. Beau suggested we use the criterion, "Is it a good poem?" not "Will anybody read it?"

Stephen's original title for our book was *Five Disturbed Men*. I saw what he meant. Beau theorized that Stephen wants these meetings to be an experience that could produce, in himself, something of value. He seems to be in a place of low esteem. Stephen believes that hanging out with the *right* concerns might make his responses *adequate to a more validating ethnicity in this ever changing world*, if you catch my drift.

Rodefer's reading had me wanting to write poetry again. He read with confidence in himself and his work. That felt incredible. Stephen Vincent, Hilton, and Larry wonder who our audience might be, when Radicals, Women, Gays, Blacks, Chicanos, and Third World poets, for example, all have built-in audiences. I said, "What about the White male audience, you know, that mass of confused, impotent, disturbed people nobody else wants to talk to?"

Larry was upset. He thought I was suggesting we play to the old power structure of poetry, which still is the continuing power structure. I remember thinking that poetry, of all things, surely couldn't have any politics in it. *Wrong again, country boy*. The talk turned to the rumor that Kathleen Fraser is being replaced by Ron Roberts at the Poetry Center at SF State, thereby perpetuating the old stranglehold on the bureaucracy. "Let them install their deadwood," I said, in my rhetorical naïveté, "Let's put out the book. Let's write our best."

Someone said that language poets, like Beau, are superfluous in the struggle. "If there's change, it'll be in the language," I say. The poet, whose struggle is with the

language, is a leader in any man's revolution. Beau is described as the kind of poet who can't reach the listener whose concerns are elsewhere. And yet Beau takes his poetry into the streets, some days handing them to whoever will take them. Hilton prefers Beau's poetry when it's grounded in the specific, when he tells the details that the images come from. Beau thinks surrealism is the common language, not of the marketplace, but the common language of man and earth. I believe it all. It's all grist. It's all mill. And, I am a White man. I'm a middle-class Midwestern American White male.

When I was in college, standing in the Student Union, one day, wearing my usual uniform of cowboy boots, jeans, work shirt, and letter jacket, Eddie Atkins, who is Black, from Oklahoma City, said, in a fit of something sudden, "Why do you wear work shirts, Steve? You're not a worker." George Carlin says if you put one *Spade* in a gang of *Honkies*, in fifteen minutes, they're all talking like the Black guy. I admire the concept of apprenticing oneself to the masters, imitating them, learning them, until you are them. Then, and only then, can you begin to find your own style. But, it's hard to find masters, right now. Beau might be right. The true masters might be the soil, the water, and the air.

Men in Groups

Lionel Tiger says, in his book, *Men in Groups*, that most behaviorists' conclusions about human behavior are reached from studies of the Norway rat, a nocturnal animal. Steve Schutzman had a birthday party. Or rather, Diana had a birthday party for Steve. He said he was groggy from illness, and soon, we were all groggy from drink. Since we are partly nocturnal animals, conclusions may be drawn that might be faulty and might be valuable.

Opal Nations is the pseudonym of a British-born poet, who pops in and out of San Francisco. His writings are more bizarre and scatological than his pleasant demeanor would indicate. He's the writer, editor, and publisher of *Strange Faeces*, a magazine of excremental humor. One night, at a party at his house, Mindy came dressed as a man, Georgio Vesta, with a hat and a painted moustache, and read my small book, *The Cock Poems by Georgio Vesta* (published as a single issue of David Moe's *Love Lights Magazine*).

It was a salon, a private poetry reading. It was packed, wall-to-wall, in Opal's one-room apartment, hovered over by the bobbing eyes and breasts of his hovering wife. I planted a cigar in Opal's butter, a yellow square on a white dish, on top of his refrigerator, that night, like a candle in a cake. My actions enraged the hither-to-fore

outrageous Opal L. Nations, and since then, he's been cool toward me. I wondered why a man, so full of mischief in his writing, didn't enjoy the unexpected appearance of a cigar in his butter.

At a party at Tom Cuson's, one night, I noticed the bathroom was also the parking space for Tom's ten-speed bike. I hopped on and rode out into the party. Curt said he had misjudged my mischief, thinking, at first, it was bullshit, but deciding, finally, it was a good thing. He said it was a reaction to something going on, and not, as is often thought, a gratuitous gesture by an egregious asshole. The idea that the gesture is serious quiets me. If the gesture is real, then I can no longer be mindless, but I have to be serious about it, and make it conscious, and that makes me conscious of my actions.

It's blame, responsibility, and credit. I do it, and I do it on purpose. I put the cigar in Opal Nation's butter. He knew I did it on purpose. I knew I did it on purpose. All the better to make it real. In an old picture, my son sits on a tricycle between my mother and father, who crouch, in their best grandparents' pose, beside him. His hands grip the imaginary handlebars of a tricycle, inside and above the real handlebars of the real tricycle. He has a sly grin on his face, and he doesn't seem to care in the least that no one else is noticing the gesture. "That kid's in trouble," I think.

Paul says, referring to Antonioni's *The Passenger* and Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris*, that involvement with life and breaking with hypocrisy brings on death. "Point out hypocrisy, and you die," he says. I wish I could say, "So be it," and rush out to man the barricades, but it's not quite like that. The barricades are constantly re-forming. Revolution is constantly re-enacting its necessity.

Let's party! Betty came in from a wedding in Carmel and asked me how my weekend went. She says she's tan. She says the wedding wasn't as bad as she thought it might be. She says she was the youngest person there, except for the bride and groom. She says it was a cute chapel. She says they had dinner in the restaurant with a magnificent view and can I give her \$8.73, for my half of the PG&E bill. I say I have five bucks to get me a week from Wednesday. Will I write her a check? No. She gets irritated. She has to pay for the stamp and mail out the letter. She asks me, where does all my money go?

"A new pair of shoes, a mattress and box springs, and the \$200 in child support I owe Jenny," I answer. I was explaining to my roommate what I do with my money, with a nervous stomach. I was apologizing.

"If the bill comes, they can wait a week," I say.

"It didn't just come," she says.

"I'm not going to cheat you," I say.

"Oh, that's not... I don't... uh..."

Betty's quarrel with the status quo is in-house quibbling over the arrangement of the furniture. I'm thinking about the bohemian life I take on for myself. A few years ago, Peter Ellington was determined to live the artistic life. He says it's ironic. One day, we were married men, living next door to each other in Married Student Housing at SF State, and now, he's working for the city, in the food stamp office, and I'm unemployed and writing. Sherrill also works in the food stamp office, and together, they pull down good money. Peter, a thwarted novelist, isn't writing, and I am. It's ironic.

"This job isn't killing my creativity," he says, "it's killing me."

I took the 2Clement, on my way to the Legion of Honor, to catch the Rainbow Show, when I saw Peter Ellington get off the same bus. I got off and chased him down. "Peter!" I yelled, "Peter!" He says he passed his mother-in-law's house, and he thought he spotted his daughters, Maralie and Jennifer, out front. His kids are the same age as my kids. The girls are in the Philippines, living with their grandfather, but they're due back, under court order. I served the papers on his ex to get the litigation headed into its current stalemate. We checked on the girls. It wasn't them, so we decided to go to the museum. It was an absolutely gorgeous San Francisco day. "The Bay to Breakers is next Sunday," he said. For a few months, a while back, he and I ran together in the park, up to seven miles at a time.

"Well, I'll miss it, again," I said, feigning disappointment.

"Me, too," he said, genuinely disappointed. "I threw my back out, but Sherrill's running."

"Great."

"Yeah, I get to run vicariously."

I told him about last night. I got very drunk and went to a party. Talk about self-fulfilling prophecies. I walked in, full of good feelings and play. "Hey, Curt, how's your ass?" My arm went around Lucy, and I said, lightly, "This is the love of my life." I turned toward Diana, "Diana, that's a great dress." Then I spotted D'Erica, who hasn't spoken to me or looked at me for the last two years."

"Hello, D'Erica."

"Hello, Steve."

It was a major breakthrough, in the first ten minutes. Then I started in with Dave Heisenberg. "Davey, I want to deal with my homosexuality," I said, in a big voice, full of theatrics.

"Hey, man, I'm a stud," he said. I was delighted at Dave's defensiveness. After a *gay experience*, a year ago, he's now back to being a fulltime stud. I put my arm around Ben. Ben is Van Hick's lover.

"It has to be a two-way feeling," Ben said.

"Gee, I've been rejected, and I didn't even make a proposition," I said, feeling the stimulation and the drama of it all. Someone said, "Hey, Steve, who do you want to fuck?"

"Him," I said, "Curt." Curt got up, walked over, and sat down on the couch with Steve and Diana, like he wasn't too sure about this sudden outburst. "But I don't want to fuck him," I said, "I just want to love him."

As we walked, I told Peter it was my old confusion of love and sex.

"It sounds like a social problem," he said, "rather than a personal one."

"But it's personal, even though it's social."

No matter how smart you are, no matter how much sociology and psychology you know, you still have to live your own problems, face your own demons, and last night, when I was really drunk, but still conscious and articulate, I jumped into the middle of one of my very own personal shit piles. The party went on and on. I ended up sitting on the floor on the back porch, passed out. I came to. Oh, shit. I grabbed a cat-food bowl and threw up in it. I dumped it into a bigger bowl. I chucked and poured, chucked and poured. Steve, Diana, and Paul were the only ones left at the party. They heard a noise and came out on the porch.

"Jesus, Steve. Hey, man."

I picked up the full bowl of grits and gravy and wavered my way toward the toilet. I felt wonderful. I hurt, but I was happy. Not even to have done anything, but to have openly displayed myself among all those people. I try to talk about us being men, what it means and what it's all about.

Women's Liberation means the liberation from the bullshit that men have laid on them. Out of power, with everything to gain by change, they become freer to examine it than men ever are. Oppressors don't demand change. To put it more kindly, the one's who have a good deal going for them don't think about changing the way things are going. Men can sit and read and watch, but it won't do us any good, until we do

something about it, ourselves. I don't want to fuck other men, but I do want to love them, and I want to show it, by word and deed. To be an artist is to break through facades, and you have to bust through your own facades, too.

On the walk from the museum to Sutro Park, overlooking the Pacific Ocean, Peter and I passed through a homosexual rendezvous point. We walked through the woods, near the ocean, and all around us were standing, singly, and in pairs, *men*, like swaying rubber statues, along the paths, in the weeds and shrubs. It was an eerie feeling. Something was missing. It was different from the boisterous gay bar scene, the nightlife, and the street scene. It was humorless, rigid, and lifeless.

I thought, "Is this what it means for the American male to love himself? God, I hope not." I told Peter how my father winces whenever he sees Joey Bishop embrace and kiss Sammy Davis, Jr., on TV.

"I do, too," Peter said, and laughed.

Poetry Man

Oh, man alive. Leah came back from Los Angeles, and she was lying on my bed, listening to records. I started off with Phoebe Snow singing *Poetry Man*. Then, without realizing it, I picked a string of male singers. Going to the record crate after each side, I went past all the female artists I usually play. Later, I lay on the bed, thinking about maleness. I imagine writing an explosive poem, standing on a chair at Malvina's, shouting, "I AM A MAN!" Silence. Gasps. How can he think such a thing? And I was not drunk. I was lying on the bed, nervously trying to relax, trying to believe that Leah was really back, was not going to run away, and really cares about me. I asked her if she wanted to make love or just lie with me. "I'll settle for just lying here," she said.

She was tired from the eight-hour drive up from LA, where she asked herself, "What am I doing in LA, when I want to be in San Francisco with Steve?" I lay on the bed, with Leah sunk against me like a prodigal daughter come home, and my mind raced. I looked at the ceiling. I thought about food. I thought about heat for the room. I sang. My voice felt good in my chest. I worried if I was off-key, but I didn't care. I think I'll never get drunk with Leah again, or with anyone else for that matter. I want to watch what I'm doing, and I want to feel what I'm doing.

If Leah, if women, if people, make me act strange or funny, scared or whatever, I want to know it. I'm writing a book about a man, a male person, and it just happens to be

me. I don't want my subject groggy. I don't want to misread my Norway rat. I always feel this way after getting rip-roaring drunk. I'm really glad I get drunk and do what I do, and now I'm sober, and I'm glad now, too. Anyway, I was lying there, freaking out, worried to death about doing the right thing with Leah, and I got a little crack of light in my brain from the hatchet of an idea sunk into my skull, *I am a man*. I started breathing like an anesthesiologist's balloon, like a highway Breathalyzer, like a man with a real good set of lungs. "Yes, officer, I'm either drunk or sober. It doesn't matter which. I can smash cars and walk a straight line."

I thought it might be too hot in the room for Leah. "Shit, I'm the one who thinks it's too hot..." I think Leah probably doesn't want to fuck. "Damn, it's *me* that doesn't want to fuck." That's masculine. Right? A man does what he wants. Right? A man also does *not do* what he does *not want to do*. Right? He does wonderful things, like lie on the bed with a woman he loves, and that's all. It felt good. She was glad she was here. I was glad she was here. I felt good being here. Plain, old, unadorned, unaggressive, unplanned, unorganized, unambitious *being here*.

"Incredible," I thought, "I have done this before. This is not new. This is an oft-repeated revelation."

I held her and she smiled. My hand dropped from its awkward position. She looked at her watch. It was after midnight, and she either would, or she would not go home. I didn't have that terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach that I might be deserted. I was home. I couldn't be deserted.

I like the expression, *full of himself*. I am a man, full of himself. And there's room in here for you, Leah... and for everyone else. Jump in, life, the water's fine.

A Man

A MAN sits in the Owl and Monkey, reading a book called *Ideas*.

A MAN with gray sideburns and deep lines in his face, walks and
holds hands with a young girl. Both of them grin.

A MAN sits alone at the back of the streetcar, a hospital identification bracelet
on his wrist.

A MAN lounges extravagantly on the streetcar, his jacket folded on the seat beside him.

A MAN carries a hanger of dry-cleaned pants, the soft plastic cover blowing
in the breeze, as he steps carefully past the spray of a water sprinkler.

A MAN heavy-set, solemn, in a sheepskin coat open in front on a warm day,
 carries two decorator shopping bags across the Safeway parking lot.

A MAN on his hands and knees, brushes the dust from the bricks he is laying
 on Market Street.

A MAN with a black beard and no shirt, wearing black shorts, black socks,
 and hush puppies, strides down Market Street, half smiling.

A MAN in thick glasses and pinstripe suit, elderly, reaches with his forefinger
 and thumb into a vest pocket for a nickel, as he boards the trolley.

A MAN in a red-stripe apron, carries a red, rubber trash basket
 into the German-Swiss Lunch at Larkin and Grove.

A MAN wearing gray work clothes, a retractable key ring on his finger,
 closes the lid on a box of Juicy Fruit candies.

A MAN gets into a car, called a *Sports Fury*, with a bass fiddle in the back seat.

A MAN crosses Geary, clutching a transistor radio with both hands to his breastbone,
 and stops, a wisp of thin blonde hair blowing across his forehead, to look at
 the gold-band wristwatches in Granat Brothers' window.

A MAN lightly touches the back of the silk shirt of another man as they
 turn the corner at Post and Grant, talking loudly of business matters.

A MAN carries an avocado dustpan, full of paint chips, ceremoniously,
 across the sidewalk, and dumps it into a box in the back of a pickup truck.

A MAN stands with his head uplifted, reading the directory inside a doorway,
 as he purses his lips and pushes his cheek out with his tongue.

A MAN with a large paunch, in dark glasses over a red puckered nose, wearing a green
 Dacron-polyester suit, carries an empty cardboard box across Sutter Street.

A MAN stands in the sun on the corner of Pine and Montgomery, with the toes of his
 shoes over the edge of the curb, and pushes a Peanut Cluster between his lips.

A MAN with his left arm in a sling, two crutches under his right arm, boards the cable car,
 holding his transfer out, in the hand of his broken arm, He is helped on by the
 driver, and as he flops on the seat, a look of relief comes over him.

A MAN jingles change in the pocket of his knit pants and then divides it among a woman,
 a teenage boy, and a girl. The boy and girl run off. The man smiles, as he and
 the woman and a third child, a girl, cross Clay Street, hand in hand.

A MAN sits on a bench in Washington Square, looking at the other people in the park
 through a telescope, propped on his upraised knees.

A MAN runs up to and then chases another man around the park,
gurgling loudly, with his tongue out, waving his arms wildly.
A MAN on the telephone in Vesuvio, at the back by the stairs,
says, "You mean it's like ANIMAL without the L?"

Negative Capability

I stopped in to visit Tamara O'Brian. She's a good poet, the half-sister of Stan Rice's wife, Anne, who writes gothic novels. I discovered that Tamara was living across the street from Leah. I was on the street, coming home from talking to Peter Ellington. I rang her bell, and she invited me in. We had tea. We talked. Somehow, we got around to talking about men. She told me a line Mark Linenthal had told her, "Big man, big cock. Small man, all cock." She's noticed that big men are gentler than small men. My big, little brother, Scott, is an easy-going guy, and he's 6'8", 270 pounds. It seems there's ease to being gentle, if you can, or could, break anyone else into little pieces, or other people think you can.

Tamara's talk about big men revealed her prejudice. She was talking about me being a big man, which is true enough, next to her petite frame. But it's not quite the way she thinks it is. She said that men always seem to be bold, confident, and self-assured, and I said, "Yeah, you mean the two-dimensional, single-layer paradigms of strength and power who are gentle when they can afford to be."

I pushed Scott around, when he was a kid. When he was twelve, and already six feet tall, in the hallway of Cousin J.R. Brooks' house in Denton, Texas, I pushed, and he pushed back. He went into a windmill of flailing fists, and I never messed with him, again. I remember the Gregg brothers, in McCook, Nebraska, when I was a kid. Their father beat them mercilessly, but he failed to notice how much they had grown. When they were 16 and 17, they turned on him and beat the living bejezuz out of him, sending him to a hospital of painful realization.

I had the horrifying joy of seeing my father so weak from his brain surgery, so shrunk in weight and size, that I could have physically hurt him, and in that moment I wanted to hurt him, to strike back at my fear of him. I remember single-fisted blows, three or four times in my life, one blow in particular that sent me flying against the front closet door. He was a man so big he was gentle, with big hands that lay on my shoulder like a hot compress. The same hands would curl into a fist like a sledge hammer. He was

the kind of man who might be confused by his size. Warrior size, he was a man who commanded a howitzer unit in WWII, at National Guard Camp, in Iowa. He had big hands that reacted when Goose Tatum, the star of the Harlem Globe Trotters, in an exhibition game with Servus Rubber Company, picked up two basketballs. My father picked up three. One was held in the middle, like the little sausage that appears between your index fingers when you touch them in front of your nose and cross your eyes.

Tamara called me an invisible man, like Shakespeare, she said. I thought, like Keats, too. The way Keats described himself in his letters, going to a party and coming home as everyone there. Like the finger sausage. Looking at life cross-eyed and seeing the essence that's other than the sum of the parts. Keats described Negative Capability, as it applied to Shakespeare. He said Shakespeare was a man who was *capable of being in uncertainty, mystery, and doubt, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason.*

And there's the rub. Tamara admired my public composure. She said I gave more than I demanded. I wanted to show her the layer beneath the surface, the anguish, the fear, and the despair, that demands so much. I told her I liked Leah because she was a dull lover. A wild woman who dervishes in bed often leaves me out. Tamara said, "I never knew men felt like that, too."

"You bet your teapot," I said, spying the teapot on her kitchen shelf.

So the job is to begin, as men, to live in uncertainty, to begin to accept that the universe is contradictory, that contradictions exist, not as a call to synthesis, or as polar opposites, but as fact. Not to have to play the roll of organizer and stabilizer. Are we there, yet, daddy? To live as a fish in water, to swim in water, to be carried by water, to sometimes swim against the flow but not against the water.

Tamara said my plane might be about to land. She said she was excited about my upcoming stage debut. She wanted and expected it to be a success. Then it's off to Hollywood and fame and fortune. And she fears for me. What if it's not good? She imagined the real drama taking place in the bathroom, afterwards. My friends, wringing torrents of grief from their bodies, singing in chorus, "It wasn't good. Oh, how horrible. It wasn't good. Oh, my. Oh, my." That's a tragic scene, my friends. But great theatre. Tamara is thinking about the big money, these days. I say to her, "You don't get the big money, until you forget about the small money."

On TV, as I write, a mobster enters Johnny Dallas' restaurant. He demands information and threatens to destroy Johnny's livelihood. There's a pause, as the

characters size each other up. I want Johnny to look the bastard in the eye and say, "If you want to destroy my bar, go ahead. If you want to burn it down, tear it up, whatever you want to do. Go ahead, it's your party. I'm not interested in you or your threats." Of course, Johnny says no such thing. It would bring the cliché-ridden soap opera story line to an abrupt halt.

Tamara said I reminded her of Shakespeare and Warren Beatty. I seem to remind people of other people. Strangers often think they know me. I seem familiar. I told her about all the people who want me to be successful. "It's strange. It's like they have a stake in my success. They want it. My success becomes their success. My failure could provoke some interesting reactions. But I want success, too, and I'm willing to have it."

I feel like Billy Budd, Mister Innocence. Tamara said I must get abuse from some people. She said I'm dangerous. I told her that was why I wanted to associate myself with people who see what I'm doing, when I'm seriously joking. To say to them, "Let's laugh at the funeral. It's OK. I'm going to do it, and you can join in. It's all right."

She suggested that if people don't see what I'm doing, when I do that, I could be attacked. When I said, years ago, on hearing of the death, over the summer break, of one of our college classmates, a guy we barely knew, "Death is breaking up that old gang of mine," I was cut down by the scorn of my friends who clucked anxiously and fearfully at death and the fear of it. That felt like swimming upstream. That felt like a cold shower. That felt dangerous.

What the Mirror Sees

Paul suggested that since I'm writing my autobiography, I might be inclined to go out and have adventures that I could come home and write about. At first, I did feel that impulse, but as time goes on, and the pages have accumulated I have found a good and curious change in my attitude. I've come to respect the book and respect the man who is the subject of the book. In making the mirror, I've gained respect for the image in the mirror.

I want the character I describe to be a man I respect, and I want the reflection to be complete and accurate. Since I don't want to manufacture a false man, I find myself acting with more and more self-respect. If the character I describe is to be someone I respect, I need to respect the character I am. I want the two to like each other and to be like each other.

Let the art inspire the life. Harpo and Chico, in their matching Groucho costumes, mimic each other, in what they think is a mirror, but is, instead, a doorway. My life is changing, and this story is the artifact. I want the artifact to reflect the life. I want the story to be inspired by the facts of my existence. That's simple and clear. Like holding a mirror up to a mirror and guessing which is the real reflection of the other.

A Vestige of Integrity

At home again in the rich and ripply amniotic fluid of a bottle of Kentucky Ten High. I'm watching The Waltons. The kids on TV are sitting on the floor listening to Clayton Moore and Jay Silverheels, supported by the high, happy whinnies of Silver and Scout. It triggers a memory. The night breeze slows through the open front door to the back door, off the kitchen. My mother is bent over the aluminum and Formica kitchen table, wiping it clean with a soft cotton cloth. My father lies on the living room carpet like a beached whale sleeping after dinner. Mark and I sit close to the speaker of the console Motorola. Behind the front door is a clothes pole. In the snowbound winter, it's heavy with hats and coats that drip melting snow onto the rubber boots below. Nearby is a magazine rack with old issues of Colliers, The Saturday Evening Post, Life Magazine, Reader's Digest, and one slightly tattered issue of Photography, with pictures of nude women, lying in sand dunes, looking like sand dunes. We listen to the radio and we're consumed. Bobby Benson of the B-Bar-B, Straight Arrow, also known as Steve Adams, with his Golden Palomino, Mr. Kean, Tracer of Lost Persons, Inner Sanctum, Lowell Thomas, Gabriel Heater. The voices fill the room. These images send waves of dry tears and memory quakes through my chest. The Lone Ranger. The Shadow. Jack Benny. Phil Harris. I stop in my reverie. There's no end to it. I could go on and on. It's a safe place, the loved and loving past, the past of one's imagination, the safe past.

Leah called, and Betty answered the phone. Betty yelled in to me, but I didn't hear. I knew it was Leah. I knew Betty was calling me, but I didn't hear. Then, when we did talk, Leah said I sounded unhappy. I told her about the basketball game. A guy came up and asked if he could take half the court to play a private game, so he could win a hundred dollar bet. He asked me first, and I started to acquiesce. Then Pat objected and I agreed.

"This isn't a private club for your personal pleasure," I said. "We always have full-court games. You know that."

The guy, a familiar player called Wakely, persisted, and his private game irritated everyone. It inconvenienced the regular Thursday night games, and they died out earlier than usual. I wondered what to say or what I should do. Pat was bitter. Later, I went up to Wakely, by the elevator, where he stood with his friends, none of whom I've ever seen at the International Center.

"What you did" I said, "was a masterful piece of manipulation, and I don't have any respect for that."

He looked at me, pissed and a little surprised.

"I don't want to talk to you. You don't respect... I don't respect you... because you're a White man."

He says no one objected whenever any White boys came up and took the floor.

"What White boys?" I said. "What's this White boy shit?"

Then his friends told me that *Wake* didn't want to talk to me, and I said I could damn well talk if I wanted to. Wakely told me to get out of his face. He told his friends it looked like he wanted to do me some kind of undefined damage. I was upset and living very much in the uncontrollable present. If I wanted to talk, and he wanted to fight, and we did fight, he probably would have won. I felt weak, I wanted more clothing, more strength, more calm, more distance. I felt like I had none of what I wanted.

Leah had sent me home the night before, saying I'd had my two days of sleeping with her. In Churchill's, on a stopover between her place and mine, Angelo said he thought that was ridiculous. I thought about it as I lay on my bed. I enjoy my nights sleeping alone, unbumped by Leah, in bed or mind. I had a dream about Jenny and a violent suitor of hers, a dream that felt like others I've had whenever I felt rejected by a woman. Rejection. Jesus. What a male dry well.

"I reject!" I want to shout. "I reject. I reject you." I want to say to her, "It's nice. I like you. It's comfortable, but I don't want it. I don't want the nice, comfortable, easily rejectable life."

But I don't tell her that. I tell her about Wakely and his dislike of me as a White man. Did I block him, because he was Black? I gained support to stand up to him from Pat, who is also Black.

Back when I thought, "Leah is here," it seemed like I was writing a love story, *Beautiful Leah and Her Flame Red Firebird*, but now, I don't know. I don't want to just

make my life look good. It's hard to know the difference between what looks good and what is good, when I'm the one looking and I'm the one being. She and I talked, the night after the Warriors won the seventh and final game against the Bulls, as we sat over beef fondue, which she bought and she wondered about the book. She wants to read it and I say she can when I'm done.

"I haven't read it yet myself, and I won't, until I'm done."

"When are you going to be done?" she asked.

"I'll be done in two or three weeks," I said.

"I'll be around then," she said.

"Sometimes, I think you will, and sometimes I think you won't," I said.

"I will, unless I gain a hundred pounds or you find someone else or I do," she said.

She said. He said. He said. She said. I suddenly felt like she'd won, like *it's* won, like the game we were watching. I wanted to go home, she wanted me to go, and it felt banal, bland, blasé, and boring. Sexual conquest is a male pit of venomless snakes.

My mother's heart is never won. She's my mother, yet she's never won. My father wanders in, lies down on the floor, and the house becomes his house when he lands there. Even the illusion that my mother's heart is won is gone. Tamara thinks I'm a big man. At one point, she called me *Superman*. I think, "I'm a ghost, an apparition of a runt, a little boy. I have no wife, no home, no majesty, and no power. I'm a White man, a jerk. I only have my tongue and a vestige of integrity."

The Elephant and the Water Tower

The boy grows up and when he's 33, he sits down one day and writes what he thinks is his autobiography. He begins to see how much it hinges on what's happening. He isn't exactly sure what's happening, but he knows a lot is. It seems like a good time to take stock. Count the sheep, as it were. He finds several things on his mind. Sex and money, for example. He thinks he needs both. He has a girlfriend who tells him she's still in love with a soccer star from LA, but even that isn't the point. His female roommate throws a dollar bill on his bed and says, "As long as you're going out for toilet paper, get some toilet paper." And even that isn't the point.

He doesn't know what a true homosexual experience is, but he talks about it, and he thinks about it, and he wonders if that's the point. When he was a kid, all the way through high school and college, he was preoccupied with girls. He knows a lot about

boys, too, and he spends a lot of time with boys, in class, in sports, in conversation, in conflict, but they're like cardboard cutouts, compared to the warm, fleshy, and exciting girls. He gets busy with his desires. He gets together with women every way he can think of. Friends and lovers are magicians with his attention. He wants to find out what makes them tick.

When he's pushing thirty, there's a movement among women that tells him he doesn't know shit about women, and his experiences are blind, because his attitude is all fucked up. He gets all the way around the elephant, but his prejudices against the elephant warp his understanding. He thinks he's examining a water tower, by mistake. So, he climbs down off the water tower. He walks over and sits down under a tree, and he thinks about what he knows. The elephant loves him, hates him, takes him for a ride, tosses him in the air, charges at him, rolls over on him, makes loud noises at him, but, of course, he's never actually been *in* the skin of the elephant. He doesn't know what it's like to *be* an elephant. The elephant might be full of water. It might be a water tower. There might be more to it, than he's ever thought. But then, he already knows there's a lot more than he can ever know. Finally, the elephant analogy is out of hand and seems foolish. The great body of women, that he's examining, falls apart. It becomes a bunch of shapes, flying around him like leaves in the wind.

He begins to examine men the same way he examines women, by checking out all the angles of the beast. That seems like a good idea, because he's only beginning to do it, and a new idea is like a new career. Then, it occurs to him, that as regards *this* elephant, he *is* the elephant. If he wants to study the beast, all he has to do is to go on being an elephant and see what it does. The analogy of making an elephant out of men feels great. Suddenly, he sees two elephants, male and female. The male elephant grows in stature. No longer does he see himself a little figure walking all around and crawling all over a great big figure. He sees himself as part of, perhaps all of, a great big figure, standing next to another great big figure. That image makes him happy.

What is it, he thinks, about admitting he might want to have a homosexual experience that helps him make men seem as significant as women? To love himself, to love his own sex, even if it's only in his imagination, and even if it's confusing and threatening, is to admit his wants, needs, and desires, instead of first thinking about someone else. Is that the point? His friend suggests that all the talk in the world doesn't satisfy like real action. And maybe that's more the point. He determines to live more a life of action and less a life of speculation. He begins to feel real. The point is that he's

big and real and he does things. He moves around in the jungle, just like women do. Now, the jungle is full of monkeys, monkeys, and more monkeys, running around in the vegetation, trying to figure out what it means to be a monkey.

“Let the monkeys be monkeys,” he thinks, “and let the owls be owls, too.”

A Mockery of Man

It's turned cold in San Francisco. The fog came in and hung over the city like a gray filter. Nothing was wet, not even damp. Everything was near the mist, like dry skin with a chill. The windows I had cleaned until they give the world more clarity than it was due, are now clouded with two months of city soil. My eyes witness the world, with their perfectly normal acuity, blurred by my mind's confusion. I'm on the rag, so to speak, riding the cotton pony. I had a big blowout with Leah, the other night, the telling of which is like pulling teeth, like trying to remember a big dream you'd just as soon forget the details of but can't ignore the impact of, as you bump into the wall on your way to the shitter.

As I run my fingernails along the gum line of my teeth, it stings, as the nail breeches a cavity crevice. That miserable discovery is sharply appropriate for my miserable state of mind. I've gone back to using the pen I began this chapter with, thickheaded and slow.

“All the better to talk with, my dear,” I say, to no one. I have admitted one clear and specific problem I have with women. I don't have money. And because I don't have ready financial resources, I can't have a casual relationship with a woman, no candlelight dinners, no theatre parties, no weekends in the snow country, no spur of the moment flights to Mazatlan.

All I can do is get together and talk. And talking is the big, bad word of the dating game. After City Lights rejected my surrealist poems, *Let Me Burn*, with a note, “Nice book,” and after Wakely rejected me as a White man, I decided to go for a hat trick. I hit Leah's place on a dead run, wanting to clear up that one, too, I thought. As I neared her place, fresh from a beer at Churchill's thanks to Mary, the waitress, I thought, “This one's more difficult.” In Churchill's, I said, “Who wants to buy me a beer?” Mel, the cabbie, said, “What are you, a starving poet?”

“You guessed it,” I said.

In fact, I already had my hat trick. Betty bitched at my loud music while she was watching *Dr. Strangelove* on TV. I told her she had a corn cob up her butt, and she replied, "I want you out of here by the first."

"What, no thirty days notice?" I said.

Every once in a while, it feels like time to blow it out my ass. Time to get fucked up. And so there I was, fucked up, as I entered the Den of the Lionness. I bounded up to Leah, planted a kiss, and made for the Herbert Taretons.

"Uh oh," she said, "Here comes trouble."

I told her our relationship was dull, it lacked passion, after just telling Tamara what I liked about Leah was her steadiness and her low energy. Leah broke into tears. That's when she told me she was still in love, for the last two years, with a guy in LA, the guy she was just back from seeing, who doesn't love her, but what can she do? "And now you're going to leave me, because I told you."

"Right," I said. "I'm glad you told me what's bothering you, and now that you're unplugged, I'm leaving." She grabbed me by the sleeve and reminded me I owed her fifty bucks for the three parking tickets on the Firebird, all from within forty-five minutes in the same parking spot, in front of my house. I raged at the insult of being reminded of my debt.

I pulled away and said, "Fuck you, Leah." I knew she hated those words, so I told her, again, "Fuck you, Leah," and she hit me with a right cross that stung my left cheek.

"Jesus, Leah, you pack a hell of a wallop," I said, not without a little admiration. She made me stay.

"I'm only going to the toilet," I said. I came back and sat down, and I told her how much pride, integrity, and self-respect I have. I said that reminding me of my debt was a lousy thing to do. She said she was sorry. She said the times she respected me the most were the times when I broke down and told her how much I needed someone. I thought she was either putting her stamp of approval on what I feel like doing, which is to break down, or else she's telling me what I should do but don't want to do, and I wasn't sure if I should break down, out of desire or obedience, so I used the O.H. method, as Burly Bob Bennett said, in high school, when I didn't want to jump in the cold swimming pool for practice.

"Use the O.H. method, Steve."

"What's that?" I said

"Just shout, OH, HELL, and jump in."

I jumped and sobbed out my misery about being rejected three times in one day, about having no family, no one to love, and feeling scared about the future. Leah began *understanding* me, as only a world-weary 23-year-old can, so I sat there, my tear ducts emptying like so many Dixie cups, listening to an incredible string of heartfelt and sincere banalities. Time heals all wounds, etc. She told me she only wanted to make me happy, and she respected me for being an artist and so determined, despite the incredible odds against me in this rotten society, and, at 3:30AM, she looked at her watch.

"You think I should go home?" I asked, in a leading question tone of voice.

"Yes," she said, "it's good, don't you think, to take time and think about things?"

"Yeah, it's real good," I said and thought, "But it's a bummer, when you'd rather get it all out than pack it in."

She stood by the door, and I said, "Friends? I can dig that."

We kissed like two serious adults, and I left, to walk home, across Golden Gate Park in the dark and gloom. The next day I was exhausted, and I didn't do anything but take some books back to the library and fantasize about a couple of teenage girls who looked at me on the bus and the *ménage-a-tricycle* I might have with them.

On Saturday, Leah and I walked Jerry's dog in the park. On Sunday, we took my kids to the zoo. I didn't bring up our discussion. Leah was solicitous and obviously only wanted to make me happy. We went over to Peter and Sherrill's to borrow sweaters for the kids, in the lousy cold snap of a typical San Francisco spring. I looked at Sherrill and thought, "Now, there's a real woman." She runs in the Bay to Breakers, and she has lines in her face, and then I looked at Leah, and I saw the fresh light in her eyes, and I knew she wasn't weary at all. She was putting up with me. I remember my advice to Marilee, after she and I lost the string, "If only one of you women would just hang around." That was my version, anyway.

So it's back to a bottle of Italian Swiss Colony Burgundy and Bonnie Raitt, who says, "If you don't love her, better let her go," and Maria Muldaur, who says, "Any old time you want me, I'll be right there," and if it was simple, somebody would write a very short book, and we'd all relax. It's a cold day in May, but the wine is warming, and I feel real good, right now. I'll take that over feeling bad, given the choices, no matter what the weather is like, or, as Thomas Hardy said, the sun is a mockery of man.

Tyger, Tyger, Burning Bright

At Steve Schutzman's party, where I got stinking drunk and threw up on the back porch, on an impulse, I gave him my un-expired Phillips 66 gas credit card. It was drunk logic. He had a car and no money. I had a gas card and no car. As the week wore on, and I didn't hear from him, I wondered about the implications of the gesture. I handed him a card that, if he used it, would leave me in debt beyond my wildest dreams. I called him, after debating about it for a week. I took it as a gesture of intended faith in him, when I didn't have any faith in him, or rather when I hadn't *made* faith with him.

He said, in a quiet and genuine tone of voice, "Steve, you deserve to suffer for your insincere gesture."

I agreed, and we said goodbye.

"You're right, Steve," I said, and I began to change the opinion I'd had of him.

"See you, later," I signed off, somewhat hopefully.

Anne called and said she was trying to get rid of a bunch of people so she could come over at nine and pick up the painting I want her to have. Three years ago, I saw how much she admired a drawing of mine. Since I was still covetous of it, myself, I made a copy, and I gave her the copy. I thought it was a feeble act. This week, I told her I wanted her to have the original.

Paul said of my performance at Steve's birthday party, that, that night, I was *one long faux pas*. "I know that when you parody everything, you are deadly serious," he said. He said his fear was that others might not get it. That's what Tamara said. I don't have a master, and there's not much likelihood of my having any disciples. How can I call for disciples when my father taught me such exclusive self-reliance? He told me, "I buy you books, I send you to school, I teach you all I know, and you still don't know anything," and then he said, "If you want a job done right, you've got to do it yourself." He taught me I couldn't do anything right and I was the only one who *could* do it right. Here I am, breathing on the page, again, and gone out like a cheap Bic Butane Lighter. "For a dollar forty-nine, and thousands of lights, it's a pretty good lighter." Enough to set the world on fire? Enough to light one candle?

"Tyger, tyger, burning bright, in the forests of the night."

"What's that?" Leah asked, in front of the tiger cages, at the zoo, "I never heard that before."

"That's William Blake," I said, "he's a poet."

O Life Given to Itself

My last three meals have been peanut butter. I'm not sure if I'm fasting or starving. I lost nine pounds, down from 187 to 178, my weight when I was a swimmer. I have a tan, my face is bony, I'm thin in the cheeks and under the chin, and I'm not dying or hurting. I'm drinking Maxwell House Instant Coffee, eating Kretchmer Wheat Germ out of the bottle, and thinking too much about myself. Last night when Anne was over, I went into a melancholic slump. I put my hands over my eyes and I disappeared from the room. I sang a line from one of my poems, "O life, given to itself."

Ross and Tom, by John Leggett, is a book about two fiction writers who died by their own hands. Leggett describes his own shyness as a boy and his discovery of fiction as an escape, to read your way into a magic world and write your way to success in the real world. Leggett finds his novelists secretive about their lives.

Poets are different. Poets are compulsively self-revealing. Poets will tell you anything, probably too much. They work in a form that constrains and restrains the impulse to talk your ear off. They want center stage and no time limit. In the dark recesses of their garrets, they dream and believe they are talking personally to posterity. In person and in groups, they are garrulous and gossipy. For instance, Tamara asked me if I had an affair with Kathleen Fraser, and Anne said she hasn't slept with anyone since me. Except Curt, of course.

Jill Johnson, a poet in LA, says the new power politics in poetry is to make the personal public. Only a poet would say that. As Walt Whitman declared, making the public personal, "I AM AMERICA!" What balls. Anne and I lay on the bed and hugged each other, kissed and hugged, hugged and kissed, and caressed, and she said the only problem she ever had with me is the feeling she had to set limits.

"Go home, Anne," I said.

In that moment, I thought Anne was chiding me for living without interest in others. It's true, and it isn't true. Others make me nervous. When they interest me, I'm apt to dissolve into them. I have to maintain some distance to be able to keep my interest in others clean and clear. I'm self-centered, egocentric, and I think I have to entertain other people. Otherwise, I can't conceive why they would have any interest in me at all. I write. That's what I do. And I write about myself.

"That's absurd," I think. The people who are most interesting to me, like Anne, are people I believe are like me. I identify with people. The person I identify with, in

others, is myself. I find myself in them, and I fall in love with them. Or I become them, and then I lose my own set of characteristics, and I'm lost.

"I'm a ghost, I'm raw ego. Whatever character integrity is, I don't have it," I think. Does anyone have it? Or do they just have a body and clothes and habits, and after a while, a rigidity of details that pass for character?

I think, "It's soul we are."

That feels right, but soul seems like the grandest definition of the indefinite there is. "I smoke, to prove I'm breathing," I say. Smoking is inhaling and exhaling, and the evidence of it will kill you. I write books, and books will make you a success, and success is the grandest gesture of personal identity there is. And, according to Ross and Tom, that can kill you, too.

Notes on a Life

I'm sitting in the Owl and Monkey, making eye contact with a small, morose blonde who has defensive, curious eyes. The jumper cables are connected, recharging my sexuality. She has a bouquet of fingers jammed against her nostrils. "I think these women still need me," I coach myself. Notes on a life. I broke the refrigerator, when I defrosted it with a hammer.

Days later, Betty left me a note, "Steve. Please throw away all the food in the fridge. Thanks."

"All the food in the fridge," consists of two cartons of yogurt and some lettuce. It took longer for her to write the note than it did for me to throw away the food.

"Why the note?" I asked.

"Because you broke the refrigerator."

"That's petty, Betty."

"You're giving me trouble in my own house."

"I don't like being uncomfortable in my house, either."

"You just find a place by the first, and leave me alone."

"I can't do that, and until I can, I'm going to deal with this I don't think anyone has ever stood up to your petty bullshit."

This is a pattern, I think. Betty gets a new roommate, in a rush of good feelings and anxiety, and after a while, they get sick of each other and separate. People are

always leaving her, with bad feelings. It's no wonder she's flushed by new energy, worried about the end result. and sure that that's life.

A line in *Foul*, the autobiography of Connie Hawkins, the basketball player, is delivered by his brother, when Connie is a skinny, scared kid in Bedford Stuyvesant, getting beat up, all the time, "You're a faggot, Connie," Earl would say, "You're a chicken-shit faggot. You let everyone run you off."

That's what I feel like, lately. Beaten, burned out, and impotent. At the height of it, I imagined myself destined to one of two ends. One day, in the café, I looked at a couple of apparently gay guys, and I imagined myself in the state of mind called cruising, which means sitting around, with your feelers out, eyeballing other men, getting old behind it, and it's a terribly depressing vision. The next day, I ran into Axel Weintraub. I told him I've been going through the miseries of every writer who finally admits that being a writer is everything., "I may end up slumped against a wall, somewhere, out of the gutter by inches."

"Yeah, well, that's a real possibility," he said, not exactly cheering me up but, at least, confirming my fears.

I went to see *The Day of the Locust*, a grinding horror story of human depredation, and around me were single men, swiveling in their seats, looking at each other, and at me. The guy next to me sat sideways in his seat, his arm outstretched across the empty seat between us. A hyena, at the back of the theatre, thought the movie was a scream and every scene, he said, was, "Fabulous!"

I got the final rejection from Leah, at her place, while we were watching the Warriors win for the fifth game in a row. Down by 14, they won by 6, by now almost the rule for them. "I like you, Steve, but I'm not sexually attracted to you, right now."

"Then, what the fuck am I doing here?" I thought.

I don't know what happened next. I don't know if it was the booze or what. What she said was not a surprise, but I got dizzy and it left me crazy scared. I left the room and paced in the front hallway, trying to remind myself that it would pass. I spiraled deep into myself, and there was nothing there. I began to believe I was dying, that I was dead of life. I was in a whirlpool, pulling me down. I thought I ought to keep moving. I knew Leah was in the other room, but I couldn't feel any feeling. I looked at the carpet as I paced, and I tried to feel something, anything, even the texture of wood and cloth, even light and shadow. My heart was beating. My lungs were drawing in and letting out air, my legs were moving, but I couldn't think anything, and I couldn't feel anything. Nothing. It

wasn't that I thought or felt nothing. It wasn't that I thought or felt I was nowhere. I couldn't speak. I couldn't describe it. It felt like the unknown, around which everything known is. It was horrifying. It was hell.

And then it passed. I got out of the whirlpool's center. I got back into the whirl. I began to think and feel. I went back in the other room. Leah said I needed a vacation. She said I should get some money and go visit my brother in Hawaii., "You might meet a beautiful little hula honey, over there."

The next day, I started looking at girls and telling myself jokes. Incredible. And I remember the empty terror I felt in Leah's hallway. I remember telling myself why I should have a gay experience and looking at all the reasons I should be gay. It's the same feeling I have when I think I should be a schoolteacher. It all makes sense. It's a job I should have. I'm trained for it. Then I get a horrible, sinking feeling it's my fate to be a schoolteacher. "If it's such a good idea, why am I so depressed when I think about it?" I try real hard to think that being gay is a good thing for me to be. The world has a place for schoolteachers and homosexuals, I just don't have to be one of them.

Last night, I drank some beer and went to Churchill's and fell in love with at least three women, and I felt wonderful. As for the men, one guy walked up to me, stuck out his hand, and said, "Hey, man, how you doin'? It's been a long time."

I smiled and said, "It *has* been a long time. I don't even know who you are." I went up to Scottie, a guy who liked my style, who offered me a job selling soap for \$1500 a month, and I asked if I could borrow two bucks. He peeled off five ones, and I bought another beer.

"Men are great. They're great to be around," I thought, "but I wouldn't want to marry one."

I played ball with Wakely, the guy who called me *White Boy*, the day I felt eminently impotent. I guarded him, I stopped him, and I beat him. I watched him on the sideline, energetically coaching another White boy, Big Max, who is fat and twenty, "Where's your man? Max, where's your man? Get on him. Box him out. Max, where's your man? Don't let him shoot. Box him out. Oh, Max, don't do that. Get him. Get him."

And then he turned to someone next to him and muttered, "Hell, now watch him blow it."

Wakely has his problems. I have mine. Wakely thought, when I guarded him, that I was ineffectual. He was wrong. I know where he gets the idea. I have the same idea. In my mind, homosexuality is linked with male potency. The stereotypes about limp wrists and

weakness come up for me when I feel impotent, unsure of myself as a man. There's disgust and distrust toward gays. I feel it. Part of it is my own sexual confusion, and part of it comes from sitting at the knee of my father's fear and resentment, the internalized fear and resentment of male affection and male vulnerabilities.

Most men trust other men who seem to be strong and straight. So do most women. That's the way it is. Knowing how to live in the world isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it may not be necessarily a good thing when it's blind and ruthless. But it is the way things work, among straight men. San Francisco has 70,000 highly visible gays. They are so visible, it seems as if San Francisco is a gay city. Sometimes, I wish they weren't so visible, but there's a better way, and that's to live my life the way I want to live it and leave the rest alone.

Let Me Burn

I went to bed with Carol Ann. All the while I was infatuated with her roommate, Lynn, a psych student from Wisconsin, who reminded me of Jenny and Anne. We joked about the total eclipse of the moon. I lit cigarettes and held them up to the moon, saying, "I... am... not... afraid." At the moment of total eclipse, people began howling like dogs. Carol Ann and I talked about theatre, and we touched each other like old friends. The last time I saw her was at the flea market, in Oakland, with Jack, Rachel, and Betty. She was with her mother, who advised her to never get married and said her best friend was gay.

The Warriors beat the Bullets in four straight for the Basketball Championship of the World. I went to Golden Gate Park and watched the old people listen to the overture to *The Marriage of Figaro* by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, whose father gave up his career as a conductor to conduct Wolfgang's career. "Not me, Jack, you're on your own," and that sentiment is the true motto of our beloved homeland, The United States of America. *In God we trust, but you are on your own.*

It occurred to me that as I make things in the home, i.e., books, I want a woman who makes things in the home. Like kids? I imagine proposing a marriage of convenience to Jenny. Andy Byron, a poet, of course, said that when he first met Jenny, he thought I could do better, but now I think she can do better. I have to do better for myself. My mother said, sadly, that the reason for our divorce was that Jenny wouldn't be a wife.

And I wouldn't be a husband, either. I'm making myself serious, on a day when the best parts of the free life are circulating in the air. There's a hot sun, today.

Jenny suggested that the relationship between Peter and Sherrill works because they don't hear bells when they kiss and they have an open-eyed set of expectations. My love-line looks like railroad tracks, the kind you find piled up in a box of toys, a Gordian knot. So, it's all the women, or a practical arrangement, a marriage of convenience and mutual respect, or a three-ring circus?

This is too much thinking on a sunny morning after. Last night, someone said I couldn't be a poet because I was so irreverent at the eclipse of the moon. I said I wasn't a moon poet I was a sun poet. Another Icarus. You can't fly too close to the moon. They have flown to the moon, already, and the next step is a string of Holiday Inns around the Sea of Tranquility.

"No one will ever take one small step on the sun," I say to myself.

*If I die by fire, let the fire burn.
The smoke will blackface the walls.
The flames will redden the sky.*

*The ashes will throw themselves
into the wind.*

*If I die by fire, let the fire burn.
Let me burn, if I die by fire."*

It Aint Nothin', It Aint Nothin'

In Churchill's, with Peter Ellington, there was an old woman at the bar, with veins like noodles dried to her calves. She wore a stained cocktail dress and support hose, a corsage next to her right ear. She crossed her legs and opened her thighs, exposing the memory of several bad jokes. She had a cast on her left forearm, with gauze trailing from it, like bleached moss. She carried a brown gym bag. She wore ballet slippers. She had a pair of glasses with rhinestone frames propped on top of her hairdo, like a real hair imitation of a bad wig. She came over and sat, with her back to my back, at an adjoining table. She leaned close to my face, and, in an accent which could have been from any

one of several Balkan countries, gypsy or fallen princess, she asked for a cigarette. I gave her a Marlboro. I lit it for her and turned away.

"Peter," I said, "When I was in college, Arnold Toynbee, the great historian, was there. I saw him, outside the bookstore, trying to negotiate the steps with his wife. To me, they were just another old couple. It didn't occur to me to go up to him and try to say anything to him. Christ, it was Arnold Toynbee."

"Well," he said, "here's your golden opportunity." I let it slide. Later the gypsy princess asked for another cigarette. "I gave you one already," I said, while giving her another. She mumbled something and then said, dramatically, "I would fight for you! I would fight for you!"

One night, I was walking on Market Street at 12:30AM, and around me came two cars full of cops. They crossed the sidewalk, carrying their guns like shopping bags full of dynamite, up to the corner, and they rapped on the glass. A man came out of the porno magazine stand, a few doors down the block, shouting, "Ah, it aint nothin', it aint nothin'."

I ran into Curt and Tom in Vesuvio and had a cup of coffee, a coke, and a bag of potato chips. Before I could order, I reached to tap the waitress on the arm, but she moved, and I missed, so I followed the miss with my body, and I sprawled out of my chair onto the floor. Tom looked up, pointed down, and said, "Bartender, I'll have whatever he's having."

I like to tell two stories on my father. He leap-frogged over a fire hydrant, one day, and he couldn't get his hands out in time. I illustrated by dropping my face to the tabletop. Another time, he was out riding his motorcycle. There was a new girl in town. She was out in her backyard, and he wanted to get a look at her. He was checking her out, cruising slowly by, when he ran into the back of a parked car.

Tom wanted to know if he turned it to any advantage. I didn't know. Shit, I do know. He turned it into a great story. The story I'm dying to write down, for days, now, is about meeting Magnolia Thunderpussy, a giant of a woman, attractive, intelligent, friendly, and not a bad poet. We eyeballed each other at a party at Beausoleil's, back when he was married to Laura, and I left the party with Magnolia and went home with her. The wild night of my imagination became starkly real as we climbed into bed. Lifting her breast was like lifting the edge of a waterbed mattress.

There was no transcendent flesh in the bloated human body. I ran to the refrigerator. I scouted the living room to see what the other couple was doing. They

were making out on the couch, and I must have looked like a scared rabbit, as I peered around the corner. Back in bed, I got the idea to pull her over on me, taking on the odd feeling of weight like the leaden X-ray blanket of a dentist. She wouldn't get on top of me. When I finally entered her, I glanced at her eyes, and I saw a look of terror.

Telling the story, right now, sitting in the Owl and Monkey, is, unlike the reality, slightly exotic and erotic. I look across at a girl, sitting at the sunny, window table. I see her chest heaving rhythmically, her thighs held together, with her left hand squeezed between them. She's writing something, and her tongue is pushing on her lower lip. Girls and women wander in and out, in T-shirts and little blouses. It's a warm and sunny day. The barely overheard conversations seem entirely pleasant and lighthearted.

I talked to Jenny, and I remember telling Peter, last night, how I periodically want to get back with her. "I'd want to make certain demands of her, and I can't, until I have the strength to do it." He says Jenny is a strong-willed woman who asks a lot of a strong man. It's another fantasy. I remember an off-hand remark from her, last year, about getting back together in five years. It could make a great story. It might be a great ending for this story, but this book is probably without any convenient ending. I can put an ending to it, but it's no more an ending than adding a cinematic sunset, fade out, door closing. It's likely I will end this book, neither rich nor famous, neither ecstatic nor dead, neither in the hall of fame nor the gutter, neither wise nor a blind fool, absolute in no degree.

Peter said, "Fate reaches out and puts you through these situations, smashing you in the forehead, time after time, saying "Wise up, you dumbshit. Get it right, this time." I told him about sitting in Churchill's last year with my cousin Karen, watching a pretty girl prance around. Karen watched her and said, "It's no good. She leads with her belly. She's got no respect for her own body. She's a prick tease."

"But I like having my prick teased," I said, at the time.

Peter said there's a girl at work who reminds him of his ex-wife. This girl is a notorious no-follow-through prick tease, and he still stumbles over his chin looking at her when she passes. So you go backward and forward and you look both ways when you cross the street, and when you think it's enough, you stop. When you start, you expect it to reveal some kind of sense. I need to get a sense of something being finished, and when I get that feeling, I will stop.

An Ending, Of Sorts

"Sometimes, you can't know what your body is telling you, but you have to trust it's not fucking you over," Kiel said. I moved into a small room at Kiel Stein's, to hole up. It's a small, spare, white-walled room on the other side of the park from Betty's. There's a desk, a single bed, a dresser, and green plants. The window has a rolled-up, bamboo-strip curtain. The floor is bare wood. There's no TV, radio, or stereo. It feels great. Kiel came back to town, after living in a cabin in Utah, with Kate, during the time I was working on this book. I imagined renting his spare room, even as I realized I had a final chapter to write. I began this book before I moved in with Betty. I end it, after moving out. In other words, I began as I left Paul's place, and I end it as I enter Kiel's place. I told Kiel about my search for a woman of security, and he said my transiency suggested I wasn't looking for that, at all. I have no base of security, no nest that calls for a bird of similar feathers. All these casual relationships simply reinforce the feeling of transiency. I don't want or trust any woman, until I'm done changing. What I want is a woman who is compatible with the Steve who isn't here yet. Paul was reluctant to accept the changing. Betty was indifferent to it, and Kiel encourages it.

As I end this chapter, I have the feeling this book is at an end, but in fact, I'm at an impasse that anticipates an end, like a rock blocking a tunnel through which I'm crawling. Roll back the rock, smell the pinecones, blink in the sunlight, step into the open air, breathe in the cool mountain air. I quit smoking, and as soon as I did it, it was done. The goose is out of the bottle. I take a deep breath, the air tastes good, and the idea of a cigarette seems absurd. I know I'm breathing and it's good breathing.

Halfway through a reading of Anne's at Malvina's in North Beach, a great obsessive rock lifted off my head. Driving to the reading, I told Kiel I still loved Anne, that when she reads her poems, I feel embarrassed because I know what she's doing. As she reads, I feel as if I am she. Then the spell was broken. I watched her sitting with Curt in her new short haircut, wearing a red Mexican shirt, reading poems that made no reference to me, and I saw a good poet reading her poems, and I had no magical insight, no penetrating identification.

I sat upstairs in Malvina's and I stopped breathing smoke. The night air was cool in the warm room. I felt good. I went up to Steve Schutzman and said I wanted to have a beer with him. He said OK. I said I wanted to talk. He nodded, cautiously.

Dave Heisenberg asked me if I had the problem worked out vis-à-vis my gay tryouts at Steve's party. "Yes, I have," I said, "Now all I want to do is go beat up some

queers,” and he knew I wasn’t serious. I praised Anne for a good reading and she said my drawing was on her wall where she can look at it. “Good,” I said, “that’s good.”

Kiel and I split. Later, we sat in his kitchen and talked. He told me what he saw, what he heard, what he liked, and what he didn’t trust in me. He put two and two together. “You’ve had a lot of relationships with women, and at some point they fail. I suspect that’s really what you want.”

It felt good to hear him say that, and it felt true. I’m compelled to get on stage, to write, to be productive. And despite all the grief and delight this life continues to visit upon me, I am what I am. Any more than that, I don’t know.

Dear Nadja

Dear Nadja,

I think you know what a family can do to prompt our lives to aberration, and I think you know it may have nothing to do with family. I've decided, since you're locked in silence, I would write you every day and open up my own silence. There's no definite day for you to be released, so I imagine there's plenty of time for me. I'll be 40 in a month. I've had a few flashes of what that means to me. Maybe it's too soon after your own 40th for you to have any wisdom to impart, and maybe it's not what really matters. I depend on you for encouragement in this endeavor. If you open and read my letters, I'll be encouraged. You're always strong in my mind. Maybe too strong for all this we call the real world. It's such a weak sister (pardon the joke) compared to the world I know you know. My admiration for your spirit will never diminish.

Bruce just came by my table, in this coffee house called 'The Owl and the Monkey', and said, "You looked like a woman, for a minute there."

Robin chimed in, "It's your hair."

Then Phil said, "You look like a faggot."

I said, "It's what I'm doing."

Writing to you, Nadja, thinking of you, I probably begin to look like you. You have always meant *woman* to me, so much more than Mother, as she likes to call herself, who always seemed neutral, in some awful, majestic way. You may be the woman she could never let out. Speaking of let out, I hope they don't let you out too soon. Another joke. I know you're where you are because you chose to be there, and I know you'll be somewhere else when you decide to be somewhere else. If any poems come up while I'm writing, and if they're any good, I'll copy them out for you. I remember what Hawthorne said, "What prisoners we are of all that we take to be most natural." I'm grateful you've gotten yourself arrested, so to speak, and I'm greedy for this strange opportunity.

All my love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

So much is happening so fast, just when I've begun to think of silence. Silence opens up the world around me. My own noise either competes with or drowns out the rest. I'm leaving out communication, but silence encourages it, so maybe I'm not leaving it out at all. I'm in the café I mentioned yesterday. I've been coming to this café/coffeehouse for over five years. It's on Ninth Avenue, in a neighborhood called the Inner Sunset, just off Golden Gate Park. I do most of my writing here. Writing to you has brought you closer to me. I read that Kafka wrote to his sister, and his letters to her were livelier and more loving than he allowed himself in real life or in his books. I believe in letters. *In Scripto Veritas*. Kafka was a tormented man, and his letters were expressions of his true feelings, however much he was, otherwise.

It must be cold in Baltimore. I think of you and I wonder about it. What's it like outside your window? As I sit here, in the California sun, it feels like summer. Then I realize you are there, not here. I see summer outside your window in my imagination. I admit to feeling an effort, a wish, to provide for you. I can't make it summer in Baltimore. Summer will come. There's a lot of talk in the café that something is occurring. Everyone searches for, looks for, and waits for, the accident of a Greenwich Village in the late Forties, or a Paris, in the Twenties, those magical moments when artists remake themselves and the world around them. I'm not sure it's magic.

Reagan is the President, the preppies are back in control after ten years of false freedom, false democracy, and now it's back to reality as they define it. The people in The Club are back in control as if they were ever out of control. Everyone who's outside The Club is feeling the chill. That's not magic. I feel less alone than I did when I thought I would be welcome in the club, or when I thought the club was disbanding.

Harper & Row just returned my first prose book, *Savage Amusement*. They said the book contained "considerable self-insight," but they deemed it "not of wide enough appeal to be commercially viable." The letter was signed by the Director of Operations. I have always assumed I would be accepted, and it strikes me that my assumption is no different than my novelist friend Peter's constant striving to be accepted. I began to think of the different ways you and I were and were not accepted by the family. It reminds me of the business of aberration. Then I thought about The Club. It's the same difference. This lack of acceptance runs on parallel tracks. The aberrant moments, when the shit gets sorted, are moments of clarity and freedom. Daddy Ronny and

Mommy Nancy have taken the illusion out of our wish to belong. Now we belong to each other, my wonderful Nadja, you and I. Come be with me in the café, in mind, in spirit, in body, anyway you want. Steve

Dear Nadja,

I got a phone call this morning from my son, Jack, saying he and Rachel can't come up to the city because, "We've got a lot of errands to do, and we can't afford the train ticket." But they'll be up next weekend for a couple of days. I miss Jack and Rachel. I never know how much, until I find out that I can't see them.

I started this letter in a good mood. It's later, and I don't feel so good. It's not that I feel bad. It's more that the sense of heightened experience I've been feeling for days has slipped down into ordinariness. It's an attitude that matches most of this Sunday evening's coffeehouse patrons. Across the street, they are hauling damaged cars into the garage and damaged dogs into the veterinary. I sold my car today, for \$150. That eliminates one dead headache, takes care of the rent, and gets me through one more week. My share of the rent is mercifully low.

When I realized the kids weren't coming, I did the laundry. At the grocery store, I ran into a disheveled old man who wanted food. He said his welfare check had been stolen. At the time, I didn't know I was going to sell the car, so I thought I had only enough money to get me to Tuesday. I gave him thirty cents. He wanted to buy a Hostess apple pie, so I gave him another quarter. Pie in hand, he told me he didn't want candy. I started across the street, and he yelled after me, "Thank you, Sir." I was embarrassed. Then he yelled, "I hope you get \$100,000." I grinned at him. I expected a shoebox fortune on my doorstep, when I got home. Then I got the call about the car, and within an hour, I had money. Thank you, old man.

The café is nearly deserted. Those who are here are somnambulist. I've been thinking about sex, about how much sexuality is at the core of everything creative. Whenever I want to infuse myself with energy, I remind myself of my sexuality, of the sensuality of my being. I look around the room, and it comes alive.

What I was thinking about when I thought of you, before I started writing, was wanting to advise you to put the make on your surroundings. Now I feel stupid saying it. It's totally inappropriate. It also seems a denial of your overwhelming particularity. What? Your *overwhelming particularity*? I mean your silence. Well, forget it. If it makes

sense, it'll come to you. I remember those times when my own sensuality could be imagined only as a violation, a violence, a rape. I don't want a mind-fuck here, either. I'm afraid I'm not going to get very far talking to you about you. I'll forge on. I'm talking to myself, as much as to you. Advisor, heed thy own words. Advice is in the mirror of the advisor.

There have been, and now are, several attractive women in the café. Until this moment, I've only barely noticed them. There is a surge in my genitals that forces me to clench my thighs. A rather plain, slightly frizzy blonde comes in, wearing an open neck, silky blouse over what appears to be great breasts. Her fine points, as it were. She stretches, taking off her coat, fingers her hair, and sensually positions her torso.

I remember you telling me, one night, years ago, that some woman I was titillated by was obviously only flirting with the room. Ever since then, I've taken pains to look for the genuinely sensual woman. I'm often distracted by the obvious. I'm amazed at the conjunction of language; *taking pains* to find sensuality. I think I mean eliminating the pains, overcoming whatever is superficially appealing that distracts from the genuine. Does it actually hurt?

I have a new recognition. I'm in love with the world at a distance of six inches. At that distance, my eyes become conveyors of sensuality. Analysis begins beyond that distance. I'm rolling now. Except for this rotten pen that has thinned out, like a black thread in the snow. What does that simile mean? Maybe it means that the pen is running out of ink. You see how I analyze. My whole trip is spontaneity, amazement, and then analysis. I was told once that I didn't need a shrink, because I was my own shrink. I only wish I could afford to pay myself \$50 an hour.

I hate it when I find myself gawking at some women. It's like watching television. They hire this bouncy broad, the camera zooms in on her chest, the dialog is entirely forgettable and suggestive, and you've been had. One has been had. *I have been had*. Thank God I have a sister with brains, guts and heart. Now I'm thinking that the woman in silk just happens to like her clothing. Finally, she leaves and literally marches up the street. I feel stupid, sometimes, being male. I know some men who are vengeful, some who are arrogantly derogatory, some who are pitifully wimpy, and some who take power by paying for it, one way or another.

Ultimately, it's living on earth with the unknowable difference. I'm baffled by the difference in you that is you. I know you are silent. I know you may be suicidal. I know you're beyond me. It makes me feel ordinary. You say I'm lucky because I write. I

suppose so. Still, I think I know something of what you feel and don't feel. You know I've *been to the edge*. I can hear the self-denigration in my voice. Here I go, apologizing for my own insanity - my non-sanity. I'm so insufferably sane. Always, the morning after, the day after, the year after, I come to the surface, back to reality, down to earth, and I write. I feel like a thief of your awareness. But it's also my own. It's my job to report back. Please forgive me. I hope you need me more than the half-dead, so-called sane need me.

All day, for the last three days, my face has been hot, my eyes red. I'm bursting with unreleased tears. Not for you, not because of you, but because you are in my life. My sister, and so much more. You represent something to me, in women, that is silent, noble, wise, and immutable, and yet sensual and loving. Most women would be jerks without you. And most men.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I'm sitting in the *Café La Bohème*, on 24th and Mission. I don't think it was here when you were here last time, but in the past few years, it has established itself as a fixture of bohemian culture, cultivated as it may be. It's a nice place, but too expensive. Phalanxes of teenage Chicanas troop in, with blasé aplomb, to groom themselves in the only public access toilet in the neighborhood. I live on 17th and Dolores, which is much closer to this café than to the Owl & Monkey, but I find this place pretentious, in a laid-back San Francisco sort of way. *Yes, I'm cool, but I would never act as if I was.*

I have to tell you what happened, yesterday. First, it was sunny. Then, it hailed. Then, at 11:13 PM, there was an earthquake. 3.0 on the Richter. I wasn't able to write you, yesterday, and I didn't understand why, until this morning. This is difficult. After Sunday's outpouring, I woke on Monday, eager to say more. But I became silent, and in the evening, I turned angry. I didn't know why. I looked around at the café of familiar faces, and I disliked every one of them.

At 9:30, I decided to go home. That's unusual for me. The café stays open until eleven, and then there are bars in the neighborhood where I go to continue the evening. On my way home, with several beers in my belly, I kept muttering. I often find myself trying to cheer up people who lead lives of quiet desperation. I began to complain. Who

cheers *me* up? After playing healer, I wonder, who heals the healer? Still, I didn't like the feeling, and I wanted satisfaction. This morning, I woke up in a mood that always surprises me. Half-asleep and well-rested, I laughed, for no apparent reason. It's not much of a laugh, but it means I'm pleased with being alive, with coming to consciousness.

I also realized I was angry at you. You, my sister, the person, not the immutable nobility I spoke of on before. The problem is that it's so hard to be angry at you. I love you so much. I read an article in the paper this morning about a 14-year-old autistic boy, and I could imagine being angry at him for the disruption, guilt, and trouble he had caused. And yet, how can you be angry at an autistic boy who has no sense of others. I'm not comparing you to that boy. You're not neurologically impaired, not insane, not retarded, you're not unconscious, you don't have a social disorder. You've never caused a moment of trouble that I didn't think was justified, even honorable, even inspired. Mom and Dad may hold you responsible for their unhappiness, but blame is one of the poor tools in their kit-bag of life.

What angers me, turns on some sense of myself, for choosing a selfish life, and also for not being able to rid myself of my compulsion to please people. And, I'm angry at the course of thinking and feeling that poetry has taken me beyond my naïve arrogance I felt when I was young, beyond a simple sense of the world's fascinating complexity, sometimes into the awful horror of unknowing. Sometimes the world looks like a giant day-care center. Sometimes, it looks like an endless cock-fight. And always, behind it, there is emptiness.

The woman sitting next to me is telling a friend of hers how miserable she is. She's given up drinking, but she can't stay home and work, and when she goes out, the atmosphere in cafés repulses her. She speaks with a harsh sibilance. Like a harsh Sibyl: a Prophet of Misery. She must be very angry. And she is being meek, humble, self-effacing. That blast of S's is annoying. She says she has a blond, blue-eyed fetish, but Robert Redford doesn't turn her on. She says she had a very bad week back in '79. She had a 45-year-old boyfriend who couldn't understand her bad karma. She says she's going to write her autobiography. I enjoy literary eavesdropping, but it's also one of my poor defenses against such attacks. Her voice drags and scrapes, like hauling a broken-down piano across a parking lot. *At dawn*, I was going to add.

He added. I'm imagining the parking lot of the old Turnstyle Discount Store back in Moline. My mind leaps across the freeway to the new mall where Mom and Dad have their restaurant. There's a kindness for you, to call their burger palace a restaurant.

When I was back in Illinois in '80, I tried to sit in the *Big T Family Restaurant* and pretend I was in a café in San Francisco. Good Luck.

Mark told me that fast-food is not fast-serve but fast-eat, that all the food is designed to be chewed and swallowed as quickly as possible. Chewed for sure, but it gets hard to swallow. So, here I sit, dear sister, chewing on a few thoughts. 28 times to the image. A tea and salad guy just sat down, opposite me, at my tiny table, and I think it's time to move on. I'm caught between the steamfitter's nightmare and a holistic wet-dream. Maybe I'll pick this up later. Ah, the library. I think I'll go to the library. *The Realms of Gold*, as Miss Garst used to call them.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I'm back in La Bohème. Last night, in The Owl and The Monkey was dreary. All the paintings were removed from the walls, and the place looked like a bus station, like a warehouse for transients. The paintings that had been on the walls for months were varied portraits of the regulars in the café. The one done of me was sufficiently bad that I was able to sit beneath it and go unrecognized. However, when the paintings went up, the social milieu took a shot in the arm. Everyone began to rise to the occasion, with a sense of validation. Just as I began to imagine a renaissance, the place turned dreary. The cruelty of imagination.

I took the trolley home with Jeff Muller, who lives near me, and I was amazed to hear him talk about the failure of women to return his consistent efforts to rouse them with anything remotely cheerful. I sat down here in this café and immediately caught the lively eye of a young woman. Then, a street bum, who was mumbling to himself and pushing a shopping cart full of rain-wet *things*, parked it by the plate-glass window, came in and sat down across from me, and *voraciously* attacked near-empty soup bowls and left-over bread scraps. He made a quick round of the room and found enough for a decent brunch, before the manager chased him out.

I'm in a lull, I'm calm, I'm healthy. So, with nothing to report, I'll report nothing. For example, yesterday, I took an application from PepsiCo to become a driver. My house painting business is kaput. I called Dad last night to get the specifics on the truck I drove for him. He sounded awful, as usual. I tried to joke with him. Robert Penn Warren

has a new book of poems, making some kind of sense of his long life. In sum, he says that all he's gotten from knowledge, particularly poetic knowledge, is that he's "...simply a man with a man's dead reckoning, nothing more."

It's POURING rain. Every time I read one of these poets' old age perceptions, I want to send it to Dad, but I hesitate. I was about to send him Loren Eisely's autobiography, *All the Strange Hours*. I hesitate because I think, rightly or wrongly, that Dad's long life of intellectual hide-and-seek has ill-prepared him for these books. On the other hand, these are good poets, and Dad's not a fool. Sometimes, awareness catches up with you, and the finest writing becomes available. It doesn't necessarily require a degree to perceive. It only requires willingness and effort.

It's later, and I've switched cafés. I feel extremely vulnerable, these days, but my behavior is decidedly rational. A woman I know, who has always eyed me very closely and has talked to me in a concerned manner, came in La Bohème and spoke to me. I was feeling fine and chipper, but she poked her concern into my reserve, and I felt like leaving. I felt like crying. I haven't been with a woman for a while. I have moments when it seems to me all I want to do is burst into tears. I wasn't going to talk about this, but maybe it's inevitable. Nanci is the woman I've been seeing, to the point of living with for several months. She and I are breaking up, have broken up, but we continue to see each other. In the last few days, she's told me how difficult it is for her, and the hint is more than a hint.

Self-pity doesn't appeal to me, but sadness is a true thing. I'm reluctant to express sadness. I suppose if I were sitting with you, right now, I'd feel the same, holding up the world, without tears, my sadness oceanic. At first, I felt it as depression. Then it was despair. Then I called it self-pity. Now I think it's only sadness. I don't have a woman to cry with. Not like they do on TV, or in some other town, so I'm crying with you. I feel the loss, and I cry.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

You linger somewhere between life and death, a voice, an idea, a dreamed image. Whenever I think of you, I remember our biographies, until I think deeper, and details fade to nothing. I'm left in atmosphere. *At most, fear*. Fear, that what you are, is not. I

see you in there, lost nation of tribes, lost detail of woman, lost magic in reason, I am going into silent Nadja, I do not expect to return.

Who am I writing to? You see, Nadja, I don't know to whom I'm writing. *To whom is for whom*, isn't it? Does knowing who you are clarify who I am? Does writing to several others, make me whole? I met a woman, yesterday, with black hair and black eyes, a woman who strides with intention, who stares darkly, whose face blooms in a smile, like a night-blooming flower. She talked about you, Nadja, before I had said a word. Two days ago, when I was reading Baudelaire, she sat across from me and tried to foment an introduction. I said nothing. It seemed inevitable.

Last night, she leaped on me. I said Baudelaire is good when you're feeling bad. She said he's good when you're feeling good, but you don't believe in happiness. Then she talked about Rimbaud and his local disciple, Bob Kaufman, and their kind of sanity. I said it was a challenge, going into a vision that's not called sane but is even saner than sanity. She grabbed my arm and clenched the muscle as if it was a caress on the skin. She asked if I had a car. I said no, and she was gone. I want to release myself into you, Nadja. I have to trust my poet-self and release it, even as I want to trust you, Nadja, even as you have released yourself into your silence.

Today, the San Francisco 49ers won the Super Bowl. I went out into the street, after the victory, and cars were flying by, arms waving, voices shouting, everyone holding hands in the air, finger-pointing to the sky, and I began to weep, to cry, to rejoice. The killings in this city, all the degradations and depredations, the abuse and the refusal of love were erased in the euphoria of this silly victory. I couldn't block the happiness I felt, that I haven't felt for so long. I felt elation in the heart, no matter the excuse, like crying while reading a bad novel. I don't want to get drunk tonight. I want to be drunk, to stay drunk. How awful to be so afraid, to be so aware of the jail of hearts, that I get free only by devices.

I was just hugged four times by a poet named Susan. I wish people would hug more. I would hug you, Nadja, if you were here. Always when we embrace, an encirclement of ice around my chest is broken. *Poetry is the way the words change when someone is feeling true in a new-thinking way.* That just occurred to me. I like it.

One should always be drunk. That's all that matters; that's our imperative need. So as not to feel Time's horrible burden that breaks your shoulders

*and bows you down, you must get drunk without ceasing. But what with?
With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you choose. But get drunk.*

Baudelaire

There's ice on my heart, and only for one good reason; that I have not been in a loving embrace with a woman. It's not carnal desire, or perhaps it is. *Love starts it, then the body, then the rest of the love, comes out. First the scout, then the meeting, then the whole tribe moves in across the river.* A very small woman has entered the café. My eyes re-describe the dimensions of the world so that I look at her in her full nature. *I see she's beautiful, and what a surprise to her, for one moment, to be away from the big ones with little eyes. If no one listens, be silent. If you find another silent one, be ready. All heaven may be breaking loose.*

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I want to maintain my amateur standing as a human being. I don't want to put an occupation on a tax form, not even *poet, artist, performer*. Do I want people to read my poems? Sure. When I was home in the Midwest, last year, I discovered something. People said, "What do you do?" I said, "I'm a poet." "Oh," they said and stared dumbly. After several repetitions of that, and I saw that poets do not exist. They once did, hundreds of years ago, but not now. There is no such thing as a real poet.

On TV, a star football player is interviewed about his recent injury. He says he will be operated on and then, rehabilitation. The sportscaster looks expectant, ready to hear of the player's anticipated return.

"I will never play again," he says, "I'm finished."

"Oh," says the TV man and stares at him as if he's a dead man. He abruptly ends the interview. The player is dead to the world. The world is dead to the football player. He can no longer write on his tax form, *Football Player*.

"How do you make a living?"

"I don't. I live a living."

"Where do you get money?"

"I impersonate a worker, until the fraud is revealed."

"What about all the workers of the world?"

"Most of them will never be revealed in their fraud."

Worker, here's your mask, your profession, your job. You will never survive without it. Nadja, don't you see what you've done? You've ripped off the last mask of speech. Now, they will try to weld a mask to your raw soul. INSANE. ANTI-SOCIAL. NEUROTIC. PSYCHOTIC. CATATONIC. BRAIN DAMAGED.

"Tell me, Nadja, what is your name? Your name is Nadja. Can you say Nadja?" Did our parents engender this? No more than any other representative of the fear of aloneness. of not belonging, of singularity. To be alone is to have a singularity. To be alone is to recognize one's existence and to be unwilling to have it violated. There's no lobby in Washington for that one.

"But what are you afraid of? This withdrawal, this shyness of yours, is only a snobbish disregard for others."

"What others? Tell me which others. Do you want to read my poems?"

"No, we want to interrupt you. We want to stop you from writing poems."

"Why?"

"Because poems do not allow us to interrupt you. If we read your poems, we must begin to think the way a poem thinks."

I painted hallways in an old folks home today. I really did. Old Russian Jews. Despite the Forty-Niner's victory, not one of the old folks stuck his fist in the air and said, "We're Number One!"

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I like invisibility. It's absurd, because I'm so well known. I sit in the same café, in one of two chairs, in the most visible spot, in the window wells. But I don't see myself sitting here. I look out. I see what passes. I don't expect recognition. I expect to recognize. I'm chastised by uncomfortable acquaintances, because I remain apparently unambitious. What a foolish thing ambition is. If you wish to become something, then become it. If you have to desire it and work for it, it's merely that someone else has a job, and you want it. Now, you're in a battle.

I talked to a poet who has twisted legs. He was born that way. "You adapt to it," he said. I said I've seen people with muscular dystrophy and cerebral palsy who, if I looked outside the ordinary, I could see that they moved with grace, in dance movements. He hadn't thought about it that way. He thought that, by grace, I meant spirit. I didn't. I meant movement.

Now that the local team has become world champions, they say the people of the city will feel a common bond and be friendlier to each other. They say crime probably won't go down, but people will feel safer, anyway. I was waiting for the bus with an unlit cigarette in my mouth. A man standing near me, said, "Want a light?" I showed him my lighter, and said, "Thanks, anyway." He said, "49ers! Number one! Right?" and raised his finger. I said, "Yeah, number one." Then he did a strange, shuffling dance on the sidewalk. Then he asked me for the time. Then, on the bus, he talked to himself and sang a song. He wore thick, dark, narrow glasses, like windows in a bunker.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

The guy in Irving Variety is so tickled when I come in, every two weeks, to buy my favorite pen, that, for me, he keeps the price at 69 cents, when, for everyone else, it's gone up to 94 cents. It tickles me, too. I told him that if I were smart, I'd buy several boxes of them. But I enjoy the ritual. It always delights and refreshes me to buy a new pen. He assures me that he has plenty. It's a Japanese pen. So is he. Japanese, I mean. He's not a Japanese pen. Unless his name is Niji Stylist. My new pen is buried in a bank of pens of all nations. Racy pens, nationalistic pens, colored pens.

I haven't written in a while. I got carried away with visions of apocalyptic transformation. Dogs bit me. Women shunned me. God wrote me a note: *Second Warning*. It's the fifth such notice I've gotten. I'm feeling humbler, today, more at ease in the world, and tired. I went back to work painting, on Monday. During the week, at night, I began re-writes on a play I began eighteen years ago, when I was working at the John Deere Harvester factory in East Moline. Sandy, who works in the café, who's a professional stage designer, designed a stage set for me, and I like it. It helps to know where your characters are. "It's 11PM. Do you know where your characters are?"

Anyway, on Thursday night, I was living with a conversation toward the end of the play, wherein an older worker tells the college boy, "Get out. Get out as fast as you can.

This is no place to be. This place is death." I'm always affected by my writing. It may be why I don't do as much as I could. On my way home, I was absolutely certain I couldn't go to work the next day. I was certain the guy I work for would say, as he said when I worked for him, three years ago, "Brooks is a flake, as always."

I didn't know, when I went to bed, that I was acting out the play. I woke up feeling great. I went to work and I had a good day. Amazing. I can't handle the excitement of anticipating artistic breakthroughs or any other kind of breakthroughs. I'll always slow down and sink back to the simpler business of process. A distance of a thousand sentences begins with one word. And, in my case, that word is I.

We've just come out of the *Me Generation*, the pundits are saying. It was the *Cult of Narcissism*, another name for the Seventies. Every decade lasts a couple of years into the next decade. Over the years, I've given myself a hard time about narcissism, but, like all knowledge, it begins with an idea, then the idea is popularized, and then it turns into a fad. The general public plays at it for a while. Then the fad fades when people realize it means real change. Then there's a backlash, and only a few continue on toward enlightenment. To continue, to persevere, when all around you are rejecting the path, because they only took it at face value, is a lonely business. It's much more lonely than staring at your wonderful image in a pool of water.

Several women in the café are checking me out. One woman touched my shoes to see if they are real leather. One woman leaned over and said, "Hi." One stared at me with big, sad, hopeful eyes. A watched pot never boils. I stopped talking to you and turned my attention to mortal women, and I was ignored. I turned back to you, and look at the reaction. Women are jealous of you. Or, women are on a wheel of desire, and it has come round, again. I must look to see how they are with other men, but it feels good, and, as Mao once said, "The broad masses of women must be aroused." The sun is shining. It's warm. There's the best answer.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

You're sitting in a café, wanting magic to make itself known, listening to the playful, half-serious conversations around you, and your cigarette drops from the amber ashtray, rolls an inch or two, and lies burning, like a greasy head on a dirty pillow.

Nearby, a woman is flirting with a handsome man. You see moods go by that you're not a part of. You're sitting on a chair, wide, flat, and loose in its joints. You're reading a French poet's spirit that makes you want to be freer, in a city that grants it only to drunks. *Wine is arms around you from the inside*, a lover who starts an argument every morning. Magic would melt you to minuscule caresses. The woman nearby would like to kill some man, not with love, but a composite man designed by a magazine. "I've known so many like you," she says to the handsome man. A sign in the window of a car, at the curb in the street, reads, "This is NOT an abandoned car." Your sadness couples with a pheasant feather on a woman's cloche hat. You think about tomorrow, like a list of advice. Magic is called magic, because it's never learned.

I must be getting ready for the big one. Every approach made to me I rebuff, and every approach I make is rebuffed. I am unfamiliar with this rounded out rejection. I feel somewhat annoyed, often angry, frustrated, and then pleased. My sobriety reaches all the way inside the extremities of my drunkenness. My eyes, hands, and tongue don't complete the gesture of action. Something essential is withheld.

I look at attractive women, and I can't escape my realistic imagination. I've seen too much to keep up the fantasies that used to override everything else. When I was a teenager, I undressed every woman I saw. I became anxious, because I couldn't stop my imagination from performing that curiosity of desire. I've come somewhere else, finally.

The little entertainer that Mother raised me to be is dying. The little worker that Pappy raised me to be is called upon only to function at survival. The poet I was, all the way through and have made myself to be, is emerging, erasing his potential. The song and dance is over. If you stop the song and dance, you don't get paid, and you don't get laid. Human beings are remarkably good at putting on a show. I'm no longer reflecting people back at themselves, dazzling them with my coat of mirrors. I've stopped apologizing for being what I am. The flip side of apology is, "I hope you like me. Want to see me dance and sing?"

The hardest thing I had to deal with, when I was dealing with Nanci, in our year together, was the nagging feeling that I didn't believe her. There's a dark side to her, maybe even suicidal, and yet I always felt it was problematic. Her family abused her, I know that, but after a year watching her acerbic, melancholic nature, their abuse seemed like a red herring. The dependency on that family abuse and her adamant refusal to escape it, left me out of connect with her. Nadja, I think some things are truly

to be blamed on family, on circumstance, and some things are beyond, outside, unexplained.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

Yesterday seems garbled. For the first time in many days, I'm at my writing, fearful I may be interrupted. I was going to go see three Russ Meyer films, in order not to think about sex. Russ makes sex movies with big-chested women. Last night, an attractive girl, across the room, began making eyes at me, and I became overly excited. She approached me. The guy I was sitting with said she wanted to fuck me. Well, if she did, she chose the future for its fulfillment.

She sells parts, on the road, for Mercedes Benz. She stands by the highway, waiting for one to break down. We made sexy parts jokes. *In gear. Racing engine. Breaks. Accelerator.* She said *breaks*, and I said *accelerator*. Once again, my eagerness over read the situation. The guys around me thought I should go for it. I did, until I ran out of gas and went off the road into the ditch.

"The bitch," I said, walking home.

She wasn't a bitch. *It* was a bitch.

Instead of staring at naked boobs in a theater, I've come out, put up my *Occupied* sign, and I've gone to writing. I'm content, this early in the evening, to anticipate the unknown. I had a good day at work, but there's no work, tomorrow, so I have a nice, long, easy night ahead and plenty of sleep tomorrow, and then, tomorrow afternoon and night. Chris thinks I need a change of scenery. Chris needs a change of scenery. This paragraph needs a change of scenery.

I got it. There are two tables I prefer. I was sitting at last night's table. Bob was sitting at the other one. He got up to move to a larger table and grinned at me. "OK, OK," I said, in a voice of resigned bemusement, and moved all of my belongings way across this state of being, and now I've gotten the scenery I wanted. I think every writer is afraid of quiet times in the imagination. Except for the ones who know the great profit from quiet. I keep forgetting what you've done, who you are, and where you are. I hope that's good. I imagine you have people hovering about you, with bated breath, concerned, watching and waiting, probing, questioning, inspiring themselves with you.

If they'd just leave you alone. But how can they, when it's their life's work? How successful they would be, in their life work, if they could simply embrace the ways of the mind? I'm writing these letters to you out of my own needs. You will do what you will do, and I can't change that. Once again, I'm grateful for that simple truth. Before I sat down to write, I talked to a woman who asked me about writer's block. She finally decided it was emotional. So much of her heart is involved in her research, so much is at stake in its reception. I realized that I, too, have suffered a hesitance, a writer's impediment in writing to you and in writing the play, *Harvester*, that I'm working on.

I rush in, fingers and thoughts fly. Then I realize how much I care about what I'm doing, and I start to block the very writing that comes most easily, that's most involving and most enjoyable. I told her to leave off worrying, take her history of completed work as fact, and let the moment dictate to her. I felt my own advice, and now I'm talking again, speaking, imagining.

After thinking about these people I imagine hovering about you, I'm enclosing five bucks. Send them out for a beer. I'm stuffed full of good food; milk, banana, chicken soup, bagel and cream cheese, cucumber, blackberry jam. I feel healthy, tonight, since I passed by Russ Meyer's melon patch.

The woman I was talking to said that in fifty years, people will walk by on the street, and point to my table, and say, "Look. There's where he wrote his famous book." I'm going to do some reading now. Maybe I'll find some pearls, emeralds, succulent berries, bon mots. I'm not hanging up. Lay the phone down by your pillow.

Here's a quick addendum, to say that whenever people come in that I don't want to talk to, I have to throw up an invisible shield to keep them away. The smart ones know. The dumb ones sit down and rattle on, until, after many minutes, they say, "Oh. Am I interrupting something?"

I learned that the name Rachel symbolizes the contemplative life. My daughter's name is well chosen, perhaps. I have so many active friends and lovers, when I'm most at home among the contemplative. Dante says that love is that which moves anything in the direction of another.

A little girl wandered up to the counter, saying "Can I have a bite," to everyone. She stood two feet below the counter, shouting gaily, "Can I have a bite," over and over. I thought, *what a sponge this kid is* and *what a rotten mother she has*. Then her mother, with a bedraggled look, went to retrieve the child, explaining to the girls behind the

counter that she wasn't saying, "Can I have a bite?" but "Can I have a sponge?" She got it, walked back to her table and happily cleaned up her spilled soda.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

A girl on the bus is idly reading a book, by the door. I read the title, upside down, *Falling Bodies and the Birth of Mechanics*. Sometimes, I get a fog on my glasses and not my eyes, like a distractedness from the outward appearances of things. I mean, how and when they appear. I see through. I see to. I see among. It's the seeing of being, not looking. The innate extenders of being are very powerful. One does not *work* to be in contact with the being of others and other things. For those who work very hard at contact, for those whose failure at human contact is epidemic, even endemic, I must seem easy pickings. I become someone without boundaries. Accordingly, my fog can envelop me, and I can be here, near to everything like sound in a thick-aired swamp, and still be undetectable. Then, I don't need any protection. It's only when I feel *obligated* that my head aches.

It's like this. A wild animal with its keen senses is put in a zoo. It is in shock to be unable to blend in, to look and see so many eyes seeing it too easily. Every zoo animal is like the wounded. Its vulnerability comes on it like a stunning blow. But it isn't wounded. Nothing natural informs its critical weakness. It has no clue, in the senses, why it can no longer hide and seek, blend and extend, hear and fear. An animal in a cage is entranced by the light of the unnatural attention it feels on itself. It paces back and forth in a trance. It is forced to create an ego. It's given a name, a personality, a limited world, a regimen, a routine. It's given a fucking job, for Christ's sake.

"This animal, ladies and gentlemen, is a tiger."

When the cage door is left open by accident, it suddenly becomes *the* tiger. "Watch out for the tiger!" If it manages to truly escape, it becomes poetry, like osmosis. It roams in the heart of nature, unnamed, original in every step of its paw upon grass or twig.

I've taken to wearing low-heeled, crepe-soled shoes. The soles of my boots wore down, then they fell off, and I couldn't afford to get them fixed. The boots made me taller and noisier. I liked them, because they gave me position in the world. These shoes

give me an ease and an invisibility that I wanted. If I'd really wanted the boots fixed, I could have managed it, but with these shoes, I feel closer to the ground, better balanced, more fluid. I'm not striding these days. It's just as well, if not better than well.

Jeff said he was getting sick.

I said, "Oh, my god, I'm getting well."

I talked to a 65-year-old writer, Larry Fixel, today. He's having his teeth worked on, and he proposed to his dentist what he thinks of as a three-word world. He got the dentist to agree that he was stabilizing, no longer deteriorating, and may soon be improving. A goes through B to get to C. I told Larry about you. I said I see your choice of silence as stabilizing. Deterioration was before, and its goal was suicide or madness. What improving is, I can only imagine.

I have a friend, Chris Blum, who wears me out with his apocalyptic cynicism. He gives the world twenty years. If he's right, he's dead. If he's wrong, he's still dead. When he was up getting a Calistoga, I told Richard I couldn't listen to Chris for very long.

"Why not?" said Richard, who is himself cynical.

"Because it doesn't suit me."

I surprised myself with a Christian reference.

"It's my job," I said, "to light one small candle, not blow them all out."

Between the active and the contemplative is the creative. Your silence is my night forest. I am your tiger. Poetry is our bright burning. Dear Nadja, I answer your silence with my love.

(Later) An intensely unsettled and dissatisfied woman, Shelly Stein, came in and presumed to sit at my table. I know her to be a talker who probably wants to get laid. I think she'd really like it if I desired her, but I don't. I gestured with my hands that I was tented by my writing. She was abruptly forced to find another table. On her way out, I smiled, and I was about to apologize for appearing rude, when she said, wistfully, with a spiny backbone to it, "I hope whatever it is you're writing makes you a million dollars."

She drawled, dreamily the word *million*, as she left.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

Widowmaker. *She was the roughest, toughest critter, never known to be a quitter, and the pride of all the cowboys, so they say.* I sang that, all day long, while painting.

Remember? It was Mark's favorite recording, when he was a kid. Pecos Bill.

When I got off work, I walked over a block to Jim Baird's house. He lives on Pierce in the Marina District, in a garden apartment, or in-law apartment, as they call it. Jim's a teacher at City College, and he's a big hit with his female students. He was glad to see me, but he warned me at the gate in his bathrobe that it was an unusual situation, but he didn't mind if I didn't. I hesitated, and then went ahead. In the middle of the one room apartment, lying under a blanket, was - I was introduced - Yolanda. Attractive, young, pink-fleshed, shoulder-naked, Yolanda. Jim gave me a cognac, then a second, and we discussed the 49ers. Before I took my leave, I begged their forgiveness for the intrusion, and he and I made vague plans to get together, I took another casual look at Yolanda, said *nice to meet you*, and left. Ten minutes later, I thought, "Thank God I can't remember the sensation of flesh. I pity the poor soul who can remember the ecstasy of the flesh. Like pain, it can't remain in the memory, except as an imitation of a memory."

When I got home, I went to the grocery store across the street from my place for a can of V-8 and a can of chili. In the open door came a lanky, swaying, disheveled guy, with a towel around his head. At the counter, I saw he was bloody under the towel, with dry red hands and caked blood on his face. He turned and looked at me. I looked at his eyes. He didn't seem too far gone. He was buying a half-gallon of white wine and a six-pack of beer. He said to me, ironically, "Do I look that bad?" He stumbled out onto the sidewalk and up the street. The Iranian behind the counter told me the guy had had a broken back. He wore a brace. He speculated, "Maybe they're making a movie." Yeah, maybe. I imagine the guy saying to his girlfriend, "I gotta go to the hospital," and she says, "Yeah, OK, but wouldja go get some wine, first?"

Jeff just came up to me with a quote from Louis Auchincloss, to the effect that salvation for shallow people is probably being told that their fears are shallow, too. Last night, exhilarated from writing, I went into Yancy's Saloon and sat at the end of the bar. I talked to Dan the bartender. Dan and I both went to Grinnell, ten years apart. He spotted me wearing my old letter jacket. He's even sought out and read my poems. I told him I was looking for an external world that corresponded to my internal one, but I wasn't having any luck. Denay, the waitress, was talking to a friend of hers over my right shoulder. Denay said her problem was that whenever she started talking about what mattered most to her, that is, her beliefs, it was too heavy for most people.

"I'm game," I said, "It's not too heavy for me."

It turns out she was talking about reincarnation and karma.

"What about all those people drowned or washed out by the recent floods in Santa Cruz and Marín?"

"It's group karma, from their decadent life style."

"Oh," I said.

"Jesus," I thought, "This is what's too heavy? The only thing that makes it heavy is that it's such a load of shit."

The thing that gets me about people who say they've had past lives is they never say, "I was a dumbfuck who never had a good thing to say, never did anything worth mentioning, and I spent my entire threescore and ten years staring at the ground, hating everybody." I wonder how many people used to be Cleopatra, or a gladiator, or an Indian, "Yippee-aye-a, aye-a, yippie-aye-o, the roughest, toughest critter, west of the Alamo".

It's open-mike night in the café, and I'm risking post-party blues again. I'm up for a social good time. At the same time, my writing hand is moving like a goosed pig. I told Richard he should go up to the counter and buy out all the cold Rainier Ales.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because there are more, but they're not cold."

"What?" he said.

He thought I had said, "They're morbid, but they're not cold," so he said, "I don't want to hear any of your poetic shit."

People pile in the café. The music does it. The capacity for vitality is catalyzed by the music. An attractive woman comes in, and Richard says, "Good evening!!!"

Richard has a social style like a foot in the aisle. People all around. More later.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I could not get an erection long enough to keep it. Richard introduced me to a woman I liked immediately. Not pretty, but comfortable. We ended up at her house. I wrestled with her all night, enjoying it, but not coming. I slept very little, and the next day was a wreck. Paint fumes sobered me, but it made me mournful. With less sense than time has given me, I would have tried to see Nanci, after that. The current situation sends me to the past when the future closes off.

I went back to reading W.H. Auden's essays. I read for a while, and then I was compelled to say something to you. Auden says that the Muse despises those who will not stand up to her. Without realizing the connection, I was compelled to take a stronger stand in regard to you and your situation. Since you are the muse of these letters, silent as you are, my first impulse is to argue. Instead, I wonder. I know to whom I'm writing, but to what am I writing? What is it, that all of this is meant to say? Nadja, I mean to say, *Live!* A woman last week said to me, "You stir things up, and you calm things down." I got a kick out of that.

A wiry little man, who likes me, woodchucks around the café, chewing on things he sees. He said to me, the other day, before open-mike night got rolling, "I never feel like things are quite real until you show up."

I don't think it's through any great virtue of mine that he feels that way. I think it's because I like being alive, and I want others to feel that way, too. Sometimes it degenerates into becoming an entertainer or a cruise director, but at least, in my poems and some of my other writing, and in some parts of my life, there is an active affirmation. Nadja, I want my letters, i.e., all of my writing, to be an affirmation. You are, in part, responsible. When we were growing up, you were an inspiration. You exhaled vitality, and I breathed it in. All I want to do is return the favor.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

"Thirty days hath September, August, May, and December, All the rest have thirty days, or more, except February, which has less." (Thanks to W.H. Auden, for the beginnings of understanding.) Ten days to 40 years. *Ten Days That Shook the Man*.

I went over to *Salonica's* on 24th, with Mike Raifsnider, last night. A trio (singer, piano, and drums) was playing. The singer did some light Billie Holliday. I like that way of singing. I hear it for a while, and I can do it. Today, I can't remember it or reproduce it. But I remember the words I made up.

*Sometimes, you come home, and you treat me right.
Sometimes, you come home, and you beat me all night,*

How can I call this love?"

Oh, and here's a country and western song hook,

*Every new first time
feels just like the last time.*

What I like about this writing to you is that the constraints of satisfying a restless and demanding audience fade from requirement to relationship. If it works, it works. If it doesn't, no amount of working at it, works. Nadja, you and I have been together for 40 years. Isn't that enough time for me to relax?

"Quick, doctor Freud, give me an anima!"
"Relax, son, you've got your sister for that."

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

This kind of writing is what I can no longer do in my poetry; be personal. The wood that I make poems of has to be dried over time. This is where I get to bend saplings and whittle. Mike asked me, last night, what turns me on, and I said, *love and beauty*. Today, I thought to add, *youth*. I've been assiduous in wanting to allow other considerations, but in matters of eroticism, there is no legislation.

The other day, in my usual half--embarrassed way, I was wondering why I spend so much time reading about the lives and reflections of other poets. Larry Fixel suggested that we need an inner community, a circle of like minds that aid and reinforce us in our relative isolation. That may be the great use of all literature.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja, aka Nah Ja,

Janice bummed a light, calling me *Rah Ka Shay*, which she said means *Keeper of the Flame*.

"What sub-culture is that?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said, "I picked it up from a movie when I was six. I wanted to name my first horse that."

Waiting for the bus, I picked up from the sidewalk one of those small, Christian propaganda sheets, *Dear Brother*. I got to thinking about the good stuff, like Jesus' line, "Whosoever gives up his life shall receive it."

That's a tough one. You can't play it, like a gamble.

"Well, I'll give up my life, like cards on the table, in the hopes of getting it back, tenfold."

You have to give it up. Period. You can't hedge the bet.

Keats said fame is like a wayward girl. She'll only pay attention if you ignore her. That's kid stuff. Half-assed salvation.

I have to say I'm working on giving up my life, fame and fortune, etcetera. It's a big etcetera. This is what I called *faith's arduous achievement*. When I wrote that, in a poem about quickie Christians, I wasn't sure what I meant by arduous. It's not through effort, or at least, recognizable effort, that one achieves faith, but there is a toiling, in the spirit that lives in a spiritually mediocre world, to put it kindly.

I swear, people have been telling me I'm a nice guy, lately. It's been seven years since I last considered myself a nice guy, since I wrote *Savage Amusement*. I'm not sure how it happened, but once people start telling you how decent you are, it's appealing to keep it up. Back then, it was, *No more Mr. Nice Guy*.

I was pursuing not being pushed around, asserting myself, saying no to jerks, recognizing my dark side, taking the hesitancy out of my poems, trying to stop hinting at the knowledge and wisdom I had but wasn't admitting to in my work. That got done, but at a cost. Then, in love, I had to overcome my *need to be loved too much*, as Steve Schutzman called it. Awful rages. Misery. But, that got done, too. Mother said, two years ago, that I was too violent for her. She also said I was too sexy for her. I don't feel violent anymore, and I don't feel the violence on me. I don't feel too sexy, either.

I went up to a girlfriend's apartment, last night, celebrating her new poetry magazine, and we got naked and talked about love and poetry. I had no erection, despite the pleasure I was feeling. I told her it was a new phenomenon. She said I was probably getting ready for *the big one*. *I like that*.

I told her your birthday was July 7th and your name was Nadja. She said her middle name is Nadya, but she never uses it, and her birthday is July 6th, at 11:55 PM. I'm not making this up. This is pure psychic coincidence. My friend is like a little sister to me.

She's 23. Whenever I think about a new woman, I think about Nanci. I have an abiding feeling of loyalty. I've felt it before, with other lovers. It took me three years to get over my loyalty to Regina.

In a dream the other night I was in the back seat of a car, and a girl got in. We were sitting together and moving close. We were so close, so in tune, so in touch, that it became lovemaking. She said she lived upstairs from me and she'd heard loud music from my room late at night. All I could think was that I'd left my TV on when I passed out, drunk. It seems to me now that the message is, drunkenness is blocking my contact with women.

That same night, I dreamed I was standing on a precipice. Far below me was a river. A great plain lay off from the river. I fell from the cliff's edge, holding a small, up-rooted tree. The tree was about my height. It had a trunk, three inches in diameter, and a ball of foliage. I found that by maneuvering the tree, I could use it to stay in flight. As I flew across the plain, I lost altitude. At great speed, I realized I would have to crash into a bank of tall trees. I decided to cross-body-block a few trees at once and cushion the blow. At contact, I lost consciousness but regained it long enough to find that I had wrapped my arms and legs around one trunk. I lost consciousness and found myself lying on the ground. A woman's voice said I had 143 broken bones. But no one would help me. Eventually, I found I could move and finally, I stood up.

My friend, Sue, the poet/editor, said that trees are thought to be symbols for women. I got a little help from one, clung to another, crashed into many, was ignored by another, and survived alone.

The curious thing, right now, is the happy feeling of not being victimized by my own random lust. I used to be able to make love to any woman or girl I wanted to, who smiled at me. Or that I thought I wanted to. I'm still curious about women naked. Maybe I'll take to drawing them. That's the ambition of many years standing, but this prosody creates a contemplative pleasure that anticipates each new day, each moment.

I've been considering, for 5 or 6 years, putting together a one-man show culled from the letters of John Keats, but it's never come together for me. Tonight, I thought this book is my *Keats letters*, not intended to be great literature but expressive, nonetheless. None the less than literature? What is this, then? This, my dear sister, *is* literature. Don't you just love it? The problem in writing what the world wants is that the world doesn't know what it wants. It doesn't want anything. There is no world.

There's a full moon tonight. Despite that, the café is very quiet. What does *very* mean? *Very* is a golly word. Golly, the café is quiet. I predict it will get loose at ten, in half an hour. This prediction is without basis in karmic fact.

It did not happen. I'd like to lick someone's pussy, with the innocence of discovery. My innocence. Here's my poem for the passage of the last seven years. To the best of my knowledge, the azure blizzard is cold torrential rain.

*The azure blizzard,
of wanting to know every
goddam thing there is to know,
drowns out the innocence,
but innocence returns,
remembering nothing
of the storm.*

A born-again Christian sat down at the next table. He's warming up to his sales pitch by chatting amiably about cartoons and music, while making off-hand Christ allusions. A cartoon of Reagan, neck-deep in water, reminds him of a Christian song about *salvation* rising above the baptismal drowning man. When it finally gets to his head, it's decision time.

He's had one beer, to show what a regular guy he is. The guy he was talking to gave him a decidedly un-Christian cold shoulder, so he's gone. It's tough when you're carrying the *Revealed Truth* around in your back pocket, like a lump of plutonium, waiting for a reactor to show up. Or wise up. All the debate about what should or shouldn't be, is or isn't, can or can't be, is the crossword puzzle of religion.

Sometimes at night in winter or summer when the fog is in, Ninth Avenue, in this most pretty cosmopolitan city could be B Street, Billings, Montana, or C Street, Joplin, Missouri, with newspapers blowing against the curbed wheel of a car, cold lit windows of deserted shops, rooftops edged against the black night sky, the streetlight's automatic repetition of its three dot poem, a man's hurried walk to some other warm room. My eyes drop to a fitful drowsiness in the benumbing cold, in the apprehension of hungry dangers.

Good night, Nadja, I hope you sleep well. If there's no comforter, take my love and wrap yourself in it.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

Going home from work, I got off the bus at 16th and Dolores and cut across the boulevard, the one planted with palm trees. In front of the *historic* Mission Dolores, I came across a pair of crutches. They were dropped on the grass, as if, I imagined, during a miracle. Some poor soul had come to the church to stand with his mangled legs to worship St. Francis, to call for and then witness a miracle. I told Tom the story, so he told me one. Tom is my housemate. I've known him for twelve years. It's turned out to be a pleasant surprise to become his housemate, after all these years. He's a swell guy.

"Steve," he said, "the next time I'm making love to Joan Baez, please don't interrupt us, OK?"

He dreamt they were making love, and I apparently came in on him and Joan and spoiled the magic moment. It was a different house, like in the old hippie days, he said, with people coming and going all the time.

Now, I'm writing in the café, and Phil tells me, in a kind of invitation, "There hasn't been a wild and boisterous night in the café for weeks!"

Two cute girls approach my table to join the fun, and then opt for later.

I say, "I'm feeling good tonight. I'm up for it."

Dan says, "Steve has been known to make a spectacle of himself."

"It's been diminishing, as time goes on," I say.

The women are chatting amiably and looking around. Women absolutely run the party side of life, if not all of life, at least in the sense of the senses. Well, I hedged that curious generalization, didn't I?

Claire and Melody are discussing a mutual friend. Claire says he should be a doctor or a lawyer, he doesn't have the stamina to be a poet, he's unwilling to be poor, and being poor takes stamina; he's a penthouse poet.

"You have to suffer," Claire says.

"Steve sits and watches other peoples' suffering," says Dan.

"I have to go elsewhere to do my suffering," I say.

Claire has been having piano dreams. She dreams she has a piano to play. Dan says he has piano dreams, too, only they fall on him. A guy they call Nice Lee sat down opposite me, and suddenly I was plunged into a circle of hell. Lee is a most boring fellow. Dull is not bad. Dull people just sit there. Boring people insist on imposing their dullness on others. Mercifully, when I was up getting a beer, Ralph took my seat, and I was relieved. Bruce fixed me the largest turkey sandwich I've ever felt obligated to eat, and now I feel bloated. The place has stayed mild, not wild, so far tonight (He said, in his baited wait.) I told Clark, an old friend I work for, how much I'm enjoying myself these days, writing and working.

He said, "It's because you're playing." I almost took offense, feeling cut to the quick. I criticize myself for not struggling, in love and poetry, the way *true artists* are supposed to. Then he said, "It's your job to show the rest of us how to play. You're doing what's needed, restoring play to our lives, where it's missing."

His statement startled me, and I said, "Play may be more important than being serious. The serious is always there. What's substantial is either there, or it isn't. You don't need to work at being serious." He prompted me to go deeper into my own understanding. I'll stay near the surface unless something pushes me deeper.

The café is filling up. You know, Nadja, seven years ago, I filled many pages worrying about my physical and mental health. Now, whenever I talk about it, I stop. I was pudgier then, too. Today's the first time in months my belly has bulged. *I'll take another belt, and it's a cinch. I won't waist your time, gutting that issue. I'm sure you're in suspenders. Aha! A brace of puns.*

Quickly, I'll say that I've had not enough sleep, paint fumes all day, and beer at night. Add it up, and you'll see I'm less than sum would wish. But my attitude is sanguine. I'm like the doctor, wandering from rheum to rheum. Have patients, Dear Nadja. Soon, you'll be Nun the Wiser, my spiritual advisor. Did you hear about the poet who'd subtle for anything?

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

The former coach of the LA Lakers, Paul Westhead says, "My own personal love, something I've always wanted to get to, is a complete analysis of the art of poetry. I've been reading textbooks on the techniques of poets. I really think poets have the key to

many things. They capsule images. They see things exactly. Learning their methods can help in a lot of areas."

For instance, last night, I dreamed that large monkeys were eating large monkey fetuses. One of them said, "Well, I'll have to make a meal out of this," and began plucking the ears off, crushing the skulls in his shark-like mouth, devouring the innards with casual disdain.

I told Clark about the crutches in front of the church, and he thought the guy probably had been beaten and robbed. Clark is a realist-pessimist, a student of History. He says he enjoys romance because it's serious play.

I saw a friend of Nanci's last night, and I had the urge to ask her how Nanci is. I didn't. I wouldn't have known what to do with the answer. I've been coming to this café, every night, to write, for sure, but also, looking for love. As a classmate said, one January, as we sat in the college student union, all of us looking up every time the door opened, "We're all waiting for the magic person." I'm getting tired of this anticipation. I haven't been doing other things that I could be doing so I could be in my chair waiting for you, waiting for her. I was angry, this morning, and I had a sharp tongue, last night. I've been nice, not drunk, not lustful, working steadily and reliably, paying my bills. It may be time to eat a monkey fetus. I'll be laid off painting, tomorrow, and when I learned that, I could taste the metal in my mouth, like sucking the chrome off a trailer hitch.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

It's good to hear the entreating silence of your ears. I'm at the Café Durant, in Berkeley, upstairs, in the open air, overlooking the street. I'm having a beer, nursing the kind of hangover where I feel fine but don't function on all cylinders. I jumped up and had a very good time last night, open-mic night. The poet named Sue got up and read some of her poems. I introduced her. Terribly sincere, meaningful paeans to the self-righteousness of youth. She was thrilled and sat on my lap and hugged me. Then, I flirted with Barbara for several hours. We agreed we'd like to make love someday, and she went home.

Here in this university town, there are several boys tossing a football on the street below. That's good, because quarterbacks have to learn to throw in traffic. A

professor of language has been visiting with three of his students at the next table. As he stood to leave, he said, "I'm sorry I couldn't come earlier and stay longer. Well, I must go and earn my daily bread. We should, um, do this again, sometime." His students did not respond to his lonely appeal, as naturally unconscious as they are. Loneliness comes with consciousness. *Isolation in the midst of*, as it were. He was embarrassed and hurried off. The students immediately dove back into their appropriately stimulated discussion.

I must tell you, Nadja, I'm afraid for my letters to you. Since Barbara and I have begun to disintegrate our friendship into intimacy, or to put it another way, since I've found someone to talk to, I'm not sure what effect it will have on my talking to you. I anticipate that, at best, it might make my letters better, weeding out casual, throwaway banter, and add in that strength that comes from real, in-the-flesh caring. I am equally cautious about Barbara. I don't want her, or anyone, to take away the energy I need for you. This is premature, because she and I are still unconsummated. That's a cover word for making love and the ensuing entanglement that makes me reluctant to disclose privacies. She knows about you. Where are you, Nadja?

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I got a few words from you, yesterday, a very few. The note read:

Steve Paris Nadja

Barbara and I went to the Indian Center on Valencia to watch Brazilian music and dance. I thought your note might have read, *Steve Rio Nadja*. I was wrong. You're in Paris. I think I know why. Let me guess. Since you're in Paris, and you can't speak French, and you refuse to speak English, it's close to silence and close to the beginnings of language. No one will fault you for saying little. Perhaps, you've moved into a hotel or a neighborhood filled with Polish refugees, Solidarity exiles from martial law, none of whom speak English or French. There, you are entirely protected and yet free.

I'm glad you got some money from your ex, Barry the lawyer. You can wave money in the patisserie and pick up a croissant on a drippy Parisian February Sunday. Now, I'm a foreign correspondent. It's drippy in SF. Herb Caen, this morning, records a poem written by a man named Frank Crow, "Roses are red, violets are blue, I'm schizophrenic, and so am I."

My other housemate, Carlos, was one of the musician dancers in *Batucaje*. After he danced, a beautiful black woman danced, and it was a quantum leap she took. Carlos was OK, but when that woman flew onto the dance floor, surrounded by an arcing throng, executing rapid steps, all other dancing faded to a fast walk. The band drew back after her extraordinary art and held a rhythm for twenty minutes or so, while the crowd broke into dance. We danced and danced. Then we went home and talked and made love and got up and talked and made love, and I still feel platonic.

I'm talking to Eric and Robin. Eric has been comparing law school to a cult, like EST. I've seen that in my friend Mike. Now that he's a practicing lawyer, he's changed. He's become staid and boring. He was going to throw a massive birthday party for me. He used to go on at length about my greatness and its reward: his party. Recently, suddenly, he palmed the party off on Rich Shuggle. Richard went skiing last weekend, and he hasn't been seen since. Mike's excuses are odd. He's too busy. It would cost too much. Barbara told him that a catered party would be inappropriate anyhow. Call it a BYO and open the door. Big deal. I think it has to do with Mike's lawyerization. He's now a soldier in good standing in the corporatocracy. He's been incorporated. A woman court reporter sat near us. She lives in Sausalito, jogs every day, and has her whole being groomed. The guys think she's interesting. Bill said he thought she was spacy, with her brain locked in at an oblique angle. It reminds me of a woman I once knew who was always in some kind of space or another, a thinking space, a working space, a loving space. One day I asked her how she was doing, and she replied, "Really good. I'm in a really solid space, these days."

Last night, when Barbara and I were dancing, we had to contend with her bag. She was afraid to check the bag for fear of losing her passport, among other things. I took the bag, a leather, saddle-bag type, with a long strap, and I slung the strap across my chest, so it hung in the small of my back. I joked, "Now I can say, 'Last night, I danced with an old bag.'" It was funny but not that funny. This afternoon, I read that women discard their old bags because of that very connotation. Am I going out with an old bag? Does papa want a brand new bag? I think so. Barbara and I kept grinning at each other

sheepishly as we tried to be passionate. Pleasantly happy was the peak of the experience. The least little distraction, and I lost my erection. And I didn't care much, except for the missed satisfaction, for both of us.

The last time Shelly Stein came in the café and wanted to join me, I waved her off, because I was writing. She was miffed. This time, I was between impulses, so I waved her in. We sat in silence. "Champagne and cocaine, that's a nice combination," she said.

"What brought that on?" I asked. She shrugged.

"Just uncorked it, huh?" I said. Then I added, "Uncorked and uncoked."

Sherry said she ached all over.

"I need a full-body massage," she said.

What other words there are for that? It's great not being able to get it up for all these semi-attractive opportunities. I'm tired of Texas Chain Saw romances. Another woman named Barbara sat down with me. She's a psychologist and, in the course of our talking, I described Nanci a bit. She picked it up and laid out for me the type called neurotic-hysteric, i.e., unresolved oedipal complex, inability to maintain long-term meaningful relationships, seductive but often hates sex, global thinking, impressionistic fits of melancholy for no reason, defensive.

"Jesus," I said, "it's amazing how people actually fit these types." The positive side of much of the list is appealing, and much of it I can identify with. I described you to her. She was impressed and certainly didn't see you as anything but sane, but she did think you were narcissistic.

"Artists are often narcissistic," she said.

"Yeah, artists and other people," I said.

The Sixties was the *We Generation*. The Seventies was the *Me Generation*. I ventured that the Eighties would be the *It Generation*. Consciousness goes from the group to the individual to the universal. The artist goes from ego to narcissism to the universal. Any artist has to develop his or her own voice or vision and along the way acts like an insufferable hot dog and then is a doubter. Anyone who wants to reach universality must pass through stages of self that seem false. Anyone may be arrested at any stage. Anyone going through the ego, then through narcissistic or selfish stages, will draw judgment. "What an asshole. What a jerk. What's his problem?" Because he himself will not know if he believes in the process, or if he's doing the right thing.

As you can see, I've been accused, directly, and by inference, of narcissism. Clinically speaking, the neurotic narcissist is not conscious of others and will take any

slight, imagined or real, as a crushing blow. On my way back to the café, after going home for dinner, I ran for a trolley. I got on and sat down, checking my lungs, heart, and legs. Not bad. A guy, across the aisle, watched me. He was a hard-looking son of a bitch, young, with close-cropped hair, baseball cap, army boots, and cold eyes. There were only three or four people on the trolley, and he was spun around, looking back at me, staring. I had my fur-collared coat on, and I presumed he thought I was gay. I couldn't decide if he was a fag or a fag hater. We both got off at 9th Avenue, he by the front and me by the back door. We crossed paths, and I was prepared to kick the shit out of him, if he tried anything. On the trolley, his aggression made me self-conscious and nervous. I matched his hard gaze and his body rigidity. When we passed, he said, in a surprisingly soft voice, "See you later." And I didn't say, "What's your fucking problem, asshole?"

The question I ask myself, after Regina and Nanci, is, why do I find these women so appealing? Don't all men find them appealing? I know it's a nearly impossible situation. So, I've set myself up again for the question. I have no interest in ordinary women. So, I'm not in love with Barbara. So Nanci is screwy, and I loved her, but I couldn't solve her puzzle. So some stupid jerk on the trolley thinks and acts weird.

My sister is in Paris, living with Lech Walesa. I'm in San Francisco, dreaming of Paris. Are you getting plastered in Paris, Nadja? There's a skinny broad with no tits, sitting across the room, wearing a T-shirt that reads, "Reach out and touch someone."

"Hello, hello, Nadja, are you there? It's a bad connection. What? I can't hear you. Can you hear me? What? All right, I'll keep talking. I hope you can hear me. I'm glad you're in Paris, but now you're even farther away. My imagination can't keep up with you. It was easier before. Are you still there? Can you hear me? I'm sorry. I have to hang up. I can't afford this call. I'll keep writing, I promise. Goodbye. OK? I love you. Very much. Maybe I'll come to Paris. Bye. Nadja?"

Nanci gave me what looked like an expensive cigarette lighter last Christmas. There was a sailing ship on the side. The thin strip of metal, that was the embossed ship, came off. The glue didn't hold. I'm doing the impossible, Nadja, if not the absurd, if not the ridiculous, if not the stupid. My love is the muse, my work is poetry, and my reward is unlikely. All the talk is doom or distraction, and here I am, living for a future of virtues.

"The nightingales won't let you sleep in Platres." (so says George Seferis)

"That's beautiful," I think. Then Nice Lee gets up to leave.

"Jesus, I feel depressed," I think.

Lee says, "Whatcha reading, Steve?"

"A book," I say, softly, but harshly, not beautifully, but like nightingales in literature. Sunday is my traditional night to howl at the moon.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I have two friends, Mike and Susan, both writers. Susan wrote an article about their life that was published in *California Living*. The letter response was amazing. In the article, she had described the difficulties of living as writers on food stamps, with him driving a cab and them taking care of his two kids, part time. She described buying cheap beer. Dozens of letters came in, lambasting them for being slothful leeches, parasites, and bums.

A woman I know, a painter, asked me if I thought there were people who are unable to live in this world. She was talking about a poet friend who'd had himself committed in New Jersey so he could get some peace and write. I thought she was asking about me. This is obvious, I suppose. After the narcissism bit, after thinking about my thwarted love life, my marginal life as a poet, and yours as a solitary exile, I could hear the accusatory condemnations roiling up from the backwaters of my experience. I got to thinking about how Middle America would react to your life and mine.

We don't have to answer to them. This book about you and me and the rest of the aberrant gang will have to do. Don't open until things have cooled down, when the people who don't pay any attention, except when they're threatened, have stopped paying attention.

Barbara is reading *Savage Amusement*, and she likes it. She didn't get anything done, because she was caught up in the book. She says it has an underlying sadness. The old inescapable *Underlying Sadness*, one of the great virtues of literature. You don't get anything done and you feel sad. Barbara's friend Craig called the Owl and the Monkey is a seedy place. I had just left one chair, because the Bug Lady sat down next to me. She takes a bath once a year, whether she needs it or not, and her hobby is picking real and imagined bugs off her body. The fragrance drove me away.

"It is seedy, I like it," said Barbara. I do, too. The door is open. Anybody can come through, and will. I didn't work today, because it's raining. The sequence satellite photos of the continental shelf looks like lace curtains in the wind.

Darryl Cox called me. He runs a house for homeless boys out on Hunter's Point. I went there to look at some rooms he wants painted. I was uncomfortable entering the *ghetto*, with its winos and pimps, buses packed with unemployed teenagers. I don't know the rules in poor black society, but I like Darryl. He introduced me to Willis, 16, bored, lost. Sitting in his purple painted room, he didn't want the color changed. It matches his psyche. After the brief visit, I walked off The Point, for miles. Today is Lincoln's birthday, so the streets were uncommercially deserted. I only had a dollar in my pocket, because the bank is closed. I owe rent. There's no work. It rained. I passed an empty field, and for a split-second, the smell of rain-soaked earth filled my senses with memories of Nebraska. I walked back and forth, inhaling the aroma.

The night I went dancing with Barbara, I rubbed on some of Michael's deodorant before I got dressed. Michael is another poet, whose room I'm renting. He keeps it as an office, which he visits once a month for ten minutes. I'm living in his bachelor room, while he prepares to marry and live with Judy on the other side of town.

Later, at the dance, I thought, "Jesus, somebody's wearing perfume." I pulled out my shirt-front and musked myself in the nose. Barbara looks great, sitting across the room with Craig. I think it's going to take me a while to get over Nanci. Being with Barbara has opened me emotionally. I'm vulnerable to the slings, arrows, and heartbeats of lost and found love. When Barbara mentioned sadness, it got to me, and now I'm feeling sad. *There's poetry in them there feelings.* I just re-read the line about the poet in New Jersey who went to an asylum so he could get some peace and write. It came out *peace and riot* in my mind, like the riot of color in a field of flowers.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadjadarosz,

Today is the last day I have left of my 30s. So far so good. I got wrapped up in a long conversation, last night, with Dan, the bartender, at Yancy's. Dan is studying to be a shrink. We talked about the good and bad of psychology. He said I had the non-obtrusive nature of a good therapist. We talked so long and well that I forgot to eat, and I forgot to drink. Barbara gave me a big hug on her way out the door, just now, as I write, and that feels good. Dan described primary and secondary narcissism, and

neither applies to you or me. I think I'm using the wrong term. Singularity is the term I kept using. What I mean is the pursuit of singularity, with creativity as the result.

A woman walks up to the counter and says, "I'll have five bi-sexuals to go."

John says, "You want those with mayonnaise?"

Lately, I've been seeing you move rapidly into café life, with its political discussions and perhaps into the passionate boudoirs of Paris. I imagine you've already made your first pun in Polish. Maybe you've gotten yourself into a real solidarity space. How many exiles are in your crowd? How many exiles does it take to screw in a light bulb? I imagine the Poles are bursting with radical, intellectual freedom, and I see you bursting right along with them. I envy you. Perhaps a dispensation from the Pope will unite us.

The only thing missing in San Francisco is a passionate sense of being *at* something. Dan asked me, last night, if I could leave SF, to go to some other city. I told him about going back to Illinois, last year. I summed it up, saying that because of family and familiar surroundings, I never felt lonely there, but I always felt isolated. Here, I often feel lonely, but I never feel isolated. And, I feel less lonely here than ever.

Paris has always seemed to be a congenial place. Barbara, who was born in Brussels, also lived in Paris, New York, and has travelled extensively. Her father lives in Columbia. She wondered if I'd ever been abroad. "No," I said. She said she thought I'd absorbed some character of the world, anyhow. That's nice, but I'd still like to go.

The women are coming and going in the café. There are boutique guerrillas, students, doctors and nurses, ex-hippie housewives. In my non-obtrusive way, I'm ever-so-slightly flirting with them. It's akin to merely enjoying life. Mickey and Joel came in. Both are writers. Joel gave it up for the nine-to-five. He acts ashamed, but he looks good. Mickey keeps plugging away, and he looks harassed. These letters have a life of their own, now. It's no longer crucial that you respond.

I want to say something about my thirties. Almost all those years were spent in San Francisco, going from grad student to writer-performer, from the poetry scene to seen enough, from married to fucking around, from obsessive-in-love to singularity, from ambitious expectations to commitment, from passion to persistence, from depression to breakdown, from breakthrough to sanity. I've changed, Nadja. I don't wear masks, anymore, except for fun. It was a real bitch. One thing I like is that I know a lot of people. I always have, and they smile at me. Nice smiles. There's a young woman, sitting near me, who's very attractive, and from all my experience, not my type. Barbara

has changed my ideals. I've always gone for the flashy women. This woman nearby is wearing rounded glasses, a blue suit with a lavender ruffled collar. She has an aquiline nose, expressive lips, open smile, soft, direct voice, high forehead, an innocence in her eyes. She's interviewing a young guy for some purpose. She hasn't glanced at me, so it's probably his presence that has her seem so appealing, but it's nice to see. She's quietly nervous, plucking at her fingers. Her purse is in her lap, as she bites her nail. The guy is vulnerable, because he's applying. She's got one pimple below her lower lip, pretty as her lips are. She's a micro-processor. I resolved that attraction by making the big move to a window seat. And then she left, to go live in Sunnyvale, I suppose. Nanci's brother, Sal, came in and sat with me. He tells me that Nanci cracked her mother's rib, giving her a loving hug.

"Some pretty tough broads in your family, Sal," I said.

Sal nodded, sagely.

"And very competitive with each other."

He nodded again.

"If you live with them," I thought, "you check into the Nutcracker Suite."

Are you a ballbuster, Nadja? I think not. Mother called me a heartbreaker, last year. I don't think so. Without an ulterior motive, without suppressed rage, or without misleading advertising, I don't think you can be all that harmful. Nanci's aunt Maria just came to the window and waved at me. Is this a conspiracy? If it is, I love the intrigue. Sal said he was going to talk to Nanci, tonight.

"I'll tell her I saw you," he said.

Sherry's old roommate just passed the café. Regina's friend Millie, who introduced us, called a few days ago. I ran into Debra's cousin, Jeff, on the 2AM trolley, last week. My vibes feel terrific, today. Hello, America. *Hello, World. Hello, Paris. Hello, Nadja.* I worry about ballbuster women. It's a hard addiction to break. I think I became a cuntbuster out of self-defense. My fighting days are over. When I met Regina, I told Paul I wanted to take on the best the enemy had to offer. No more enemies. I'm more and more attracted to gentle women.

It's later, and *The Mad Man of the Pampas* is snapping pictures. This old fucker, who smokes with a long holder and then coughs, runs across the street and takes a picture of the window dressing in the Riding High boutique. He drinks Rainier Ale and stands in the middle of the room, until he picks out someone to harangue in broken English about God knows what. He wears brightly colored shirts and chain necklaces

and a Greek cap. He rolls his sleeves up above his biceps. He's a watered down Nazi, if you ask me. He loves little kids and calls them *my friend*. I wonder.

Richard showed up, tonight, after two weeks absence, in fine fettle and expansive as ever. He bought me a beer and sat down to converse with a new woman. I went up to get my beer. He tells the girl that he and I have a love affair, and it rankles me. The guy puts me off as much as I like him, and his loud voice inclines me to tell him to stuff it. Check out those allusions. I'm aroused, and I tell him to shove it up his ass. I like Richard's willingness to talk about people in terms of love, but there's a perversity about him that's annoying. This is my last night to be thirty something. I feel like boogying down. I feel like booming.

Love, Steve

Dear Tiger Lily,

I boomed. I drank several Rainiers. I ran into Katie when she was cleaning out the toilets, and I said, "You shouldn't have said I was teasing you. It made me stop."

"I didn't want you to stop," she said. So, I didn't. I followed her into the storage room, and we *necked* for a while. It was great fun.

Richard and I went to North Beach, looking for Nanci, at the North Star, where she sometimes hangs out, but she wasn't there. Richard got drunk enough to forget where he parked the car. I left him wandering aimlessly after we'd circled dozens of blocks, and I went looking for Luc who turned forty this month, also. I couldn't find him, so I walked down to Market and took the bus home.

Today's the big 4-0. I got a card from Mother. She wants to know if I'm looking forward or backward. Then she says, "You know, the best part about being a Christian is that you can start a new life, anytime, and you can even become a new person." She included a note saying that Mark has decided to divorce himself from the family. She says it's *His Mother* that's at the bottom of all of his problems. She always refers to herself as *his mother* or *your mother*. She says Dad "...has cried tears."

I got a birthday call from Nanci. She says she's doing well but she's afraid of becoming hard. We talked about you. She liked you from the moment I began talking about you. I said I'd mentioned her in the letters. She closed off the conversation by saying if we talked any longer, she'd want to see me, and she couldn't let that happen. I'm a little foggy, tonight. I expect this day will pass into the next without incident.

Yesterday was enough, and tomorrow, I have to do a bid, and tomorrow night is party night in the café.

I don't understand why Mark wants to do Battle Royal with Mother. He's determined to kill her, at least metaphorically, or die trying. She's blind to her own psychosis, and he won't leave it alone. They are locked in a hopeless, downward spiral. It's *He doesn't love his mother* versus *She never loved me*. The thing that struck me about the family and the Midwest is the disinterest in self-knowledge. *The Bible. A Job. Marriage and Kids. Be Nice*. That's all she wrote. Remember Christmas, two years ago, when Mother didn't want to be recorded, because she didn't like her voice?

"Then change it," I said.

"I'm too old to change," she said.

Now she says, heavy on the hint, that if I was a Christian, I could become a new person. "Are you content with what you've done with your forty years of living?" she asks.

Nanci said she'd heard from Miriam that I was happy these days. I told her, "I'm not a tormented man." It feels good to think that, to say that, and to feel that. The wallpaper in the john has flowers on it, with their names. The two next to each other are *Narcissus* and *Tiger Lily*. It's curious to me that I don't go on about the family with you, but I'm glad I don't. I used to. It feels good to find out that one is beyond all that. Not above it, but past it.

I'm extremely jumpy, tonight. I wonder if it isn't bottled up emotion. When I was a tormented man, I was very emotional. Now that I feel sane, it's back to that kid I was, affected by everything, but unconscious of it's emotional impact. Wise to it, though. So, here goes. Every time I get one of these sad, veiled condemnations from Mother, I ride over it, but it hurts inside. And talking to Nanci was strange. I told her it was odd to talk about my emotional well-being in a conversation in which we were both being cool. It all came out cool. She agreed, but we kept to it.

Sandy, behind the counter, said, "You're awfully quiet, tonight, for a birthday."

I've been concentrating on the positive so much lately that I've hardly given a nod to the unsettling aspects.

Lee Strasberg died today at 80, and I thought, "I'm halfway to dead."

I'm starting to feel more alive. I'm reading *Lady Sings the Blues*, Billie Holliday's autobiography. It's good, and it's depressing. What carries through her highs and lows

(a lot of her life was horrible) is the singing. It's not in the book. The book is everything but the thing that gives the book its reason to be.

I think about my books, my prose, my poetry, and my life. Billie Holliday, that extraordinary human beauty, power, wisdom, accident, never had a moment's complaint. She never said, "I deserve." She felt rage, anger, misery, yes, but there's no petulance. Last year, after Mom and Dad and I went out to dinner, after I told them what parts of them I thought had gone to make up my life, his poetic sensitivity, her dramatic boldness, she had an outburst, going home in the Cadillac Seville, "I haven't gotten what I deserve!" she cried, pounding on the dashboard, her head lowered, her voice bitter. She almost screamed it. "My life has not turned out the way it was supposed to." Then she caught herself and dismissed the thought. She brushed it off like it was a bumble-bee, caught in the car by accident.

I can't say I'm satisfied with my life at forty, but I'm content in a satisfying way. I'm doing what this particular human being *belongs* doing. Whether or not I'm successful or singularly remarkable doesn't matter anymore.

"This is it, folks!" I feel like crying out in joy. I feel like crying softly, with joy, "I am". Oh, Nadja, my lily, my sister, I don't deserve anything more than this. I've put in the work to get to this point, and now I'm here. I've seen the future, and it works. On the radio comes Don McLean's song to Buddy Holly, *American Pie*, and, "That'll be the day, that'll be the day, that'll be the day that I die." But I won't die. I die into life. My youth is dead. I'm young again, but from now on, I'm young in the accident of each new minute. I'm young in my spirit, which should never grow old.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

"I come here, everyday, for hours."

"I come here, everyday, for coffee."

What a weekend. Nowhere to begin. So, I'll put it off for a minute and write a check for cash. \$35 to crisis. Tom is a constant surprise. I'd been trying all weekend to get a car or a truck to haul my painting equipment and ladders and Tom volunteered. I just put the kids on the train. They're coming up every week, and I've discovered a very simple, wonderful *device* for having a good time with them. *I look at them with love*, and

everything we do is an easy pleasure. We spent the day at the park. Jack and Rachel, big as they are, waded and played in the kids' pool in the Children's Playground.

When Jack got out, he said, "Well, that's my twelve year old fun." (He's fifteen and a half.) "I think it's great," I said, "that you kids play so easily. It's good to be able to play like a little kid."

Surprisingly, I did, too. I got on the swings and ran about, and a description of play needs more than that. It's not just playing; it's being caught in the play. It's play, not playing at. Loving them, I'm led to play. I did it intentionally, but doing survives intention and becomes being.

Before that, I drank, each night, for three days. Then, I stopped yesterday and today. And tomorrow, I'll be healthy. My brain is returning to full strength, and my thoughts quicken. I had another quick thought about the intention of singularity. But first, I just remembered that when I slept with a woman on Thursday night, I did not, at any moment, mislead myself. I enjoyed it. Every occasional moment of flight was replaced by pleasure. As a result, we were both satisfied. Even so, over the last few days, it was unsettling to be estranged from my habits and my usual self. I was eager for the kids to come, and when they did, I felt centered (I believe is the word).

The guy next to me borrowed my George Seferis collection of poetry and then told his friends he's begun writing poems. The problem is, he says, that you can have a strong feeling but not be able to convey it well enough to anyone else.

Intention. Doing. Being.

My thought on singularity came first as a feeling of guilt and self-indulgence, but quickly passed to resolve. The resolve is to continue to live this life. This life is a marathon, of say, 26 years, and I've just passed the point where the body wants to quit. I imagine death as the reward the king gives to the messenger from Marathon.

Noel just gave me bad news. The ten bucks I loaned him won't be coming in for a while. He got laid off.

I finished *Lady Sings the Blues*, and one line affected my perception of Billie Holliday. She says, "I never did set well with women." It reminds me of Regina and Nanci and Leah, women who know many men but have few women friends. They are women in competition, or women who grow up caught in the competition for men. It's none of their doing, but they start doing it, until they're undone by it.

The women, who are seen as the great Victors in the Battle of the Sexes, are at ease only with their own *echelon*, The Officers' Club of Actresses and Models, an

uneasy alliance of the Stunning and the Beautiful. Or they have a friend who's not in the competition by any stretch of the imagination. Or they rely on a protective mother.

It's 9:30, and for the first time in a long time, I feel alcoholic. The shit is in me, and as it surfaces, I feel unhealthy. I want to feel better tomorrow than I do. Tonight is the night Mike and Richard were going to throw me a *BIG* birthday party. Not tonight.

My little bout with wanting a beer passed. I had a bowl of soup, instead. I talked to Mark on the phone for an hour and a quarter, the other night. He called and gave me his side of the Mother-Son battle. Yesterday I read about thirty Afghans, who are seeking asylum in the U.S. *Seeking Asylum*, Nadja, that's what you were doing all that time in Baltimore. Mother doesn't mention you when she writes. It reminds me of when I went to the family reunion in Ohio, last year. Dave's wife, Jana, asked me what I'd been doing in San Francisco for the last dozen years. I said I was a poet.

"A poet!" she said, "That's great! But Steve, how come your mother never told us?"

Every time anyone asked her how I was, she always said, in her tight-lipped fashion, "Fine," and that was it.

"I don't know," I said, "You'll have to ask her yourself."

Just then, she walked by us, and Jana gave her a hard time, in the parlor at Aunt Marlowe's house, just off the golf course in Columbus, one of America's favorite cities. Her probing had no effect, because Mother doesn't approve of Jana any more than she approves of me, or you. She thinks Jana's not the right kind of wife. And of course, you weren't the right kind of a wife, either. *The World According to Gladys*. She's a male chauvinist. All women are inferior, except her. You and Mark and I have spent our lives surviving that sink-hole of a worldview. Unfortunately, for Mark, he survives by fighting.

I told him I was beginning to prefer gentle women.

"What?" he said, "You mean there is such a thing?"

Mother must have been sweet to you, the first few years. I don't know. I suppose I'm apologizing or justifying. I'm trying not to accuse you of being like her. You're not, but there's no reason for you not to be. Were you adopted? Was I? Are the Ps, as Mark likes to call his parents, why you didn't have kids? Mark wants to blame Dad for not standing up to Mother. But we both like Dad. I told Mark I thought Dad only had three choices - divorce, a lifetime of fighting, or giving in. He gave in. You and I and Mark did what? He battles, and we got divorces. Scott calls Dad's choice *love*. That's good.

Mark told me a story. After an argument about business, Mother said to him, "You hate me, don't you?" He had always said *No* before, but this time he said *Yes*. Dad was leaning over the sink, and he seemed to sob. Mark looked at Mother, and the two of them smiled at each other. Mark said she smiled, because he made Dad cry. I wonder whose anger has mother always anticipated, long before we were born?

The shit you lay on kids always comes from somewhere else. I imagine her father did a number on her. She never talks about him. Grandma was a saint, but Grandpa has disappeared from the record. And the credit, or blame, gets passed back up the generations like a daisy chain.

That's enough of that. I was tempted for a tenth of a second to write Mother a long answer to her unquestioned misery, but I won't do that. You and I are family, and Mark is next of kin, and Dad is a decent man, like an uncle. This is a turning point. You and I have both come out of our asylums. From now on, my voice broadens to include everyone of any readiness. Readiness equals Readerness.

"Not of sufficiently wide appeal", huh? Well, we'll see about that. I feel a resolve coming on. I've had boundless energy, lately, suppressed only by alcohol. I asked a sixty-year-old professor in The Little Shamrock (It's a popular neighborhood bar, just across from the park.) last Thursday, why I was so energetic, at forty.

"I don't know," he answered.

But I had an idea. It's because I want to make a move, I want to make my mark. I looked at the page of theatre offerings in the city, and I wanted to see them all. I have not had that desire, before. I've been cloistered. If nothing else fascinates me, I am amazed at change. Are there good plays in Paris? Yes, well, I can imagine.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

It's a beautiful, sunny day. I went to the park and watched a semi-pro baseball game. One batter crouched so low the ball was bigger than the strike zone. In the third inning, when the centerfielder caught a high fly ball, the announcer said, "That's two put-outs in this inning for Brewer." A guy on the bench shouted, "Yeah, one more, and he ties a record." Think about it. You'll get it.

I went home without drinking last night and woke up with boundless energy. I washed everyone's dishes, cleaned up the back porch, made a big breakfast, and

cleaned up the room I live in. I left the decorations up. Jack and Rachel threw a birthday party for me, yesterday. They'd already been out to the store, and when I went to take a shower, they strung red streamers across the ceiling. They had party hats, tootsie rolls all around like Easter eggs, and Perrier water they called champagne. They gave me a card and big smiles, and I hugged and kissed them and said, "You kids are great!"

"We know!" they both said.

I woke up, this morning, feeling resolute. I thought, "Well, now that I've convinced everyone, including myself, that I'm a recluse with no interest in conquering the world, I think I'll do just that."

I thought about becoming a comedian, after watching *Evening at the Improv*, last night. The comedians weren't funny, so I thought of going on stage and saying, "I read from notes, because I have a lousy memory. I can't pretend this stuff just pops into my head as I stand here." That still sounds like a good idea.

I'd like to understand what's wrong with America, the United States of. I read the local hot-shot columnist, Herb Caen, and one thing he either says, or shows, is "San Francisco has everything but..." *America has everything, but...* But I'm examining this beast from inside its belly. I think I need to get out. My horoscope calls for a change of venue and a great burst of creativity.

The café is crowded. It's likely someone will take the seat opposite me. Since I don't own the table, I'm open to the vicissitudes of patronage. First, the Madman of the Pampas hovers dangerously close. Now, Nice Lee is near. I'd prefer a total stranger. Uh, oh, sorry, Steve, you get Mr. Nicely. Why would anyone whose intention is entirely social, want to sit with an unsociable bastard like me is beyond my comprehension.

Maybe I'll become sexual this afternoon. Coffee, the thinker's drug, is not appropriate. Tea, the drug of meditation, is out. I'll have to make up a drug. An eyeball drug, the intoxication of attraction, the sensual secret wandering in the body. I feel like writing a poem or two.

Pause. Nope. No poems right now. Lee harrumphed and whistled and sighed, as he read, waiting, hoping for my curiosity to get the better of me. It didn't. A cute girl sat down at the next table, and Lee said, "Nothing against you, Steve, but I think I'll sit over there. I don't care for these window seats all that much."

"OK," I said. I feel like a beer. I'd have one, except I really do feel like a beer. I feel the lingering shades of beeriness.

(9PM) Whenever I try to imagine myself as a poet in America, it is as a poet *inside* America. Not a poet *of* America. I certainly am American, and I don't mind that. There's nothing to make me believe that because I'm American, I'm not a poet, but whenever I imagine the fulfillment of my life as a poet, I can't imagine it here. I can imagine going to another continent, country, city, and being recognized for being a poet and an American. If that simple recognition allows me to return to the United States with my eyes clear, I would be satisfied, not in the achievement of my work, but in the knowledge of my existence as an American poet.

I need a little distance. I need to come to Paris. The time is ripe and soon to be rotten. Something is rotten in the reality I'm surrounded by. I imagine ways of getting to Paris. I imagine I can only become alive to the image of Paris and then see the route that might be open to me. My eyes are open to the passage. I can't emerge as poet here, except by continuing this growth. Book me passage, my sister, rent me rooms, prepare my way with introductions, regale your Polish-French friends with stories, both mild and wild, about your brother, the American Poet. I need to sit quietly and anticipate.

Paris, I conjure you out of the asylums of America, dream city, more real than the real land of sleep, you are the sister city of my life. In you, I will be let out from imprisonment. Paris, I want you, home of my new heart. I'm at that point in the life of a poet when I have to leave my homeland. Now is the time, the time is now, it is time. My head's in turmoil, I spin toward Paris, I see foreigners, and they are American. I see a woman. I buy her dinner. She buys me dinner in Paris. I am alive, intently alive. Woman of Paris, in Paris Woman, I want you. Paris, you are the new home of my heart.

It's turning, Nadja. The guy I work for suddenly has no work. A woman nearby says, "You create karma." She seems to say, at least, that we are responsible.

"What about the karma of others working on you?" I ask.

"The café is here," she says, "you created it, I created it, we create each other."

I'm reading Nazim Hikmet, wonderful Turkish poet, in prison and in exile. My world is breaking loose and apart again. At least, the café is alive, tonight. Thank you again, my children, for my wonderful birthday party.

*One sits, in the afternoon, wishing for, like a picture in a magazine,
an infusion, hopelessly, more than a picture, sanguine, bloody, yes,
blood red, confused, infused, "Come to the Zen Center and face
the Wall." and what if one has been facing the wall for years?
I gotta get myself out of this place, one way or another.*

Joyce waved at me and said, "You were drunk in here, the other night. Do you remember our conversation?" I'm manufacturing life. I'm the karmic manufacturer of my Detroit. I sat with three ordinary American women, charmed by the movies, charmed by my drunken, antic voyaging. I looked out from within my eyes. I took excuse and removed myself. Is the charm only dazzle? Nadja, are we just having fun from fear, like practicing blindness in the darkness, before we dream another fantasy? The only thing that keeps me from becoming another trickster millionaire is this notion of truth. Charmer, trickster, actor, poet, are you dying for lack of lying? Are you earthbound for lack of flying? I won't get to Paris on the ground.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

Love, Nadja, where is love? Another question. What is love between two people? Perhaps the one question I will be asking myself, all my life. I feel frenetic. I went to the Café Flore, Café Gitane, The Clarion, La Bohème, and The Owl and Monkey. I had a cup of coffee everywhere, and I looked at women. I ran into Stan Rice, another poet, the former head of the Poetry Center at SFSU and husband of the vampire novelist, Ann Rice) at the Flore. He asked me about the crazy stewardess I went to Monterey with.

"That was seven years ago, Stan."

He told me he was going to the nursery school to pick up his four-year-old son.

"What four-year-old son?" I asked.

As you can tell, Stan and I had gotten out of touch. I told Stan I wasn't able, anymore, to romanticize women. I look at them, and I see the next hours, days, weeks, and months.

"You have the curse of Cassandra, the curse of prophecy," he said.

I need love. I need drama. Today, I think I need some more theatre. I mentioned my desire for Paris to Stan, and he thought I really ought to go. I proposed it as

metaphor, but I prefer it as goal. I'm manic. I'm 40. Maybe I have TB; that fevered state called *consumption* in Keats' time. This book feels bogged down in dissatisfaction, but dissatisfaction often precedes action.

I got a fundraising call from Grinnell, tonight. A freshman was sitting in a room with 25 others for three hours, calling out for money.

"I might consider it, if I had any money," I said, "Oh, well, I chose the life of a poet."

We chatted. At the end, he said there was a gorgeous blond saying "Hi."

I said, "Tell the gorgeous blond to write me."

He said, "Her boyfriend might not like that."

I said, "I'm sure he wouldn't."

It was a strange exchange. In *La Bohème*, I read through my collection of poems called *The Queen of the Rhumba*, and I was struck by the thwarted love spoken in many ways throughout the book. I told Stan I was done with ball bouncers. He said I should quit going out with such beautiful women. I agreed, but added that it was difficult, because I was attracted to beautiful women. He agreed. I said I was going to put an ad in the *Bay Guardian*, "Wanted, beautiful, brilliant, but gentle woman."

Later, in an imaginary dialogue, I answered the question, "What would substitute for all those qualifications?"

"Funny," I said to myself.

"I don't know what star I was born under," Stan said, "I'm getting paid for sitting here." He looked around at the café. Stan's wife got rich off her first novel, and he's a tenured professor. I said, "The progress of my writing doesn't have anything to do with my economic situation."

"Or the lack of progress, either," I added.

I'm so antsy, I want a beer. I stopped after a few, last night, and went home. Good boy. Smart boy. I found a bucket of fish or burritos or something outside a restaurant on my way home, and it looked like meals for a month. I dumped it in a trash barrel outside the Forest Hill Tunnel. Jesus, it stunk. It was making me sick. Can you believe that? I sat on the 44 bus with a bucket of rotten fish. It was covered nicely with aluminum foil, but as the foil began to rip, out came the awful truth. I was in that state of mind where I thought it all made perfect sense to find a bucket of perfectly good food sitting in front of a closed restaurant on the sidewalk.

I was talking to Original Lee, yesterday, telling stories and cracking jokes. Funny how some people draw that out. "This must be a funny table," he said, "It's funny how it

inspires me." It wasn't funny, ten minutes before, when Nice Lee was sitting at it. *Nicely* kept trying to join the fun, but it was like pissing on the crepe paper.

I feel cloudy. Some doctor might read this and diagnose my disease or deficiency. I call it dissatisfaction dementia. Mother, thanks to your other son saying *hate*, I've carried the word as talisman with me for days, Hate? Mother, do I hate you? How does one hate what is lacking, what's not done, what's called undone, unfelt, unsaid, how do I hate what you were not?

Years ago, I wrote a poem, that my wife said was my best, about the man who thought he was Jesus and attacked the Michelangelo Pieta, battering the Holy Mother about the breasts and eyes. I wonder what happened to that poem. I think to say, "You made me a charmer, Mother, and took away the love, never knew it, never showed it, never taught me. How can one teach what one cannot feel? How can one pass along all the rules without the heart? Mother and child did not fall in love. I know all about myself, Mother, and I always suspected something was missing. I begin to know that love, not from within, but from words and examples from without, in both senses of the word. How do I remedy this lack, this petty, not uncommon, experience, of missing love, of the love that's missing.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

Blank tablet. Hours ahead. Half-carafe. The subject is anger. I read an interview with Ntozake Shange. Her work is based on anger at men. It works. Anger is an effective tool for gaining perspective. Words spoken in anger create adrenaline, a verbal fluid, like the release of rhetoric. Anger is a great space for emotion. Mark once said that the worst thing in world was anger. Now he says he is angry. Kids brought me his four-page letter but lost it on train. I had a fantasy: write poems or a play based on anger at women. Get strung up, tarred and feathered, drawn and quartered, vilified, reviled. Here's one diatribe, for starters.

Fuck you, Nadja. You've always had it your way. Even insanity, your way. Barry wasn't such a bad guy. He couldn't handle you. So what? Poor slob. You knew it. You did it. You screwed him. You dumped him. Fussed over by fancy doctors in a cushy asylum on Chesapeake Bay. You flew to Paris,

where you charm rooms full of men, order croissants, wave money, drink wine, dance, get your fucking hair done, chop it off, paint it blue, let your tit hang out your arm hole. Even at 41, there are plenty of years left for wit, but where is wisdom, my dear sister?

Jenny used to ride me, mercilessly. I slapped her, once. She said, "You're a man, you're bigger than I am, you can't do that."

"OK, you're right," I said, and I dropped my weapon. But she kept hers. Her mother said, "You beat on a man until he breaks. If he doesn't break, he's a good man."

But when does the beating stop? Does it only stop when he breaks? Richard asked Nanci what the problem was. She replied, "Steve didn't love me enough."

When is enough? What is enough? How would I know? Do you know? Poor women. Innocent victims of centuries of male abuse. Or, as someone said, one night, "Do you hate me, or do you hate all women?" I'm alone again. I'm alone. Peasants of soul, don't we always learn and relearn the same lesson?

Love? Steve

Dear Nadja,

Gentleness. Dead broke. Write \$5 overdraft. Sun. Café. Sit. Just sit. Happy. Anger not my motivation. *Gentleness.* Back to the source. Barbara says anger, intense emotion, are a good impetus for art. She says I'm not an angry person. I try, sometimes, but it doesn't work. It's better to be gentle. I say, "How about intense gentleness?" as in, "He's an intensely gentle man." It's like Keats idea of (intense) disinterestedness. We talk about not caring whether you live or die. These are the polar attitudes of the criminally insane and sainthood.

"Gentleness is a great weapon," says Barbara.

I think of years of trying to be tough. I don't want to be a wimp, but I do want to be gentle. Last night, it seemed as if the man who could get me work wants to humiliate me. After talking to Lee and then watching Clark talk to him, I thought Clark had to be superior to everyone. I told Herb I was Clark's equal. Herb said *superior*. Clark hires me and then lays me off. He knows I'm dependent on him, so he doesn't rehire me. Herb said, let him do it, take the money, and run to Paris. I say, fuck Paris. I like being forced to be humble. Humility is good for the soul, but humiliation is not good for anything. As I

was getting angrier and angrier at Clark, and full of wine, I decided to get out before any damage was done.

I said, "Clark, if you need me, I'm ready."

He nodded.

I went up to Herb. "Herb, I'd like to believe we're friends."

"Yes, of course," he said and held out his hand.

The day before yesterday, he said, "I think you want to be a poet as much as I want to be a musician." Both of us are artistic winos or wino artists. Actually, I think my drinking has changed. Consciousness remains. No hangovers. All life in every corner. There's no need to go to Paris, but I want to go to Paris. The break-through in my art will be gotten with love and gentleness. The world at six inches. I'm always amazed when I listen to old rock and roll. What I remember as explosive, overwhelming music, how unforced it is.

On the street, here comes Barbara. Thank you, Jesus. Laughing, talking, loving night. Life. Subtle. Currents. Slips by. Rolls up on you. Sneaks up on you. Subtle dominance with a grin on its face. Good stuff is just as subtle. It's time to take off the heavy gloves.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I signed on to do my second one-man show, *The First Annual Blood and Turnips Poetry Festival* at the *Second Annual Nova Artist Show* in Golden Gate Park, July 17th. It's good to look forward to performing. I immediately began worrying about the profanity I use in the satire. There will be kids wandering around. Will it be jail time? Certainly the climate is right for a new round of censorship trials. As the moderator, Dennis Llewellyn, I could announce, before the festival, that conditions of the show require self-censorship and leave it up to the poets I play. Then the cops could arrest fictitious characters but not me, because I had Dennis make a disclaimer.

I can hear *Noní Lustgarden* now.

poem for chaz

*lover of my life
take my body take my soul
take my breast (bleep)
between your sinewy hands*

*the sensual pleasure that i feel
when you gently bite my swollen clit (bleep)*

the tender pain you soothe with your wet mouth

*when we are eating each other out (bleep)
what dreams i have of our eternal bliss*

*cascading streams of mountain rain
the heavenly strain of your redwood cock (bleep)
and the quaking of our earthly bed*

Or *Perfidio Vitus*, who, I'm sure, would refuse to censor himself.

The Throat of Joy

*My woman has great steaming tits,
I love to grab them into heaven of terrible death,
my woman has great American Divide slit, stinking pit,
I dive in with my heart torn in pieces,*

*When I am dying inside my woman, like an angel
in the middle of Satan's Hell Cunt, I scream,
"I AM LOVER!" and the flowers of our mouths
blossom into the crimson of our love's anguish,*

*Anyone who would come to interrupt us
in love's despair, I would rip his balls apart
and eat his teeth for dinner,*

*Because she is rosy ass of dawn,
and I am chariot driver of mighty phallus,*

*She is wonderful moon goddess,
and I am her blazing sun and sexual master.*

Charles Drunkowski (Mongo Eddie's Dead Cat) would simply get sloshed and forget the whole thing. It could be very interesting.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I'm in the café too early. I'm going to the library and the park. A guy named Royce says he sees me in the café as much as he's here, and he says he's a bum. He's young. He says he just wants to write and ride his bike. Last night, I went with Jeff Muller to see a Brecht play at the *Plough and Stars*, an Irish bar, on Clement. The play started reasonably well and then sank to a sustained muddle. The actors were loud, without any projection. Pity them, though. The front of the bar was business as usual, with video games, pool, darts, and loud conversation. The bewildered audience sat between 1919 Germany and 1982 San Francisco.

The high point, literally, was when the cast performed one scene entirely on stilts. Our gaze was uplifted, dramatically. However, the dialogue continued to scrape the floor. It provoked ideas of using the scene integrally. *The Iceman Cometh on a Hot Tin Roof*. On the way home, Jeffrey pulled a dog-eared essay from his pocket, concerning the plight of poets and other mongrels. Jeff has a care, but it crosses ever so gently into pity.

A current movie was made from a ten-year-old script, carried around by a successful screenwriter. Everyone who read it, praised it, but refused to have anything to do with it.

"We can't do this, it's *too true*! I can get this reality at home, for free."

It took ten years, from the actual reality it portrays to the screen, and it's still too true. What's the answer to this phenomenon? Do we require distance for intimacy? Must

art always seem like an alternate reality? This particular screenwriter, when he was being original, was too literal, but when he was reworking the scripts of others, he always brought the right edge to it. I can sympathize.

From now on, dear reader, as real as my sister, I want to address you. The relationship between writer and reader is real. It's a fruitful intimacy. My writing loses its drive when I can't believe there is, or will be, a flesh and blood reader. You are a reader who is very much alive. Forgive me, posterity. Even if I'm dead, you, reader, are not dead. Self-preserving as I might be in imagining a readership beyond the pale, I prefer to keep it closer to home. Another bind is this requirement of distance. A book of poems or a story that strikes us as somehow too true or too close to home seems not to have any art to it.

Jeff pulled out his essay. He wrote it a month ago, and he's considering rewriting it. My advice to him was, "Write another essay. Don't write the same one, over and over." It seems to me that people don't want *advice* for living they want *devices* for living. *What's your device? How do you do it?* Everything boils down to a device. Religion, politics, philosophy, and art are full of devices. What's the linkup between beauty and truth, between device and advice? You are, dear reader. You're the linchpin. If I'm honest with you, I can go to the limits of my imagination. The only requirement is that you too are honest and willing to be open to your own imagination.

This equation is *intense disinterest*. This is living without devices. But what protects us from each other without devices? Probably very little. If we get scared, we can bale out. You can revile and vilify. I can talk to my sister. You can feign boredom. I can feign resignation.

At the play, I said, "Every time I come to the theater, I wonder why more people don't do this, and I wonder why I don't come more often, but I don't."

Then the play fell apart. Still, I'm glad I went. Every time is a risk. One thing missing, which made the talent mediocre, was projection. The play wasn't given to the audience. I give this to you. At least, that's my intention.

What a difference a day makes. I'm still broke. I still don't know how I'm going to get through the weekend, but I feel good. Poverty of direction makes all life poor. One can be directed at something, by, toward, and in something. It doesn't matter. But having no direction is going nowhere fast. Intense disinterest is directed. I think having the show to do in July has helped clear things up. I can't disengage from the world, no

matter how much I may care for my work and the work it does. I'm going to spend the rest of the afternoon editing poems for publication. The period of abstinence is over.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

Brent, the friendly psychiatrist, recommends *The Uses of Enchantment* by Bruno Bettelheim as an answer to the need for things not to be true. Bettelheim says, for instance, that telling children the underlying symbolic meaning of fairy stories robs them of the release.

I read several poems last night at open-mic night. I noticed several things. It's amazing what a deep well of adrenaline I have. I became much more than my usual self. It feels satisfying to be asked to read. Several other poets read, and a gradual rumble went up, demanding that I read.

Phil came over and poked me in the chest and said, "You read."

Bruce said, "You should read, Steve, but you're too good for this place."

I don't agree. This place is as good as any other place. Several others prodded me, and I did read. I became high. I told Dan the Bartender, later, that one unfortunate byproduct is the feeling that I deserve better than my poverty and humble station, but no one deserves anything that we don't all deserve. Poverty and humble station are good things. Except that *Humble Station* is the last stop to *Poortown*.

Being who I am has its compensations. When I was talking to Dan, Melissa put all the unfinished drinks and order mistakes in front of me. And then Lori sat down, took me home, and turned out to have the kind of creamy body that men dream about when they look at airbrushed photography. I loved making love to her. I made love, without apology, regret or promises. What a life this is, sometimes.

It's alternating between rain and bright sun, this afternoon, leaving a beautiful, clean light. Bruce's grade school superintendent is in the café. He says it's Poets' Day.

"What's that?" I ask.

"Piss On Everything, Tomorrow'S SaturDay," he says. (One could substitute every day of the week in this little word play.)

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

There's a small shrine outside the wall of The Mission Dolores. People place vases of flowers there, in homage to St. Francis. Often, it's a humble offering. Yesterday, there was a beautiful lily in a large jar. The jar had a paper label on it.

STEWED ZUCCHINI

2/24/82

Last night, I stayed home and washed my jeans, sox and underwear in a plastic bucket in the bathtub. This morning, I took them to the *Washamatic* to dry them. I had strung them up on the back porch last night, but this morning they weren't any drier. The night before last, I dreamed I was stuffing baskets, playing basketball, while flying high above the rim. The ball was mushy, and I realized, at that height, all I had to do was drop it gently through the hoop. A bunch of people wanted to see my wondrous leaping ability. I demonstrated, but first, I had to clear all the wooden chairs off the court. Then, last night, I was driving in a pouring rain, dark and romantic. I nearly missed hitting an attractive woman who was crossing the thoroughfare while carrying a suitcase to a bus. In the dream, I was glad I was sober and alert. There's no pressing business in my head. I have all day to sit here and welcome the world.

Jeff calls the Madman of the Pampas *The Colonel*. He's in attendance, this afternoon, coughing and wheezing, drinking Rainier Ale. He's writing a letter *A ROSALINA*. Spread in front of him, he has a camera, with a glittering decal on it, a small jar of Jojoba Creme, sunglasses, two cigarette holders, two packs of Chesterfields, a bound volume of poetry, and a yellow Bic lighter. He's wearing a double-breasted jacket, a white shirt, a blue tie, black double-knit pants, and cowboy boots. His thin hair is slicked back, and he's staring at two very tall women. When Kathleen, the owner, came in, she got the Colonel's hat off another table and returned it to him. It's a Stetson, with a feather brim and a cut-out photo of the Colonel himself in the front. His body is a bloated, jerking bag of rot. Mine is not. I prefer mine. My mouth is clean. I taste the silver and gold in my teeth.

Dangerous Dan Markowitz just handed me a newspaper ad. A place called *Samadhi*, a Buddhist term meaning temporary nirvana, is auctioning off its inventory, by order of the U.S. Bankruptcy Court. Gene, the other owner, has been in bed for 4 days

with the flu. Bruce took Gene to the hospital, this morning. He comes in the café, and I say, "How are you doing, Gene?"

"I'm a little shaky," he says.

That's the price you pay for living right and working hard. Jeff and Deborah went to see a play at the Women's Center. It had been advertised in the *Wine and Cheese Bulletin*. No one there had heard of it. They went downstairs to an Irish bar, where a play was about to begin. The director thought Jeff was the replacement for an absent actor. The play was written by a Dutchman who died of the Spanish Flu. Then, Jeff told me he made that story up.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

Still no work. The café is closing tomorrow and Wednesday. The last time I was broke, and the café closed, I went back to Illinois for six months. I feel a little panicky. It's the first day of the month, and I don't have a fast-pass for the buses. That means I've lost my ease of mobility. It means I have to have fifty cents every time I want to go anywhere. It started raining again. That kills the painting business.

I wrote a letter to Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish poet who teaches at UC Berkeley. Whether or not he replies, his poetry has touched me and challenged me. I used to play basketball with Father Miles O'Brien Riley, the Director of Communications for the Archdiocese of San Francisco. He does TV spots for a variety of good causes. One spot prompted me to write him. In the ad he said, in a nice homey close-up, "People are not made to serve jobs. Jobs are made to serve people." I told Miles I'd love it if he could help me find a job that would serve me as a writer, either directly or indirectly. Barbara says she'd like to translate my poems into French, and then we could send them to French publishers, and maybe, in that way, I could get to Paris. Then, we'll see what's what with Nadja. It's odd how much happens when there is no work and no money. I've been to three plays this last week.

My mind does not feel prosaic, but poetic, anarchic and sensible. That is, of the senses. It makes it difficult to talk. My head is full of stories of the last few days, but my vision of these eventful days is poetic, momentary, momentous. I'm afraid I'll have to pursue the poetic today and let the stories come when this sensibility passes. You, dear

reader, won't notice the time, because pages turn quickly, but I'm struggling to say even this much. The descriptions *by* a poet are rarely descriptions *of* a poet.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

One day without a coffeehouse, I walked all the way to North Beach to sit in the Trieste and look at a young girl's dyed black hair and sparkling black eyes. Tonight, I'm in the Clarion on Mission, nursing a couple of cups of coffee. I talked to Nanci, on the phone, Monday evening, and Tuesday, I thought she and I may love each other, but it's a love without a future. I called brother Mark and cried for his anger. I called Scott and tried to explain Mark and myself, to some small success. I say that out of kindness. Scott called me a genius and took pity on me but called me down for drunkenness.

The same thought keeps recurring. This kind of writing is without pictures. I mean the pictures that poetry makes. As I was walking today, these words came to me, "Without an image, I wait for the truth. Without an image, truth won't come." I'm faulting myself for not being the kind of writer who works hard at creating finely honed works with fully fleshed characters, the fiction of truth, the truth of fiction. I think I'm capable of being that kind of writer, but I like things that come from honesty, first. I'm struggling with concepts that precede change. I don't know yet what the outcome will be, and this writing may be a vehicle for change.

I caught a glimpse of a line as I was flipping through Milosz's book, *Native Realm*. He said, "My own regular subject of contemplation was the devastating process of change - in individuals, in countries, and in systems. Perhaps, all poetry is simply this." So, then, this is poetry-time prose, the prose of change, and it takes a whole book to make a poem of this changing. I spent three and a half hours today walking and moving. As I walked, I moved into a walker's high, from image to thought to image to thought, without effort at analysis.

I watched a documentary of Carl Sandburg, intermingling actual film of him reading, singing, and talking, with interviews and history, with an actor impersonating the poet. As I walked the urban streets, I saw again and again the images, faces, dramas, traumas, tragedies, miseries, and occasional comedies of human life. I remembered the early Sandburg, full of the moral indignation against poverty and the uplifting song of

courage. It's the same today, if not degraded to something far worse, in the relentless indignity of society upon the souls of its citizens. Sandburg was a moralizer, a lyric poet with the device of morality, and finally, in my sense of him, a bore. I couldn't bring myself to imagine any more poems of Sandy Carlburg from Galesburg, Illinois, 35 miles south of my hometown.

In a conversation with Tom Cuson and Michael Shorb, we joked about living in *The Old Poets' Home*, all of us forty or about to be. Tom called me *Old Young Mr. Brooks*. We talked about Anna, a friend of Tom's, a very appealing woman, but a dedicated communist. Michael suggested we write Reagan and apply for a federal grant to fight communism on our block. We would each take several hundred thousand dollars to keep each other from going Commie. As we are currently doing in El Salvador. No chance. Being a poet is making a political statement, living a political life, simply in being what it is. Any world imagined better would be a world in which poetry would be better imagined.

As I sit here, writing, my left lower wisdom tooth is bleeding. It's frightening, on a banal level of mortality. It's not gushing blood, but it's damned red. There's a hole in the dike. There's a repository of herpes, three inches above my dick. It blossomed, and now it's gone scabby. Otherwise, I'm healthy. *Otherwise, I'm healthy*, he said. I like this café, it's spacious with comfortable old furniture and a variety of people, no familiar faces.

When I ask my mother the names of my ancestors, thinking I might write them a letter, she looked at me, a beggar at the back door, and said, "Why do you want such a thing? Why must I let them know you are my son? Move on, young man. There's nothing here for you."

I'm sad, because I can hear the ancestors singing, and I believe that, on hearing of my sorrows, they would answer with dancing and a fire in the snow. On hearing of my anger, they would weep and wrap arms around my soul. I believe these things, but I look to the road.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

You are in Sweden. You went home. Not to the Sweden of socialized welfare and intellectual self-examination but the Sweden of our ancestors, the shamanistic Laplanders. You've gone back to the roots of language and mythological lore.

I'm sitting on the back deck of the *Acme Café* on 24th St. taking some sun. The conversation is muted. There's a fellow speaking *Mellowese* with heavy hints of deep anxiety. He's talking to two professionals whose conversation is more properly *Shallow Mellowese*. I'm afraid, once again, as always, of letting go of my toehold on social ease. Two ideas link up in my mind, *release* and *real ease*. I'm still afraid that giving my full attention to the life of the poet will turn me into one of those city nomads, always witnessed with the jaundiced eye of the liberal conformists, a sort of polite scorn. Last night, I watched an interview with the English eccentric, Quentin Crisp. He recommends being oneself, entirely. It's the only gift you have to give to the world. Your self - a true eccentric.

A small boy approached a man nearby. "Newspaper, mister?"

"Nah, I don't want to know what's happening," the man barked at the kid.

When the kid left, he turned to the woman next to him and said, "Now the Aspen Times! I'd pay a dollar for the Aspen Times. What if you could get the Aspen Times anywhere you went? Wow!"

Now, I'm in La Bohème, with all the La Bohemians. I've just plunked down my last 64 cents for a 64-cent cup of coffee. I found 8 cents in my drawer and two cents on the street. I passed the poet Robert Duncan on the street, and while I don't care much for his poetics, I felt I ought to have said something to him. I could have told him that when I was in high school, when we played basketball in the alley, everyone would call themselves by a famous ballplayer's name. Ron Gindy called himself, 'The Big O,' and Larry Houser called himself, 'Earl the Pearl,' and I called myself, 'Robert Dunkin'.'

Milosz says, "I could invent a fictional character and put together a biography out of the observations I have made of myself and others. But, involuntarily, I would choose details that suit a preconception; that is, I would reject what seems to me atypical. Without the controls of reality to inhibit me, I would be without a ballast, like a balloon." On Monday, well before I read that observation in his autobiography, I wrote this, "Milosz' poetry is like an anchor flung down from my balloon."

Lars Forssell, the Swedish poet (b. 1928) says, "There has to be room in the poem for the whole human being. You know, they say Tchaikovsky is sentimental, messy, full

of bathos; but if you could remove exactly those flaws, you wouldn't have Tchaikovsky any longer." But Miłosz warns, "There is nothing degrading in our fundamental incapacity to lay bare all the particulars of our fate." An article about Jerzy Kozinski says, "If Kozinski has any fetish, it is his inclination to an excess of self-analysis." I think his *fetish* will become a trend toward use and value. Is the biologist accused of being overly biological?

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

Inasmuch as I imagine you into your reality, I will now describe to you the woman who has come into my life, the woman of my total dreaming, of body, of mind, of heart, of soul, of life. Inasmuch as you are real to me, by the mere accident of my imagination, so will she be made real, and then in that magic called reckoning, which is the reckoning of our lives, she will be no dream, but made real.

She's gone for the time being, as you have gone, but she'll be back. We talked in the café where she works, simple, quiet talk, off the subject of emotion and intuition, but necessary for two who are coming to know each other. She's gone to be with her many friends, and I'm going home. I was in Munchkin's at midnight with 50s rock & roll on the jukebox, kids playing PacMan, young couples, gay and straight, ice cream for lovers, 27 cent deal on the coffee, Filipino gigolos, Leslie says it was slow all day,

I got tired of TV and came out to spend my 27 cents, two nickels were Canadian, but that's no problem. I bummed a cigarette, but my stick matches wouldn't strike. I tried and tried. A girl stepped across the small room, dropped a matchbook on my table, witness to my struggle as the rescuer of fire. I try for words to describe a young girl's simple-eyed confidence, late at night, with her two boyfriends. A man's whipped cream and cherry topples in slow motion to the tabletop. No matter what I say or think or notice, it's colored by my attention to Leslie.

Last night, she said out of the blue that she couldn't imagine marriage. I said nothing, but thought, in terms of looking for the ultimate match, I must stay away, but came here, fifteen minutes before closing, to see her. She's a woman I can imagine to the end of her days. Character deep, she warns her suitors about herself. She asks if I warn mine. I do, even if it's taken me more years to catch onto her essential wisdom. She may not be my woman. I don't know what it would take, to make it so. I think about showing

her this writing, or no, but it might be better to show myself to her in little ways of midnight intentions. There is a satisfying calm to be in the awareness of good feelings for someone like her, on this honor roll of intuitions in the recognition of true love and even truer loving. I will go home after this nod to Charles Aznavour in *Shoot the Piano Player*, falling for the waitress, and finding life anew in the expression of love.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

What's missing in brother Mark, as far as making up an artist goes, is his inability to open up the inner forces. All his brilliance is gotten by force, and none by surrender. Surely, his fear of mother is connected to his wanting to control what can't be controlled. He's like a man who's built a solid foundation on uncertain soil. His house's deliberate foundation is too heavily laid and gives him the false base for all his understandings. It will sink to the grave, an admirable sarcophagus, but a lousy boat.

I say that after reading Milosz describe his extreme receptivity to external stimuli, and at the same time, *being a passive instrument of another power that operates from somewhere inside, that was at once me and not me. There was nothing to do but submit.* There is something else to do, and it is to block, to refuse to submit. I have two brothers, and they live polar opposite lives around this central figure, Mother. My quarrel with them both is with their way of living with that difficult woman. One submits, one blocks. The one that submits risks losing will, independence. The one who blocks risks rigidifying himself. This woman and her boys obscure, through their aggressive-passive equation, the better world where a healthy combination of willful independence and willing acceptance produce the shining fulfillment of our dull natures.

When Sami Farhat (Ankido) wrote a few words of appreciation about my surreal poems, *Let Me Burn*, he said, "The words of a poet who traveled the roots of the heart and captured the word, sometimes by force, and other times, it was given him by the hidden muse."

I called Nanci to see if she'd care to buy my bookshelf and rug, for thirty-five bucks. She said yes to the bookcase. She's going to put six bucks under a rock, when she goes out tonight. I felt a particular anger and disgust at my poverty, and perhaps more to the point, at myself. Being this poor gets to be like quitting drinking or smoking, one tends to make it the mead of conversation. It seems I'll be back to work on Tuesday.

Emotion clouds my eyes. When I got to Nanci's, there was no money under the rock. She was home. I petted the dog and the cats. She swore profanely and casually, too much. Then she told me a parable. The other day, she parked in a yellow zone, in front of her favorite check-cashing grocery store. When she came out, a drunken man, on crutches, carrying a beer can, began abusing her for parking illegally and blocking his path. Then he went to his car, parked in a red zone, and Nanci returned the abuse. She drove home and, either by accident or design, the man drove by her and, as she got out of the car, yelled at her and took down her license number. He yelled that he would see to it that she got hers. She yelled back. She started to go in the house, but on impulse and in a rage, she jumped back in her car and chased him, screaming at him to pull over so she could get his number. "I've got your number, so don't fuck with me, you bastard!" The man was intimidated, and Nanci went home, triumphant, over-adrenalized, and prepared to defend herself.

"It's been a bad week, I'm not crazy," she said. She's been laughing, hysterically, at the falsity in the world, as she approaches her 27th birthday. People who haven't seen each other for a while will often conjure a story that is a parable for their feelings for each other. I am that drunken cripple who abused Nanci, for whom Nanci felt defensive rage, and I was all men, all humanity.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

Happiness is not something I imagine achieving. It comes when it comes, as if by accident. I'm sitting, surrounded by all that pleases me, with the sun irradiating everything and warming my arms. I'm not happy. I carry a hesitance, a watchfulness, a word I have used to describe my sense of the Jews, who have learned over the millennia to pay cautious attention to the world around them. Happiness, as an attitude, is smug, I think. And yet, I'm pleased by so much that I ought to call it being happy. Perhaps it's the equivalent to:

"That madman on the bench is content with himself,
warmed by the same sun that warms the czar."

Several things are bouncing around in my brain. I'm thinking of an idea for another satirical one-man show. In a TV studio, it's taping day for *Free Speech Messages*. The variety of volunteers for that event would be fascinating. It would be my ticket to satirize every manner of American self-expression.

I got a strong hit that my sister is contemplating moving to Havana for the sun and the chance to see if a socialist society can be joyous and humane. I'm struggling with the lingering images and feelings of a long and bizarre dream, and I'm preparing to mull over the drunken night I spent with Bob at a party and afterwards with two women.

Besides all that, I'm thinking about how much or how little Nanci needs my loving, after hearing Scott's suggestion that Dad has stayed with Mother for forty years because of love. Nanci, for my needs, must crack, open up, break down, confess, tell me, in the gentlest of terms, in a way that she won't retract or forget, that she needs me, in a way that opens up kindness and forgiveness to all people, men and women. I'm going to circle around this mound of anthropological diggings and sort and pluck at a few prominent bones and jars.

Bob declared his friendship, Saturday night, after we'd been circling each other for several months. Bob is a writer of fiction and an occasionally maniacal bird, like I am. He cleared the air, beautifully, that afternoon, when he said he like to get together and argue.

"Why argue?" I asked.

"Because we have absolutely nothing in common. Our perspectives on the world are opposite. You think the world is real, and I think it's made-up. Besides, I don't understand that poetry stuff."

I laughed in relief. I always try to find something in common with everyone. Later, at a party, with a pint of Jack Daniels under our belts, he said, "We're either going to get into a knife fight, or we're going to be best friends."

I laughed again. I said I didn't foresee any knife fight.

"Let's divide up the world," Bob said, "you and me."

Bob and I felt, when we first met, the opportunity for a special friendship, but our differences broke open when he fell in love with Nanci, just as I was breaking away from her. He told me, Saturday, what an impossible woman she is, and I felt the challenge, once again, to tame her.

In the dream, I boarded a train for Los Angeles. It was the NJudah streetcar line. It ran to LA, but it didn't pick up any passengers, going or coming. The train was filled

with poor people, poets, down and outers, the wretched refuse. Laura Beausoleil was in the car and in fine spirits. (Laura recently got a grant from the NEA for \$12,500.) I mentioned to a man on the train that the worst smell I have ever known came from people who never wash. He told me there was a man on board who had not bathed for six or seven years. I panicked. That man pursued me for the rest of the dream. I stole a glance at him, and his body only vaguely resembled a human's. His face was a crusty oval, with vacuous holes for features.

His eyes were the eyes of eternal damnation. I say that, not knowing what I mean. I didn't know where to sit in the car to successfully avoid looking at him or smelling the stench. I settled at the front of the car with another man who wisely knew we were upwind. The train stopped for an on-foot tour of some historical ruins. I wandered in a labyrinth of rooms, until I turned a corner and saw this creature, now little more than a heap of rags with burned out holes for eyes. I turned and began to walk away, quickly. He pursued. I walked faster and faster. He followed. I almost ran, from room to room, afraid of being trapped. I couldn't believe how swiftly this awful apparition followed me. I found refuge in the top row of some steep bleachers, seated among a few dozen happy spectators. I would like to remember that I confronted that fearful apparition and that it became a harmless pile of tissue, but I can't. I don't remember.

Bob and I met two women at the party, and we went to the house of one of them, where we danced, and I felt as if I was dancing madly, wildly through the 1920s until just before the Crash. Bob and his partner fell out to make love, and I went to the front room and sat sleepily on the couch. Betty began to make a pallet of cushions for me on the floor. Resigned, I crawled in, and she went to her bedroom. A short while later, I got up, crawled into her bed with her and began to make love.

"Where did you come from?" she said and submitted. It was good lovemaking.

Then, she said, "Are you going to hurt me?"

"Of course not," I said, and in fact, I was gentle, I think, and persistent. In the morning, it felt as if an ordinary San Francisco professional, corporate woman had, for a few hours, submitted to basic animal virtues and then had closed back up. She became coolly caustic. I went home and slept it off. I read an article about acquaintance rape, and I felt guilty. But, it was a momentary time of real humanity. She had admitted her willingness just before dawn.

"You're someone who needs to be hugged," I said.

"Yes, I am," she said.

We embraced innocently for a brief hour. Her mother's picture stared down at us from its perch above the closet doorframe, a frightened, austere woman of the 20s and 30s.

That death-mask man in the dream comes from several occasions on which I've been near human beings whose lives, on the streets of this postcard city, have deteriorated to horror. Death-camp, bloated shells of pus and crusted skin, here, now, in this Nirvana by the Bay. I've compulsively imagined trying to save these creatures of humanity. I've imagined sitting in my cubicle at the *Central Bureaucratic Humanity Office* when one of them comes through the door, and what would I do? Do I have to do anything? I have to absolve myself of this image of horror and responsibility. I think this is not my dream, my projection. This is real. Bob says it's all made up. And Bob is a brilliant man. And Bob is an honorable man. Has he come to bury Caesar?

Savage Amusement, written seven years ago, was about what Milosz calls "...one of those thresholds - when we finally begin to become the person we must be, and we are at once inebriated and a little frightened, at the enormous distance yet to be traveled."

And, I think, there's a need for drama, for fictions, and all that time between. Even the events described in this book are powerful in a way that's not realized in reflective prose. My god, the thought just crossed my mind that I'm wrapping this book up, with Nadja on her way to Havana, and me on my way to what? One thing for certain, at the end of *Savage Amusement*, I said I hoped I was still a poet. And what is Nadja to me? Nadja, you are my value objectified. You're the one who puts the intentions of my poetry at risk. You are real. I think there's a letter left to be written.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

Yes, and that letter will be the rest of the book. It's a month since my 40th, two months since I began to write. I made a vow, yesterday, to try something new, to work the alcohol out of my system. I dreamt, last night, what on the surface seems like a nightmare, but became more, the more I thought about it. The clearest indication of drinking I give to the world is my ruddy face going beet-red, puffy and characterless. My face is bonier, today, and my hair greyer. The clearest indication I give to myself is

that when I'm exhausted, the night after a night of drinking, I try to sleep, and my heart or my lungs stop, my body jolts awake, and I pace, in fear of sleep, or death.

The two things I dislike about drinking are when I'm disparaged for being an alcoholic and when I myself feel weak and stupid. Years ago, I thought that my father ought to have been a drinker, because he acts like one, in his apologetic life. In the dream, I found my face encrusted in a mask like a scab. I tried to disguise it with oil and makeup. Then I peeled the whole thing away and began a healing process. The argument for and against drinking is its effect reducing inhibition, getting rid of controls, opening up to unpredictable influences, and demolishing boundaries. That's the good and the bad. Its ultimate effect is the total elimination of inhibition, control, and boundaries, and then nothing is possible.

Alex Shelaketinsky came back from Boston, and Dan said, "Now, there are two observers in the café." Alex is a steady beer drinker, a morose, Russian born, thinker-translator. Drinking is a tool I've used to end my observer status. I'm curious to test the limits of my observer withdrawal. Without inducing sociability, what will I do? I fear scorn, anger, shyness, but I'm tired of believing that one of the salient results of drinking is the humbling of my self.

I went to a Russian movie last night, *Moscow Distrusts Tears*, and I was moved by its simple message in the midst of urban noise, "Life begins at 40, go after what you love, wait for what you'll love, be what you are." The problem with having this poet's perspective is my demand for truth, constant revolution, sensuality, and love. It's the best and the worst of all worlds.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

The other dream I had was being at our father's funeral. I was upset, because I had left the two stories he wrote, years ago, back in California, and I wanted to read them to the family. I couldn't, and I had to speak for myself. And now my sister is here, in San Francisco. Cuba was OK. She got a tan. Cubans cannot understand the U.S. fear and loathing. They also know that offering support to rebels everywhere, is immense. Nadja is here, somewhere. I haven't seen her. She may be shadowing me, dropping in the café, as I go out of it. I feel her influence. Something is happening.

Coincidentally, I ran into Nanci, last night, on St. Patrick's Day. She was wonderful and loving, then teasing, then withdrawing. I went over and sat with some friends, and she went home with Miriam. I ran into a woman who's attracted to me but thinks I'm *annoying*. I chatted a bit and then said goodnight. Buster was pissed at me, then at himself, and told me to stop playing martyr. I got him a roll of toilet paper. "Here's something for you to write your complaints on." Mike demanded I recite something, since he doesn't believe I'm a poet. "I'm not a dancing bear," I said, stealing a line from Keats. Nanci was very sweet. She was the Nanci I love, but her bitch training took over, and I took off. Bob says Nanci's idolized older sister, Gina, is a woman who sorely wants to be killed. No wonder her husband is a drunk-wimp.

Bob and I are becoming confidants, partners, intimates, like a team. Bob is the first writer I've met who has chosen to use me as a character in his stories. It's about time. I'm getting tired of being both character and writer. We're joined in a war on wimps and bitches, a war in which the victory has already been gained and remains only to be celebrated and re-enacted.

Some people tell great stories. Paul Vane, a poet I've known for many years, is one. His wife, Carol Lee Sanchez, also a poet, was going to be my agent, after my first one-man show in '75, until I turned away from pursuing a career on the stage. Paul says he writes *deathless prose*, which in his telling seems to mean deadly or morbid, not immortal, but anyway, he told me how he got dressed up and went downtown to look for a job. He drives a cab, but it's strictly hand to mouth. First, he stood in the unemployment line with all the real-estate salesmen. (We're in a housing *downturn*.) The people around him were moaning and groaning, back and forth, and finally someone turned to Paul and asked him why he was there. "I just came in to see what life is like for all you out-of-work motherfuckers." He turned and walked away from their dumb-struck faces. Then he went to the Employment office.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I'm trying to write a big something, a long serio-satiric poem piece, a performance piece. I see it, I feel it, but I don't know what it is or how to do it. I'm set to do a show in June, and it's a fine opportunity to do my generation's version, that is to say, my

version, of Ginsburg's *Howl*. One of the things standing in my way, that I have to rid myself of, finally, is this absurd notion that I'm a favored son of the nice people who brought you the current edition of *Imperialist America*.

Chris Blum came in the café and told me an idea he has for a long piece about a poet who's a café-sage. It begins with a poem the poet reads to the café, which appears only as another decent poem. In his drama, you see people sitting down to the poet's mirror, one after another, and revealing themselves, projecting themselves on the poet. The piece concludes with the poem read again, with the same café response, but with the reader's overview. I left out a scene, in which the poet drinks beer and goes privately, publicly insane.

It's a wonderful idea, of course, based on his idea of my situation and my experience in this café. I got to thinking, what if I wrote that piece for my performance? I imagined it as a long surreal/real narrative, and then I saw it with two chairs, and me as poet, and also as all the characters, moving in and out of the second chair, and then as one chair made of mirrors, and then the whole idea stymied me. When I woke up, this morning, I saw it as dreams, with each one telling his dream, as *The American Dream Café*. I like the title, but it got away from me, becoming too broad and epic, when I tried it out as a poem.

Needless to say, I don't know how to do this thing. Yet. I'm still stuck, reluctant to take on *real* people and expose them. The satires I've done before have been about people who choose to be public: preachers, singers, directors, mimes, and poets. Partly, it's being too kind, still socially fearful, from my Midwestern nice-guy background. These are the ingredients, the desire and the hesitance. Chris has challenged me, saying, "Brooks, you're only problem is your love of the bourgeoisie." Of course, one way I get over that is by getting drunk, but I want my health. I think I need to write something that might risk my going to jail, that would risk condemnation, but it's my own internalized fear of alienation that blocks my freedom.

All societies succeed in repressing people, when the people internalize the repression. The society makes the repression seem better, in its safety, than to take the risk of our impulses and feelings. I succeeded in my first two shows in breaking free, by keeping my satire within the poetry/performer world. It protected me. That's fine, but I need to put everyone at risk and not just poets and fools. I need to go back to those ideas I had, before the first show, when I was more serious than funny. That sounds

wrong. Humor has always been a tool for freedom, but I need to risk myself. I need to take on these so-called real people.

Bob has been convincing me that my dramatic reputation is no hindrance to my poetry but an aid. The public demands a drama to stir its curiosity, and then attention to more permanent values is stimulated. I'm not as concerned and I'm not as sunken in guilt and embarrassment as I was before. It's time to render unto the Caesar of Popular Imagination what is Caesar's and keep to myself, and to poetry's children, what is poetry. It's my business that I love language, poetry, truth, and beauty. I don't have to proclaim my intentions and demand the world take me seriously. It can be a secret between me, the muse, you, and Nadja.

Peter called from Denver, and I told him all that's happening between me and Bob and the world. It's Bob's contention that writers, from time to time, have secretly compacted to create a scene that would draw the world's attention. He wants me to keep the secret, but I have a better secret. Writers have always tried, but it only rarely works. The meeting between Bob and me as polar opposites who need and desire each other is accidental or fated. Anyway, our collusion is revealed to your ears only. Those people, who think this book is being written for anybody but you, are eavesdroppers, projecting themselves into our mirror. Orpheus lives.

You and I are creating a living theater to perform our work within. When the world comes to the theater, we'll have our lines. That's that, but it doesn't decide my course. That's between me and the muse, with you as my true believer-perceiver. It's strange to think Nadja is here in San Francisco, and I haven't seen her yet. I will trust it, though.

Paul and Carol Lee just came in the café and sat for an hour. Paul is the kind of man I like to call a madman. He says he's quitting driving a cab, after seven years. He says his body went into a fibrillation, a coronary incident, a shedding, a shucking, a shaking off. All the years of abuse from the city finally came out, and he's become calmer and happier. Except that all his allusions are to death. He asked me how Nanci and I are doing, and he suggested, hopefully, that she and I get back together. "Steve, you're no spring chicken," he said. I didn't think I was bothered by that notion, the idea that I'll grow old alone, but something about it threw a disquiet into me. He always does that to me. Damned poets.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

When I first met him, he picked me up and looked at me, as if someone had said 'table', and he decided to see for himself. He put his big hand on my face and pushed, like a blind man, but more. He put his hand on my head and ruffled my hair like a parent but not. He put his arm around my shoulder and shook me as if I was a fruit tree. He went away and came back later and balanced his body against me. He looked in my eyes each time, looking for something, looking for essence. I saw him do that with others and within minutes, saw them become their essential selves, or disgusted, unsettled, belligerent, missing, always missing, the act of faith, the act toward faith, that has made us friends ever since that night.

Paul Vane said that about my first meeting him, years ago. I didn't remember doing that to him. It is true that I've always believed he and I were friends, without ever sitting down together for longer than twenty minutes. It's true I've always done that to people, not knowing why I did it or what it meant. Now I understand. Bob calls it drilling people, and that sounds awful, but, once in a while, you strike oil. It's outrageous behavior that cleans house. It outrages the bullshitters, and it risks life and limb in the process.

Walking down the street, I heard, "I like being Steve Brooks. It's very interesting being this person." I laughed. It's true. Friends are showing up, one by one, people in pursuit of substance and commitment and a great party.

"Years ago," I told Paul, "I sat down in this café. I decided to sit still and see what would happen. I wanted to see if the world would come through the door."

And a big chunk of it has. A lot of people go nuts watching a man sit still. People get sarcastic, nasty, and bitchy. It brings out a range of discomfort with themselves. Paul was talking, about the virtue of apocalypse, revolution, disruption and economic depression to shake things up. I said one shouldn't wait for the revolution. I have to write, here and now, in this place and time. The hardest part is to recognize substance, essence, intention and energy in this upholstered marshmallow delusion, two steps removed from reality. One has to pull off one's own revolution, and then look around for others who are busy at the same task. I felt like falling out of my chair. I feel it, this sunny afternoon. It's a wonderful impulse, to take a dive onto the floor, to drop off the plane of social reality, to take a dive.

I mentioned to Paul that his wish for Nanci and me was nearly hopeless. He said he was only sad we weren't together. I'm sad, too. I'm sad tonight, and I was sad last night. My sexuality is turned off. I miss love. I drink, because I do not have that love. You know how someone's love fills your heart with joy. When that love stops, or goes away, or turns cold, or is not there, your eyes look for fire, for heat, for warmth, to bed or bottle, the arms that embrace you from inside, or you look for full love from someone fully loved.

Paul has it from Carol Lee. His love doesn't make me jealous or envious, it only makes me aware of what I don't have. Wine is a lover who starts a quarrel in the morning. Intoxicating lovers do the same. I think Jeff is overweight because he needs a lover's embrace, so he's built his own embrace.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I am, at this moment, in the midst of sensation. A frightened bird, beautifully plumed, is perched near me, and I have made what I hope are gentle gestures toward her, but her fear runs deep, so trained is she in flight, that I have no resources to manage a fruitful calm. An olive branch does not provide enough refuge for her. She darts looks at me, and her darting eyes do not reassure me, but tell me, in their way, she will fly. Her fear has not made her weak but wary. Tight sinews of anticipation and tense nerves of experience have prepared her for quickness. It's a quickness that's easily mistaken for vitality. It's a vitality that's easily mistaken for the life force. She is a bird who's used to bird dogs.

I described going into Munchkins and sitting with coffee, late at night, while Leslie finished her job, bussing dishes. Then I proposed describing my ideal woman. It's really quite simple, someone who stirs in me a feeling of their presence on this planet, a significant person, a compatriot, someone with whom I feel no inequalities. I start this up, again, because Leslie is in the café, and I think of her in that way. We ran into each other, a few days ago, waiting for the streetcar. We talked, and I was impressed with the strength and independence of her thinking. Self-insight is no exercise in egotism. However, she hasn't followed my lead toward romance.

Tonight, it occurred to me that she's so used to men being attracted to her that she's mistaken me for another one. I feel attracted but not in awe and not as a

boy-suitor. I suspect she'd like it if I ignored her for a while. Or, I suspect, I don't know anything, and she's just simply not interested in romance with me. Let's call it *the obvious*. As I sit, she goes off with Richard in his car with his wallet and his distracted desire to do things, go places, and spend money. His lack of focused substance is matched with her youthful curiosity to check things out before committing to substance.

That may sound high-hatted, but I don't grieve or condemn. He's frightened of his wish to shed his managerial life and become an inventor, as he says, and she's young, and youth is time for suspended morality. It is the taking in and taking on of a great variety of experiences without prejudice. It was surprising to me when I evolved out of that attitude. I hadn't realized I had it, and I didn't understand its uses, until it was gone. As a pre-moral person, as a post-morality person, I didn't know I was creating my own moral sense. In the same way, early on in my poetry, I wrote in every accessible style, berating myself for not being myself, until, lo and behold, I began to emerge.

Tonight is music night, but there's no music. It's raining, and the crowd is quiet. Clark is here with his nice, pretty, bright girlfriend. He got me a \$300 paint job, slightly better than wage work and too small for his business. It's going well, and the man, who dabbles in income property, likes my work. He owns hotels, I'm told. The guy was curious why I was the only painter, and I told him that Clark's two crews were probably busy with two big buildings. It was meant to impress.

I told Clark what I'd said, and he replied, "Oh, by the way, I didn't tell you. I take 25% off the top." So I said, "Oh, I didn't tell you. I don't give 25% off the top." I'm still in the hole, as he tells me how powerful this hotel guy is. Maybe he'll get big jobs from him, if I do a good job. So I say, "Oh, I didn't tell you. I take 25% commission on all subsequent work."

Our beloved President Reagan comes to mind. Reagan cuts \$200 million in aid to the handicapped, and his darling wife Nancy makes a public relations visit to the Easter Seal Child of the Year with a gift for the tyke under her arm. Cut out the substance that enhances peoples' lives and give them a box of chocolates, shaped like bunnies.

People like Clark are difficult, because they're charming, intelligent, amiable, engaging, solicitous, and attractive - the perfect image. But isn't the perfect image what poets are striving for? The only truly perfect image is one born of, evocative of, and fertile with, substance.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

The guy at the next table is sitting across from two women. One is a plain, scraggly, droop-shouldered, hippie type. The other is a casually attractive blond, visiting from Germany. The guy has a beard, a fake-wool, sleeveless vest, yellow T-shirt, and a dirty, Greek sailor cap. He drones, sincerely, when he talks. He's talking to the blond about how hard it must be for her, since she's so attractive. *She could never live in his rough neighborhood, in these bad times for women, etcetera.* The dumpy girl is watching him. The blond, politely, tries to understand.

"Have you heard of the Moral Majority?" he says, smiling greasily, smugly.

My pens are running out of ink. My feet hurt. Bruce is playing the harmonica like a Confederate soldier in a Yankee prison. The café is not full, but a crescendo of voices surges, all of a sudden. Don't crescendos always surge? I don't feel comfortable in the shirt I'm wearing. Nothing bad is happening. I took a nap after work, and I'm groggy. Walter Matthau says he likes being an actor. There's a toxic spill in the Russian River. The man I'm painting for owns a hotel in Kentucky. He prefers to hire women, he says, because they smile more easily than men. Especially, when he writes out their checks for \$400 a month. He's from India. A Patel. He knows his place. I imagine he expects others to know theirs. Ozzie Osborne didn't mean to bite the head off a rat. He says he thought it was rubber when someone threw it on stage. Sandy is working behind the counter.

"I think the world is bizarre," I say to her.

"You just noticed that, huh, Steve?"

I've detailed about one percent of the image input I seem particularly stymied by, tonight. Where is my significant other? Nanci is undoubtedly frolicking at the North Star with her friend Tina, even as we speak. The last few days I wanted to tell her, "I'm sad. I'm sorry it didn't work."

There's a guy sitting in front of me. He rode his bike up to the door, came in, sat down, bought nothing, and now he's staring at the females. I want to say, "Hey, buddy, get out of my line of vibes." The best I can do is blow smoke in his direction. And Nadja? I think she's taken a job at The Bechtel Corporation. A very pretty girl is talking to the bike schmuck. She's from Ohio. She's trying to be friendly in the big city. She's from Yellow Springs. I tried to crank up some sexuality, but it's no go. Yellow Springs looks

like Kathleen, who owns the café, with her Kewpie doll face, beret, and small town niceness. I went up to the counter.

"Give me a beer. This is ridiculous," I said, indicating the atmosphere.

Sandy and Beth suggested the problem was the guy playing the harmonica. They wanted him to stop.

"Oh, no, you've got to go with the flow. Life is life," I said, and then I added, "Yeah, flow right over there and tell him to shut up." I went over and said to him, "I feel like I'm in a Confederate Prison." That got a laugh from the table.

Yellow Springs says her hat is new, and she's not used to it. God, I'm a sucker for a pretty face. I'm automatically posturing for the pretty girl from Ohio. And when I'm not posturing, I feel like a tired, dreary, impotent housepainter. My blue, plaid shirt feels like a blanket, and my green corduroy pants feel like thick, worn out pajama bottoms. Of course, none of this would matter if I had any energy. Sexuality is a strong ingredient in any man's revolution. Working for a living is an effective tool in counter-revolution. And the beer is making me sleepy. The bike-schmuck told the girl he's writing a book. I'm sitting here, writing a goddam book. Now I'm feeling sexier, more alive. I'm looking at Yellow Springs.

Man Upsets Apple Cart Due to Stand Trial.

I think the girl from Yellow Springs is black. Only a fool would talk to the schmuck for half an hour and not wise up to his vacuous nature, or she's someone who wants to talk without risk. And as I say that, she says, "Walking around here is safe, at least." Then she glances at me. Jesus, I love sexuality, the joining of imagination and animalism. And writing is more fun than a bucket of chicken livers. This is great. I'm beginning to feel slightly crazed. She is black. I'm certain of it. Being black lends an air of the seriousness of being human to any cute girl. There's no way that any intelligent person, growing up black, cannot help but be tempered by it. She's finally getting bored with the schmuck, casting off lonely glances to the corner of the ceiling. And I'm feeling more and more energized.

Starting my third beer, I slop a little of it on the upper left corner of the page. Can you see it? Nadja, where are you, when I need to bridge the gap between my shyness and one of your sort. Normally, in this situation, I'm content to let it ride, let her show up in here some other time, and if there's an interest, say hello, with a hint of

recognition. I feel good, now. I feel filled out, alive, busy, free. I don't feel less than my desires. My clothes don't matter. The schmuck has shrunk to his limited significance. There's no barrier between me and the world. The bulb above my table just blew out. I'm now bathed in shadow. It's time to recede. Goodnight, dear reader. I'm on my own, now.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

Phil just came in the door, waving his arm, and said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, Steve Brooks, The Academy Award for Sitting in the Owl and the Monkey, Biding His Time." I'm having doubts, mixed with determination, and I think I'll write tomorrow. Nadja, do you want to read my poems? Does anyone? Do you know what it's like to be very good at something that you believe in, and no one particularly cares, one way or the other? It's like being a lover in a stale marriage. Do you convince your partner to love you?

"Yes, I love him, and I know he loves me, but he doesn't turn me on." Do you get a divorce and go hang out with other singles, other poets? Be celibate and marry God? Another poet once said my problem was that I needed to be loved too much. That hurt. How do you live with needing to be loved *too much*? I decided to believe, instead, that I needed to be loved *very much*. I said the hell with it, and I stopped courting the world. I quit the pursuit of love. Maybe that's what Chuck Ferraro was saying when he questioned my failure to understand that publishing is not the *preset* for love.

And certainly, when I get it from a woman, it's no big deal to publish and perform. Or is it? I accuse myself of still wanting to be loved. How do I get out of this trap? Persistently, I do not believe anyone truly loves me. Do I ask too much? Those women, whose hearts are supposedly broken by me, I took their love as wonderful, but slightly suspect, undependable. And they were women with whom I felt incomplete. My love was never enough. Mother, do you love me? Do you accept me?

When I was living with Nanci, there were two days when I was entirely at home, in love, in myself. Then, she reminded me that I couldn't be with her like that. Homeless, I wander, living nowhere. Home is where you hang your hat. I hang my hat on my head. Whenever I go home with a woman, I search the room to see if I'm home. I never am. I'll know it when I find it, and the woman will not send me away, in word or deed. Then, I won't leave. I'll no longer search the eyes of a nation for love. The shmuck who was

talking to the girl from Yellow Springs has brought his manuscript into the café, tonight. It's almost sweet. But she's not here. She was so attractive I was grateful when she left.

Here we are, new and different, at least in a different setting, sitting at the Big Table in Yancy's, in romantic, imaginative pursuit of a woman who's sitting nearby. She's a woman I've seen before. She reminds me of Keats' girlfriend, Fanny, not pretty, but elegant. I saw her, a little while ago, in the café, looking studious and a little pissed off.

Arthur sat down with me and said, "I'll bet all the women say, 'Who's that handsome guy striding back and forth in this café?'"

I enjoyed the play of the imagination. Her boyfriend just showed up. He's the same boyfriend who was in here when I first spotted her. She languishes with a brown cigarette, against the settee, her nipples hard. She glances down at her low-slung breasts and approves. How constantly amazing are my peregrinations in search of that for which I claim to have no interest. Well, this will be my last glass of wine, and then I'll head for home, where I toss my non-existent hat. Thank you, Richard Hugo, for writing a poem praising self-pity.

She, when she appears, will say, "I know it's hard being a poet, but you're so good at it. Will you stay with me and take refuge? I offer you my breasts, my vagina, my mouth, my bed, my food, my heart, my thirsting intelligence. Of course, you drink too much. You need to be made warm, one way or another. I don't care how many ways you try to be warm. I'll make you go home and throw rocks at your solitude."

That's a variation on a line that Bob told me tonight. A Texas whore said to him, "I'll make you go home and throw rocks at your wife." His ecstatic response was, "Who do you want me to kill?"

Fanny's boyfriend just jumped up, threw on his coat, and stormed out of the bar. When I went to the toilet, I thought I heard a woman crying on the phone, but she was giggling, laughing. Fanny is staring blankly at mid-distance. I am, I accuse, writing at mid-distance. What is writing anyway, but the proof of our thinking, the proof of our conscious existence? It is breath on a winter's day, clouds with images in them, whisperings of gods, taken into our lives and made manifest, like Teddy Roosevelt charging up San Juan Hill to act out a newspaper headline. I think, therefore I am thinking.

Phil and Alex came in. Phil asked Fanny to join us. She said no. He said she was pissed at me for not being the one to ask her. I said I didn't know how to do that, a slight misdirection of the truth. She went home. I went home. Ate macaroni and cheese.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I talked to a man who said he no longer believes in suffering, and then, today, he called me "Stevie." First, there was no one in the café. Now, it's begun to fill. This afternoon, I read Robinson Jeffers, who said, "The ephemeral has only news value. I decided not to lie in verse - not to feign any emotion I did not feel, not to say anything I did not believe myself, and not to believe easily - to reclaim substance and sense - to reclaim old freedom."

Dan, the bartender, came in, and I tried to explain to him how I had come to those same conclusions. How my highest goals were fame and fortune, until I found myself at that level of capability, with proven talent, and then even without wanting to, I saw higher goals. Those people who wish success for me and resent me because they can imagine no higher goals, are only seeing as far as they can. We understand only to the limits of our understanding.

Jeffers describes his own nature as cold and indiscriminating and his great good luck marrying Una, who he said was "...more like a woman in a Scotch ballad, passionate, untamed, and rather heroic - or like a falcon - than like an ordinary person." He describes the accidental luck, driven from Europe by the First World War, of finding his home in Carmel, California, finding "...contemporary life... that was also permanent life... not shut from the modern world... but conscious of it and related to it... capable of expressing its spirit... but unencumbered by the mass of poetically irrelevant details and complexities... that make a civilization."

But I like the city and, fondly, I can't help remembering Nanci's best spirit as like that of Una's. A woman came up to me who heard me read poetry here, in September. She wanted to tell me what she remembered. In *A Poem for Czeslaw Milosz*, after much concern about the life of the poet, I describe Milosz, at his reading in the city, four years ago, with the line, "He came with friends."

"I've been trying to write that simply," she said.

That line came after many lines of less simple questioning. I've been waiting, for days, to describe my experience, over the weekend, painting the house for the Indian hotel landlord businessman. The first day I went to the job was miraculously fluid. The

day I came home was equally easy, but in-between was a bucket of rocks, so I concluded I was led into and out of a lesson.

At the end of the day, I saw one man degrade another man. The one degraded was the old painter who worked outside as I worked inside. The landlord had promised John his money on Saturday, but when he asked for it, the boss grinned, walked over and pointed at what was still unpainted. He was saying, without saying, "My word counts for nothing, because I don't trust you to keep up your side of the bargain." He pointed to a small section of wall as if it had shit smeared on it and John hadn't finished licking it off.

That was it for me. I thought to say, "Keep your money, keep the work I've done, (I was three hours from finished) and keep my equipment, I don't want it, anymore." Instead, I finished the job, got my money, and walked away. This morning, I applied for another kind of work, I imagined a more humane way of painting, and I returned to a deeper resolve to make poems. I told John I was glad to have made his acquaintance.

My body is riddled with horrors to be expelled. I'm going through a cellular exposure of old thinking. I remember seeing a drawing, back when I was suffering what I called brain fever, what I later saw as an emotional breakdown, after Regina. In the drawing, sickness was forced from the center of a cell to the surface, and only at the surface were its ill-effects felt.

At that point, because of the pain, most expulsion is retracted, and the sickness returns to the center. It must be forced to break the surface. I have a glimmer of my current sense of breakthrough. Change almost inevitably creates crisis. But it must be carried through. The cleansing must be completed. I've proposed two things - to release my image as a poet to the world's desire for icons - and to push further on in my own private sense of purpose. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and render unto Caesura what is Poetry. I feel better already. Dan was praising me, for being the strongest, freest man he knows, when I felt like last weeks' diarrhea. I said, "Then why don't I feel free."

Jeffers says, in a poem called *Point Joe*:

"Walk there all day, you shall see nothing
that will not make part of a poem."

Dan described my sitting in the café, talking to all manner of man and woman, finding that part of them that was worthy or critical. Jeffers says that one must *love the coast opposite humanity*, and I agree. He says, "I admired the beauty / While I was human / Now I am part of the beauty."

This is the most beautiful poetry I've ever read. I told Dan, "It's like reading the Bible." It's the worship of the extraordinary life of the ordinary. I believe that any worship will finally turn back and embrace humanity. That's my legacy from Jeffers. That's my life, as a poet among men and women. Even though they may walk by my table and think, either, "There is a true poet," or "There is a bum, a failure, a wastrel."

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

What's going on? I think I lost \$20. I was overdrawn at the bank, so they charged me \$12 for three checks. I put my boots on the heater to dry them, forgot them, and burned them beyond use. It's supposed to rain for ten days. On the positive side, Chuck says he wants me to share his apartment near the café. And I devised a painting scheme. *Paint Your Own House With Professional Help; Learn and Save*. I also left a resume off with Miles Riley, looking for new work. On the permanent level, my reading of Jeffers convinces me that my thinking and writing of the last few years has been good.

It's wonderful to find a poet whose way of seeing the world reinforces my own. It's validation, confirmation, recognition. I trust that Jeffers knew others would come along to honor, love, respect, praise, understand, and emulate him. As I trust, Keats did. The goal of my disillusionment is this level of belonging in quiet joy to a brotherhood of the champions of life. Jeff Muller came in, mentioned narcissism to a full table, then gestured to me, "There's a prime example, right there."

I just read through my poems and found a thread I never saw before. I saw a fear of being called something. In Jeffers' life, it was *too bitter*, that always inhibited the release of these poems.

Stephen Vincent, who published my poems in *Five on the Western Edge*, rejected many of the poems from *The Queen of the Rhumba*, because, he said, they didn't have my earlier spirit. I would call it a manner that allowed apology, and was, in a way, ambivalent, with some innocent sympathy hung over from earlier years. I've always felt a quality of entertainment, of dancing and grinning in front of the firing squad of public

opinion, not in the poems but in my thinking about them. I think public opinion is nothing other than the lowest common denominator of socially informed ignorance. I sense I'm declaring myself more and more. I remember lines that have occurred, such as:

True compassion does not require an action.

I know what you mean closes the mind, I am the same opens the heart.

Religion attempts to imagine a sympathetic and vengeful god, when God must compassion and empathy, because spirit is in everything. I am the same as you, bird, rock, wind, wave, human. I feel so much better than I did, yesterday. Last night, in Yancy's, with a few people, I was joking, laughing, and welcoming. All night long, dreaming. This morning, telling dreams and jokes.

I dreamt I could fly, first by walking above the ground, and then above a river. I moved from rock to rock in the river, each one with clothing drying in the sun, until I came to a giant fish, dead but beautiful, under water. Around it was another fish, wanting to take it away, and a City Fish, waiting for official word. My father was on the shore with a friend of his and mine, or a brother, both men with long hair and beards. The friend, who wanted the giant fish, was waiting for approval. I leaped across the water to the shore. I had to avoid a large crab, which snapped at my feet.

I was in bed with a woman at the time of the dream. What does all that mean? Damned if I know. I also dreamed of my new apartment, with a wonderful window-on-the-street view. I'm recovering my painter's eye way of seeing the world. It was remarkable to wake up in a woman's bed and explore her body with my eyes. She seemed somewhat surprised but pleased by my hungry perusal.

With Barbara, I began to do this six-inches-from-everything way of seeing, that I've spoken of. I tried it with Nanci, a year ago, and I saw her balk at it and hide from it. She told me not to tell her the truth. Time was, I was unable to look at anyone. Only stolen glances, when there are those willing to be seen and I'm willing to see.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I'm overwhelmed. I feel as if I have found that master poet whose vision carries me beyond the popularity contest of styles and attitudes. To fully release my poetry to the

judgment of time is a goal I've long sought. It's a goal toward which I've felt faint-hearted at times, because I had only my poor ability, measured against its imagined achievement. Now I have a vision to join. My faith is free, and I don't have to embrace some religious or political ideology.

Chris tells me that Robinson Jeffers and Henry Miller used to hang out together. Two heroes, together. The temptation, when one has heroes, is to imitate them. As William Everson says, in *Fragments of an Older Fury*, "One may, for a time, imitate an art; to imitate a life is fatal." I'm grateful I came to Jeffers after I had struggled to discover my own vision. On the other hand, I wonder at those long years of self-doubt and self-denial. Could I have been saved that much unhappiness?

I'm so excited I can barely sit. I must admit that, perhaps for the first time, I have a volume of poetry before me that doesn't have me feeling the tiniest bit reluctant. I'm faced with a gold mine. Like facing the discovery of the Mother Lode. I'm Sutter, in 1848, facing the entire Sierras, his mind exploding with visions. I feel something like what Keats felt reading Chapman's Homer, like Balboa facing the vast Pacific for the first time. After twenty years of panning for gold and rejoicing at each precious nugget, I'm more amazed than ever at my persistence. How could I have known, except by example in the lives of others that such realms were discoverable?

The entire life process of this search for vision is discouraging. It has nothing to do with material success, and the success of vision itself is discouraging. Magellan couldn't take an airplane from London to the Far East. His accomplishment couldn't have been gained by hearing about someone else's accomplishment. The idea, the wish, the hope, and the attempt are all worthy, but none is complete. It crosses my mind that I'm being foolish, imagining that I've arrived at vision. I have not. I've only begun. My faith, long buried, has only broken the surface. What follows now? I imagine what follows is the adventure of confidence in a world of adversaries. No more paranoid apologies for a life.

Stephen Vincent once said that my poetry was an attempt to name my enemies. That disturbed me. I said, instead, that I was naming my loves. Any one of us, who declares what he loves, can be assured that his enemies will declare themselves. In the naming of loves, the naming of enemies is joined. It's Thursday night in the café, usually the most social, usually with music. There may be none, tonight. It's cold and blustery. A few voices are droning away. The mediocre paintings of romantic nature and cruel nature adorn the walls like polarities of adolescence. I'll drink beer and enjoy my nature.

Fools had better be prepared for contumely, and lovers for embrace. It's fun to write with such delicious excess. It's powerful. Jeffers is an example of excess, as Everson says. And I remember Dr. Johnson, described by Boswell, as living a life, not greater than others, but more. Everyone wants more in their lives, and they mislead themselves by accumulation, or by decadence, or by complaining in shallow rage. *More* is akin in my mind to a line I wrote, without understanding it, years ago, "I will put myself inside a self larger than myself and watch it fit." There is no need in this overcrowded world, for a birth control of soul.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

Curly Bruce said to me, last night, "Steve, you are more of one thing than any other man I've ever met. It has eight letters and starts with an S. He meant *specious*.

Specious: seemingly fair, attractive, sound, or true, but actually not so, deceptive. Having the ring of truth or plausibility but actually fallacious.

(American Heritage Dictionary)

"Daydreaming bears a specious resemblance to the workings of the creative imagination."
(Cyril Connolly)

Know that when all words are said, and a man is fighting mad, something drops from eyes long blind, he completes his partial mind, for an instant at ease, laughs aloud, his heart at peace. Even the wisest man grows tense with some sort of violence, before he can accomplish fate, know his work, or choose his mate.

William Butler Yeats

What's going on here is a move toward decision. Clarity is the word. I have presumed that I like people, and I still think so, but I've been waiting for them to return in kind my love for them. My love, on the social level, is one issue, played out in an ebb and flow, little different from anyone's. I'm used to hearing it said that people are sheep, morons, idiots, etc. and I hear that judgment everywhere I go, on many levels of society

and intelligence. Rarely does anyone confess to naming themselves that way. And I find intelligence everywhere I go. It seems as if *everyone* is always *everyone else*. I've been disappointed in human beings. What I need to be is no longer prey to disappointment.

Michael Shorb, the guy whose room I've been renting, who shares my appreciation of Jeffers, had an idea what Jeffers would say if the human race obliterated itself in a nuclear holocaust, "My, my, isn't that a shame." I take comfort in that attitude. The human race may obliterate itself, and I, as a poet, will be unable to do anything to avert it. And why should I rage against human folly? This is a feeling akin to my revelation, during the Vietnam War, that it wasn't my job to convince the President that the war was wrong, it was his job to convince me that it was right, and I was not convinced. Nor is it my job, as a poet, to convince the world to love poetry's truth and beauty. It is the world's place to convince me, and I am not convinced. I'm about my work. And whether or not I'm good, bad, or indifferent at it, I believe it is work in the best interest of the human animal.

I've been in this café for five years and barely a half dozen people have spoken a desire to read my poems. That's no longer a call for disappointment. That's merely the community of beings. It's known and widely believed that I'm a good poet. The same people who don't seek out my available work are the same ones who think I'm a failure for not publishing. It seems to be thought that, surely, everyone else would rush to embrace my work, if only I tried a little harder. A fool's paradise is this world, and the more like paradise this nation professes itself to be, the more foolish it sounds. It's strange, is it not, that I've come from Bob's scheme, for hoodwinking the masses into loving our theater and canonizing our lives, to Jeffers' remove?

Everson, using Jeffers' words, says, "If civilization is *rich and vulgar and bewildered*, it's because men of the mind, like Jeffers, have withdrawn the force of intellect from it and left it in the hands of egomaniacs, aggressive belligerents and entrepreneurs. Jeffers has not withdrawn the force of intellect from it, but rather gave that intellect to its critique...."

I've come from Keats to Jeffers. Seeing how the world has dodged their truths, should I, lonely dreamer, expect any different than their reception? The saving grace from defeat is the love I have for these great men, not to mention women, whose lives are given, beyond the call of duty, to tell their hearts, like carrying a whisper into a cacophony.

I'm have learned from my adventure as a public poet, a market-place poet, the café sage, living daily among people who have accorded me a role, not without its perquisites and amenities, not without its debilitations and degradations, with occasional encounters of genuine beauty and truth. What surprises me and separates me from Jeffers is how much I like people. I have to ask myself why. Is it fun? Is it entertaining? Yes. Does the accumulating applause for my life give me pleasure? Yes. Can I rouse, in myself, an anger to deny these banal pleasures? I doubt it.

Jeffers' hawks and embankments, his Junipers and sea lions, do not care a whit for his poetry. He gloried in their coloration, their interplay, and their integrity. I attempt to glory in these human animals. But there's another breed apart to whom I'm speaking. Sister Nadja? Of course. You, the reader? Yes, I suppose. But, more, it may be, as I've read, we are human beings reporting back to the angels what we see, and the angels do not need to hear what's angelic, but what is true, both spirit and animal, in us humans.

That last paragraph about the angels does little to impress me, as a final answer. We are human, speaking to what is human, for human ears that need to hear as much as we need to speak. If poets are thought to exist, then what is it, in us, that is poetic? And how long can people exist that don't allow life to be poetic. If the holocaust comes, let it come. I will just as surely continue, because I am at one with Jeffers, and in him, the hawk.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

For years, I've felt that I was an empty man. It isn't being shallow, or hollow, or weak, although I will accuse myself of those. I'm also solid, thick, and strong. It's being human. Kathy said, last night, she thought I had a very old soul. I never wished to be so caught in this flesh, that it appears that all I am is to be dead soon, and in the meantime, I'm a self-centered fool. I'm a human being, no different from anyone else, but I am one, in extremes. I can't manufacture myself back among the better people who give themselves to human use. I'm insane, or I'm hopelessly trapped, or I'm merely one who is different. I understand what it takes to be among the better humans, to give your work in such a way that it becomes the property of those who want it as their property, but I

find that inadequate. I'm so extremely self-centered, and at the same time so extremely out of myself.

Kathy said she wasn't sure if she was angry at me, because Thursday night, I told everyone she was a hot woman. She said she felt as if she'd been. "...staked out as territory and pimped for, at the same time."

We talked about the habit of people to want to possess. She thought it was a desire to fill up an emptiness. My early reluctance with her was with *her* possessiveness. Death is the proof of how much we possess nothing. To possess is to defy death. How foolish. To possess nothing is to embrace death. Even soul. We do not possess soul. We are soul. Soul passes through us. If a hawk can fight death until it's overcome, then what difference is our organ brain in its struggle to fight death?

I have to remind myself that any of this, all of this that I think, feel, and am, is only what's human. It's not as if I'm to apologize for exhibiting, more noisily, what everyone is. I want to love somebody. I love so many women, it's as if I don't love anybody. Keats sometimes sat in the darkness, pouring over his language. He also said, at a very young age, "I believe I have a *wrong idea about women*."

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I crack Jeffers' poems, and every time I do, I'm astounded. And Bob shows me, by being who he is, not to let petty concerns get to me. Sensitivity, in and of itself, is drawn toward any quirk of emotion, real or false. To be sensitive is as worthy a goal as being able to catch diseases easily. Anyone who tries to be sensitive will be as successful as anyone one who tries to be intelligent. Sensitivity and intelligence are only valuable when they are being applied, wisely. Sensitivity and intelligence are potential, like un-mined resources. One doesn't dig up a mountain merely to expose its resources. I was thinking about the differences between Jeffers' creatures and my humans, today, when I took the kids to the zoo, where we watched the sea lions cavort. One can stare joyfully, restoratively, at a sea lion, all day, and never think, "What an asshole." My children restore me. I love them. They love me.

I ran into Bob, on the streetcar, after I put the kids on the train. I told him what I'd been thinking about nature and humans. Humans are exasperating. I stood watching a Kodiak bear, feeling the camaraderie of flesh, but finally, all I thought was, "I'm glad that

big fucker can't get across this fence." I remember a poem my friend, Michael, wrote about Indians calling the horses their brothers. I can't feel that brotherhood, beyond imagining it. Bob said, "The Indians sat around the campfire calling the bear brother, but when they met one in the woods, they ran like hell." Jeffers says, "I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk."

Because one can say, *what an asshole!* of a man. If that Kodiak decided to slake his thirst on my flesh, I'd sooner kill him than write a poem. I don't believe Jeffers, enough, as an ideology. I do believe him when he admits that, as a human, he has *sooners* that hawks don't have. No hawk will ever write such a line. Would Jeffers approve, now that I'm broke and hungry, if I went out in a few days and killed a man for food, with no motive but survival? What are wars but actions out of the idea of survival? Human life looks to me like wartime in slow time. Peace is gotten, by being ready for war. We have *war*, and we have *ready for war*. We have war with departments. Jeffers is right. Nature is cleaner.

I'm sick of my room, my diet, my habits, and my situation. Nothing looks good to me, tonight. I drank bourbon all day Saturday. I woke up this morning, feeling quite good, knowing Jack and Rachel were coming. Last night, I cried and I prayed. This afternoon, I had love, in me, around me, from me, and toward me. Tonight, I am tired of whatever is not love.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I woke up this morning, a couple of hours early, and wrote these lines. "Jack, you are my son. You are doubly strong. I am your reserve. Whatever the challenge, actual or in spirit, your call will have me at your heart's side, on the side of your seeing, inside all of your doing. You are the owner of your self, and I am here to proclaim it."

I got into a long rap in Yancy's last night, talking to Dan and a guy from Scotland. The gist of which is that audiences feed the performer. A performance, which needs fifty people, cannot be sustained by five, no matter how much the five might wish it. A readership sustains a writer. Is a painter fed by those who see his work?

I was asking myself, "To whom am I playing?"

This morning, I read an article, which was an attempt to explain the deaths of famous people from booze and drugs. The writer, Bob Greene, contended that fame isolates them into the idea that the extraordinary high they feel while performing ought to be theirs, constantly, that it grants them immortality from ordinary rules. I know that high, the notoriety attached to it, the addiction to it, and the obligation to sustain it. And, intuitively, I've been smart enough to refuse it or to drop out of sight, to remove myself, even to the extent of invisibility. Fame is a killer, and there is peace in anonymity, silence, even withdrawal. It's not a failing to refuse fame but a kind of salvation.

But I'm addicted, surely, as much to being known and projected upon, as I am to alcohol. I was talking to Bob and Gita, last night. Bob is giddy over Gita. Gita noticed how young my son seems. I said he hasn't matured, yet. No body hair, no voice change, not interested in girls. She asked if he's gay. Who knows?

"He's not goosy around girls," I said.

"Maybe he's over that," Bob said.

"Do you know any men who are?" I said.

"Yeah, I knew a forty-five-year-old guy, once, who was."

I confessed, "I'm not goosy around girls, because I have a trick. I pretend that poetry is the most important thing in my life. More important than everything else."

"It works," said Gita.

"And I've met some pretty good poems, along the way, too," I said.

Whenever I have, or imagine I have, truly desired a woman, the game is blown. But it sure cuts down on goosyness. I told Bob what Kathy said, "You made me feel staked out as territory and pimped for, at the same time."

"That's perfect," Bob said. "She'll be around for a while."

There was a letter in Playboy from a guy who described himself as a sensitive, nice guy, who gets along well with women but has noticed that the bastards get the girl, that women will put up with just about anything but niceness. Playboy said he must be hanging around with the wrong women. That reveals Playboy for what it is - a chance for wimpy guys with a couple of bucks to imagine getting women they'd never get in a million years.

What sort of man reads Playboy? The average man, that's who. You don't get rich selling things to only a few people. You go for the great masses of wimps, dipshits, and nice guys. Nice guys finish last, with a copy of Playboy rolled up in their back pocket. Those playmates are bought, not taken. Incidentally, lest I be taken for a cad and a

bounder; real bounders are mean-spirited toward women, and they deserve any punishment that life deals out to them.

I've been wondering about this charade. Women like men who appear not to be domesticated, because most are so easily had. Men prefer women who appear loyal, because they imagine the opposite. When I imagined that Regina might actually marry me, I became elated and calm at the same time. She dumped me because I was, as she said, *too weak* for her. I was willing to give up my freedom for her. I wanted her so much, I was weak.

For days, I've been wanting to tell Nanci that I did my show for her, last November, at Intersection. I did *The Blood and Turnips Poetry Festival*. It released me, and it released the audience. The quantum leap in pleasure was real. I'm a small town boy, a human size poet. I don't write for large audiences. When I try to do that, I turn rhetorical. The woman I write for, the muse, my sister, Nadja, Nanci, or whoever, is no different from any woman. She wants all my attention but secretly prefers me to be free. The less I court her, the more she desires me. I imagine I need to be sexy and violent, without doing damage.

Mother called me a heartbreaker.

I said, "I don't see any dead bodies."

In fact, it's my own heart that's been pummeled. Bob says all he wants is to make one tiny crack in the corner of a woman's heart. Ah, I've just gotten the window seat. It must be my lucky day.

*The poet, who wishes not to play games with words,
His affair being to awake dangerous images and call
The hawks - they all feed the future, they serve God,
Who is very beautiful, but hardly a friend of humanity.*

Triad, Robinson Jeffers

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

So much to tell. I wish I had notes, a tape of the last week. I do have this poem, written in the midst of the shadowy chaos of thought and deed.

A Connector

*Ants crawl across the table in the corner window
that overlooks the seacoast in relentless wash
under the rain.*

*Spilled wax from a green candle, beer cans
with cigarette remainders at the lip, conversation
comparing voice quality from opera to Bobby Short
to the Rolling Stones, Prokofiev on the cassette.*

*Janice, who turned twenty-three, last midnight,
has gone with two-cars-full for more liquor.*

*An urban expedition to witness whales migrating
has turned exploration of polite confinement.*

*People drawing owls and carp, people drawing
the rocky abutment offshore, waves relentlessly wash,
ants crawl, do not crawl. Is it their miniature relationship
to our lives that makes them appear to crawl?*

*I blow an ant from my arm and remember my childhood
fear of the seas, one cough in the throat of the Pacific,
and we are drowned. What is it that distinguishes us,
that doesn't also extinguish our belonging?*

*Sandy calls the rocky bridge, from the near ridge
to the great rock in the ocean, a connector.*

"There is a connector," she says.

I'm back in the café, after being out since last Friday. The guys at work have been treating me strangely, the last two days, I think because Clark told them I was suicidal on Sunday. I didn't think of committing suicide, but coming back from an exhausting three-day, drunken explosion, with 25 people on the edge of the Pacific Ocean, as we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, Jeff, Fred, and Richard were joking, yelling at the pedestrians, "Jump, Jump! Jump!" I opened the car door to spit tobacco juice, thought for a second, and said, "Hell, if nobody else will, I will." Jeff grabbed my arm, but for a split second, I imagined the incredible joy of diving into union with being, the joy of final release.

I told Clark I wouldn't commit suicide. A poet who commits suicide is saying to the world, "I take it all back. I didn't mean what I said." On the other hand, on Sunday, I understood Keats saying that death seemed sweet to him. At work, Tuesday, I was hopeless. I must have seemed suicidal. Last night, I went to hear a wonderful poet read, and a healing woman took me home to bed.

Tuesday afternoon, I thought, "I've been living out Keats' life and death. Then, I thought I was living out Jeffers' sense of life and death, up in Mendocino. The poet, who read last night at *Intersection*, Robert Sund, is a backcountry poet who left the city because his particular kind of poetry couldn't stand there, and therefore, didn't need the pace, the noise, and the humanity of the city. I love Keats, Jeffers, Sund, and many others. I've been in an altered state of consciousness. I felt it at the reading. I thought, *I'm ready. I want to read.* I went up to Jim Hartz and Jack Davis, who run the place, and said, "I want to read." I had a manuscript with me, and I gave it to Jim.

My antics, my obsessiveness, my being in clairvoyant drunkenness, over the weekend, I'm sure, have been the subject of gossip in the café. Dan told Clark all about it. "King for a Day," Dan said.

One woman at the gathering up the coast told me, "You're a mirror."

"I'm looking for someone to crack the mirror," I said.

"It's bad luck," she said.

"But, it's a good life," I said.

"Don't stare at me," she said. I couldn't mirror her.

"You don't want to break," I said, "I give up."

She was the only woman there who seemed to be a Eurydice. I began to think about Orpheus and his wife. She followed him through the mirror, but she couldn't come back. I refer to Cocteau's version, "*Orphée*," which I've always wanted to update, somehow. Yesterday, I read a Cocteau quote in the paper. "A mirror must reflect a while

before giving messages." I gave messages, all weekend. I have no idea how my mirroring went. I would like to be able to live with a woman, without losing my mirroring. I imagine she would have to be un-mirrored and un-mirrorable. I couldn't remember the name of the woman who talked to me on Sunday.

"What's my name?" she said.

"I don't remember. Maybe your name is not your name. Maybe you have another name. Do you have a boyfriend?" I asked her.

"No," she said.

"I think you have an imaginary boyfriend, so far unknown to you."

A moment later, I said, "I think your boyfriend just died."

She was deeply troubled and wouldn't approach me. She was a painter and very much removed from the group. On the phone, Sunday night, I told Clark that my poet was alive but my ordinary man was starving.

Joe Vennerucci just called me *The Man of the Hour*. "Everyone out there wants to shoot you," he said, "You insulted everyone."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I said. Joe grinned and touched me, gently. It's time to pay the piper. Fortunately, I was loved, last night. And today, Clark gave me a \$400 painting job. *Luísa*. That was her name. Pay the piper. *For whose dance, mirror?*

"I'm surprised you're still alive," Joe said. I may not be soon. A teacher at City College, who was loved and hated, who presumed to test the minds of his students, was shot to death in his classroom yesterday. Could *Luísa* have been you, Nadja? Could she have been my Eurydice? The poet, Robert Sund, wrote a love poem about the failure of love's endurance, about its brief moment.

*I saw your face
fading from me
like a round stone
sinking slowly
in dark water*

He also used the line, "I am the father/ who cannot reach for/ his children."

I thought that this book writing, this poetry, in its extreme, in sublimation, has blocked my Eurydice. My body has been infected for two weeks. It's time to stop.

"You have too many women," Gita said, Friday night, when she took me to bed to collapse in the trailer she brought with her up the coast.

"I'm infected," I told Sarah, last night, "I thought I could make love to anyone."

"Nonsense," she said, "I will take it away."

Going to her house, we ran into an old, drunk Indian, panhandling on the street. He said his name was *Running Water*.

"So is mine," I said, but he didn't care.

"I think Indians are like poets," I told him. "People either don't listen to us at all, or they listen too much." He nodded. He sang us a beautiful song. He called me and Sarah *partners* and said I should be good to her.

Dangerous Dan Markowitz came in the café. He was up the coast. I asked him if I'd have to pay the piper. He said that Phil, who was not there, is spreading the rumor that I ran around with my cock out. If Phil imagines anything, it ends up having something to do with his cock. I need a beer. I laid off for two days, but this anxiety is highlighting that my nerves are still ragged.

I came to Yancy's, to escape and fuel up. "Daniel," I said, ordering a second glass of wine in as many minutes, "It's tough being an alcoholic. Making a public spectacle of oneself is exhausting."

"It's entertaining," he said.

Jeff came in the café, "How dare you show your face in here." Then, he sat down, and complained about the rumors. I could tell he liked being included in the wild surmise. I told Kathy about the rumor of my cock hanging out.

"Probably true," she said, with calm assurance.

"It was my brain hanging out," I said, "Blown out, actually."

Of course, dear Sister, none of this explains what did happened. What does explain? What needs explanation? What wants it? I don't remember what I said, but I remember storming around the crowded main room, excoriating the popular reality. Luísa, alone among the rest, seemed to have said she could hear me. Regardless, it was an outburst that put almost everyone off. I deserve their denunciation, no matter the virtue I might have meant to proclaim. Are you here, Nadja?

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

Last night, I went back in the café and had a wonderful time. I jumped up on top of my role in this theater. Today, I'm fighting arrogance. No one else minds, but I do. The café is jammed for music. I'm only making false starts in this writing. My future roommate Chuck has to fly to Chico, tonight, on law business, but he didn't want to. I'm out of messages. It's time to absorb, to draw back. I keep thinking how Robert Sund has to live in the backwoods on Invisible Lake next to Shit Creek. A poet has to live where and how he does, and no matter where it is, or how it is, it has the same conjunctions and contradictions. Now, the arrogance is falling away. I'm writing, and I've put my blinders up to the world. It's wonderful to be quiet and removed from the public role. I told someone last week, that at heart, I might as well be a contemplative monk.

Nanci supported my public role, wanting me to perform, but she thwarted my writing. She wanted it published, that is, performed. When I went to the café to write, she assumed I went to party. When I began to write at home, she interrupted me and finally told me to get a job. Where is Eurydice? I just told Mike I'm ready for her, as I become, more and more, my Orpheus self. I walked past a table in The Little Shamrock, last night, and a guy said, "Ah, the overwhelming presence."

Kathy said she loved me. She said she could tolerate my comings and goings, but she wanted more. I told her, "I love you, but I'm not in love with you. And if you think of it, you'll realize I'm not a particularly good lover." The guy singing sang half a dozen notes, and everyone quieted down. Isn't it amazing? I'm dragging on in this writing, because of the pretty woman, nearby. I mentioned her a while back, sitting down with me and saying she liked to be incognito. She's smiling at me, these days. This guy singing is wonderful. The girl left. Her beauty was drawing flies. Bob, Joe, Lee, and Phil.

(Addendum) I've got bleeding gums, herpes, and a rash on my arms, indigestion and farts that require a gas mask. Sarah said I smelled like a man. Imagine that. That's a compliment. Chris said that the body has grain, like wood. My rash has come out like lines in the grain. This guy singing is losing the audience, because he doesn't sing to them. He's very good, but he's singing to himself. I'm going to stop, now. I told Mike, when he invited me to the center table, that I can come out of my corner whenever I want. It's true enough about tables in corners.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

There are hundreds, thousands, dozens of women. It's a quiet night in the café, but there are at least a half-dozen attractive women. I should be asleep. I'm working, everyday, even on the weekends, and at night, I'm working my role as poet. My body is being overrun with rashes. My rash is not stopping but mounting to epidemic proportions. *Epidermic propitions?* Guilt? Approbation? Nerves. I'm exploding with toxins. I came across an article about the organ skin and its propensity for dispelling toxins.

I'm living the kind of life that might make good reading, good romanticizing, but shit, I'm in it. Where does he get his energy? He doesn't. I'm exhausted, working loose a toxin. I do, though, have energy. At my age, I don't have a problem drinking. I have a problem stopping.

"Stay drunk," said Baudelaire, and look where that got him. My mind sees the sexual world, but my body is in cruel limbo, *working loose a callus on the red, red rose*. Raoul called me to mirror him, last night. He bought me a beer, and another, and then, after an hour of his own private, personal angry demand, he spoke *himself*, and the talk was finished. I went to the Shamrock, and Gene wanted to talk. He did talk, but I was worn out, I couldn't carry it to the end. At work, today, I was slow and hurt, and my brain, heart, lungs and nerves jerked around in my body like a riderless horse.

This is the kind of night in the café that I love. No one puts upon me. This is the kind of writing I love. I'm so tired. I don't put upon myself. I'm drunk, for myself. I'm mirroring myself. I tried to explain to Tom, last night, at 2AM, how tiring it is to be a mirror, and he responded by talking about being a human, with human love, in a relationship, a sharing, caring.... "Yes, Tom, yes." I've been getting a little nuts on Tom, lately. Shit! I've been getting nuts on everyone, on myself. Everyone wonders what my problem is. Someone mentioned that my first book was rejected, and someone else said, "What happened to the *Great Brooks?*" and some girl said, "Who's the *Great Brooks?*"

I've always thought that if I ever let loose my spirit, it would reek wonderful havoc, and I'd be hard-pressed to survive it. There's only one way to achieve your greatest fulfillment in this life, and that's if you have a vision beyond it. I was watching a tribute to Jerry Lee Lewis, who was near death, six months ago. He spent 62 days in intensive care. His eyes have a far away look. His music hasn't changed, but he has. He's seen death. John Keats said, "I'm living a posthumous existence." Jerry Lee looked like that.

Samuel Coleridge said of the only meeting he had with Keats, "He had the look of death on him." I'm afraid of that, Nadja. I'm afraid I have seen too much, and yet I'm so alive, fueled by alcohol, like a corpse, pumped full of embalming fluids.

"My, he looks so alive." This is exaggeration, but it makes a point. Am I nearing the end of this book? Am I changing? Am I growing? Are there parts of me that are dying? Yes, to all the above. Where are you, Nadja? Has anyone written such a chronicle of the crawling and climbing of this sort of internal adventure? I heard a guy on the radio talk lovingly about the human difference. It seems we have a large portion of our cerebral cortex, that's unknown, that does our human thinking. We imagine and live from that source. It reminds me of part of an old poem.

*This shall be it all,
and the river that fills our brains
is the pot of earth from which we
will never be satiated and which
we cannot ignore.*

Nadja, you are my mirror. I need all these pages to get to the breakdown point, the breakthrough, the breakaway. I need your support to keep it from breaking me. How can I know that I'll break free into spirit and not into broken pieces of earthenware? The metaphor of dying is that, as the body dies, the spirit is set free. What's the presumption of that? That spirit is held prisoner in the body. But the body is the earth that feeds the heart that rivers the spirit. I can't know whether I'll live or die. On the bus today, coming home from work, I saw more new rash on my right hand. I saw it overtaking my entire body, and I was afraid. I looked at my ravaged arm and said, "Come on, toxins, take over, if you can."

*When you're young, and your breasts are sexy bumps,
and you have a motorcycle at the curb, you look at the room,
you see scenery flying by, you think about hands that cup
your innocence and kisses like sweet breath.*

*You go over and talk to the madman, the sad man, the bad man,
with only a faint glimmer of the crash and how the heart beats*

*like a wild animal when it's trapped by death, and only then
are your eyes in the gravel, and the gravel in your flesh.*

Jesus, Nadia, poetry scares me, like everything that conjures life.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I'm sitting in the Café Flore, after going to the clinic to find out about my rash. It's either syphilis or a final allergic bail out from house painting. I'll know in a week if it's the devil or the deep blue sea. The clinic cost a dollar, and the cortisone ointment cost nine.

Chuck doesn't want me to let my remarks and phrases get away. Therefore, out of a sense of friendly duty, here are three:

At the root of every alienation is a virtue.

*Life is like sitting in the front of a roller-coaster,
pretending you're in the driver's seat.*

*Go slow. Slow down. Stop.
Now you're getting somewhere.*

Before I wrote anything down, I said something in casual conversation, and Chuck stopped me.

"Write that down," he said.

"It's only a remark. It's just conversation," I said.

"You're a writer. Write it down."

"Gertrude Stein says remarks aren't literature."

"Fuck Gertrude Stein! Write it down."

Peter Ellington wrote, offering me board and room in Denver, in exchange for work. I need a ride. Hitchhiking has its appeal. Getting loose, for a while, has its appeal, but getting loose is possible, here. I haven't been in the Owl for several days. A café is like a lover. I have the habit of breaking free of lovers by making them kick me out. My

outrage factor has been rather high lately in that staid cesspool of middle class dreams gone awry. Bob's encouragement prevented my normal embarrassment from keeping me balanced. No amount of weighty words can keep a sheet of paper down in a breeze. I'm sitting in the direct sun, 80 degrees, in a long sleeve white shirt, because of my welted body.

"Scabies," the nurse said. I said to Chuck, as I showed him the outbreak of the rash in its dots, blotches, and lines, "I expect to see the face of Jesus, any day now." I haven't seen Jesus, but I've seen something. Last Tuesday, when I went to work painting, after the weekend up the coast, I took my tools. On all my scrapers and brushes, I made an X at the head of the handle, to mark them as mine. Everyone made up his own marks. The weekend before felt like an eruption of my being as a poet. Going back to work as a painter seemed like a cruel denial of a violent declaration.

Then, a few days ago, two configurations appeared on my right arm that I read meaning into. On the back of my right hand, just like the markings on my tools, appeared an X. And on my right forearm, a large, dark, well-defined question mark. ? I thought, "Why am I turning myself into a tool for someone else's advantage?" I still haven't settled on a satisfactory answer to the question posed by my right arm. On my last job, Clark told me to hurry up, and his girlfriend Christie said, "He's cracking the whip."

"That's his job," I said, "he's the boss."

I believe it's quite possible for my brain and nerves to write a message on my skin. My brain and nerves are writing these words on paper. I've committed myself to poetry so many times. It doesn't reduce the difficulties of living in this alienating world. Alienate or accommodate, that's the query.

*To be or not to be, that is the question. Whether to suffer
the slings and arrows of outrageous persecution or take
arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them.*

Here is Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. What possible slings and arrows could he be suffering? He's rich, talented, handsome, educated, with a beautiful girlfriend and loyal buddies. So his uncle killed his father? It was probably no more than a quiet, relatively bloodless coup. Was Hamlet's old father an innocent angel? Outrageous persecution? By what or whom? Take arms against a sea of troubles? Slash the relentless wash? Order the waves to stop? End troubles? Is he naïve? The mind is like a field of daisies,

against which is thrown a sea of dangers, from which the flowers draw sustenance, but the worst danger is the plow and the bomb, the blade and the hand of man that cut and tear the living beauty for the glass vases of distant decorated rooms.

Like a flight of fancy, like bees, like a hawk, circling in the sky in the heat of the afternoon sun. In defense of Hamlet, Denmark was a war zone of bleak aspects and bleaker dreams. By opposing them, does one accept them, define them, and end them in the mind? The world is beautiful. The world is ugly.

I'm in a café I seldom visit, and a guy just came up and said, "You're sitting in exactly the same spot you were in, when I saw you in here, yesterday. Did you leave?" I guess, when you find your spot, it gives out some sense of inevitability. Have I found my spot from among all these in my spotted life?

There was a story in the paper about the local teacher guru who was shot and killed. A student told him that he was greatly disappointed in the last lecture he gave for the year. The kid came back and said, "I get it. Your lectures have no beginning and no end, they just go on."

"You've learned a great deal," said the teacher. A search for, or a demand for conclusions is always fruitless. Even death is no conclusion but an awful transformation. To die from this intensity of awareness into dust, worm's meat, electrical dispersal, seems like such a reduction. The newspaper describes a super-nova explosion due in the Milky Way, soon, next week, or in a thousand years. And so it goes. It doesn't end, it merely ends. I have to go back to *The Owl & the Monkey*, right now, and take a last look, before I return.

I ran into Sybil Wood, another poet, on the streetcar. She was zoned out. She's on a three-month meditation journey at the Zen Center that culminates in a week-long sit, coming up in June. She described sitting on the Mission bus, in a clairvoyant state, seeing everyone's life messages. I said I had something similar happen with alcohol, and that clairvoyance is stimulating and addicting, but it comes at such a cost. The cost to her is a kind of spacy lethargy. I said that when I feel normal, I miss so much, strolling through life, noticing but not seeing. Sybil and I have an easy friendship. I showed her the X and ? on my arm. I told her I might be allergic to paint, or maybe I just think I am.

"Well, whether you are, or you aren't, you are," she said.

"That's clairvoyant," I said.

She laughed and rolled her saucer eyes. I got off the trolley, and when it passed, we waved. Now, I'm back in the window seat. At least I was, for a minute. It was too hot in

the afternoon sun. This chair is the polar opposite of that one. It's in the back corner, by the kitchen, a good seat to watch the café from. I told Sybil I felt like a broken man, last Tuesday, when the rash came. The weekend before broke me down, and going to work, I thought, "This is lost, this is hopeless, I'm a slave."

And here are Gene and Kathleen, the owners of the café, smiling. I imagine them asking if I had left the café, and I say, "Yes, for a while, but I'll always come back." This café means humanity. I'm normal, today, calm, peaceful, with no words but kindness for my fellows.

Love, Steve

Dear Nadja,

I ended up talking to Phil about Joe Miseraka, the self-styled General of Poetry. Dan and Phil think Joe's a good poet. I doubted it, because I couldn't imagine any compassion in him. He's been 86'd from the café, for a series of mildly psychotic outbursts. He's on S.S.I., and his parents pay him to stay away from them. Phil convinced me to take another look at Joe's work. I did, and it's not as bad as I thought. Joe tried to read at *The Rose Tattoo Café*, last week, and the patrons drowned him out. One guy got up and began playing the piano loudly. I ran into Joe, and I asked him, since he was a General of Poetry, what was I? He thought about it for a while. He gave it the utmost consideration and said, finally and succinctly, *Captain*. I was flattered, and I told him so.

Lee sat down and started to chat amiably. He gradually became angry for what seemed to him my arrogance about being a truth-seeker, when, in fact, I'm an asshole, like everyone else. I told him my interest was the intentionality of those people I care about, and he wondered what that was. Then he said something that didn't register until today. He said that, at first, my poetry scared him, but when I included some poems about people in the café, he relaxed, because they were kind and not cruel.

I've always meant, at every point of my being a poet, to address the general reader. My demeanor, my life in the bourgeois café, the way I dress, have all been affected by my wanting to belong in the community. Lee was telling me, without knowing it, and in anger, that I owed it to him not to break away. I had the feeling he wanted me to accommodate him, in some way.

Keats and Jeffers. The Nightingale and the Hawk. It's a gift to the human soul for a poet to love a thing enough to show that love in all its beauty and truth. Not one person's beauty, not one person's truth, not *the* beauty, not *the* truth, but, simply, beauty and truth. The hardest lesson, and the most joyful, is that no matter what I may learn about my incidence of life, I have no choice but to enact it, and when I do, all of life's anguish and realization become one. Nadja, you are me. I am you. I have no sister.

Invisible Lion

Too Much of a Man

"You're too much of a man to be a taker," my friend said. It's been six days since my last drink, and I'm still toxic. I'm sitting in La Bohème on the couch at the wall. My face is hot, my eyes are bloodshot. I'm not about to tell tales of drunkenness, nor am I about to begin the saga of a reformed drunk.

I want to tell the tale of the invisible lion, a living poet, an exciting, frightening, and dangerous creature, who has chosen to be so without the confusion and death threat of alcohol. I choose to be as drunk as any man, but I will do so without alcohol. I imagine this to be a journal of fulfillment, with all the excuses and abuses behind me. I am an invisible lion. Lions know about fear, in their own fear, in their own awareness. Drunkenness has become everyone else's excuse for their fear of this invisible lion. I know other lions. This one is busy at being this one. The others will take care of themselves. Today, this lion lets his invisibility become visible. This journal will proceed without regard for any misconceptions I might have had about my duties in the past.

The San Francisco 49ers will or will not win the Superbowl in ten days. I'll be 43 in a month and a week. Four men sitting near me are discussing *the meaning of being*. I'm no longer seriously concerned with the words and lives of all the other creatures that come to the watering hole in the jungle. They have their lives, they'll tell their own tales. I'll tell what an awakened lion thinks, feels, sees, and does. I'm excited about this time ahead. I've spent years listening to your tales of achievement and woe. I understand them.

If you've heard me roaring, it was a blast furnace and an incomprehensible garble. Even when I articulated as a poet, even when I held your heart in the hands of my words, you stared dumbly in awe or in anticipation of flight. We are all the same. Most people think that means we all get C+ at life and we should all earn a comfortable living. All the animals come to the watering hole. In the animal kingdom, they all know who they are, because they are what they are. Only among human beings is there obfuscation, denial, pretense, and posturing. I won't do any good if I try to put down some philosophy of human behavior. As human animals, we are what we are. Our invisible roar is somewhere deep within us, beneath our bullshit, or else it's apparent. Let it become apparent.

A Hundred Bottles

I'm living on Peter's back porch. His wife's son lives there, too. Chris is a Punk, with a leather jacket and torn jeans, written on. He wears three shirts or four with one tied around his waist. His hair is cut like he was caught sleeping overnight in the knife drawer of a hardware store. He reads Rimbaud and Lautremont. He uses his room like a crash pad. He offends his parents. He dropped out of school. He's going to live in a house with several others or on the street. I like this kid. He's my kind of kid. He joined the Communist Party. The Reds will never know what to do with him. He wants to be a bike messenger and spend his time going to demonstrations and getting arrested. He's a ringleader. He never talks among his friends, but they crowd around him. His father is attending Med School in Granada. He wants Chris to go to Harvard or Stanford. What, I think, and sleep in the basement of the Poly-Sci faculty lounge where he can plot the overthrow of absolutely nothing?

I'm in the Pícaro Café, on 16th Street in the Mission. The kid behind me in line was a ringer for Chris. The place is full of gay men. What has prompted this mini-invasion? Maybe it's the movie across the street at the Roxie. I'm not going to drink anymore, so it's time to affect some other manifestation of my aberrant responsibilities. I'm growing a mustache and a goatee. I don't like my nice shirt, my nice Levi's, my nice boots and my nice leather jacket. I rewrote some of Rimbaud's poems, ten years ago, before he became fashionable. I suppose what I'm doing now will be fashionable in ten years. I don't know what I'm doing now. I didn't know then. Only when it is the fashion, and you participate in the fashion, do you believe you know what you're doing. I could get a bizarre haircut, but what I have was once thought of as a bizarre haircut.

I believe in the timelessness of good writing. On the other hand, it's interesting when some example of good writing becomes *au courant*. The seemingly narcissistic, self-indulgent, nihilistic, chantlike, raving, demanding, clarity of Rimbaud deserves a moment, from time to time. Rimbaud was a Punk. He believed the end was near, a fait accompli, past. And it was, for that enfant terrible. Dried up at 19, he went gun-running, caught a bug in Aden, and died in a hospital in Marseilles, busied over by his sister. I could take my shirt off and tie it around my waist, sit here naked, or wear my jacket

inside out and slit-rip my Levi's. Or I could write poems. What rebellious son of a bitch ever did that for 20 years? A few. As few as there are few of anything good.

You are in on this early transformation-manifestation, completion-fulfillment, business-as-usual reality, whoever you are. I'm looking at the hundred bottles of beer on the wall, re-imagining their images. A hundred chipped coke bottles full of dirty river water. An old man, teeth rotted, sits near them. He says, "Hey, mister, pssst, want some dirty water, full of maggots. You'll like it. Tastes good. Ten for a dollar. Great, huh?"

The Punk bounces up to the counter like a mating waterfowl and dips his peacock-tail head, like the counter-girl at Macy's showing off a new perfume to a matron with sinus problems. Maybe the manager is watching. I'm practicing sitting like I've always imagined I'd sit if I ever managed to believe what an absolutely incredible life I'm living. It feels right. It feels good. It's going to be fun, to watch people try to rise up to this flesh and bone apparition. This is being drunk without getting drunk. It is having the right by having the right.

A Curious Vantage

I'm free. The monkey's off my back. The unspoken motto of America is *You're on you're own*. Once understood, it's a freedom. There are dependencies of many colors. All gone. Freedom. The reality comes indoors. This is the third in a series of self-describing books. *Savage Amusement*, then *Dear Nadja*, and now *Awake in the Dream*. My brother Mark suggested that all books can be reduced to a single sentence. The first book was, *I am a man*. The second was, *I am a poet*. This one is, *I am free*.

Like all my writing of this sort, there are untold stories running simultaneously. The events of encounter with others are left largely to themselves. I don't live in order to write about it. And the poetry lives independent of this narration. This writing is a different kind of communication. There's a great deal going on, outside this. Dave Kohl called me about house painting. Peter Ellington talked to me about his maturing. He's beginning to write again. He thinks it's still two years off. He's so much more of a man when he's at his work, writing. Paul and I are talking of writing a play, called *Goodnight, Irene*, about two terrorists who invade a café, armed with song, poetry, love, laughter, and truth. It happened to us, two years ago.

I was painting for Ian and Dave. Ian's greed drove Dave off, he says. Dave wants me to get my painter's license, and then we can make some good money, do good work,

and talk about Thomas Merton and theater. Dave was a Yale actor and did some New York work. He's now in a religious community. "Without the dogma," he says. Last night, I prayed. It just came out. "Lord, please help me." Simple. That's all it was. I tried to elaborate, but there was no need. The prayer was complete. God doesn't require much, just the pure expression of my spirit. "This hesitant revolution," I called my life, ten years ago. I knew it was true. Taking away the hesitancy is kicking the monkey off my back. I've stopped helping people deal with who I am. They're on their own. From now on, they get the full-shot, or they get nothing. Invisible eyes. I used to engage everyone's eyes. Everyone. So many eyes. Looking for the soul behind the eyes. Now, they show, or I go.

Gia Cresci said, "Steve, you sit in that café, and you give them everything, and they give nothing back." I used to think I was helping them, worrying about their lives. I sat, talking to Peter this morning, in his house, and I stopped carrying him in my mind's eye. I looked. I saw. I thought my eyes were cold, but they weren't. They simply weren't supportive of real or imagined angst. When there were moments of pleasure, a warm smile came into my seeing. Compassion needs no words, no actions. Showing sympathy is painting a mask on a real face, a beautiful face, the true face.

It's Monday afternoon in the Pícaro, a few people scattered about, Reggae on the radio. A tall, pretty, painted girl, sits reading. A man in a trench coat strides out the door. The pretty girl taps her cigarette, as if she's measuring a pinch of tarragon. It's a good mood Monday. I talked at length with Dave tonight. My son, Jack, is coming by in a moment or two with my Rimbaud-Breton-Lorca poems, *Let Me Burn*, poems written as if they were translations, without knowing the French and Spanish. I invented new poems. I had an idea this generation would understand them. Being a poet for all time is a curious vantage point. I see generations as if they were different towns on the map, each with a different set of prejudices and possibilities. Back to a recurring theme, my potential at an end, I am fulfilled, filled to the full. Now is the time to empty out the bottomless urn. I've urned it. Let Me B-urn.

On the Bus

Riding on the 22Fillmore bus, I watched half a dozen blind or legally blind people get on. They came to the back of the bus. As they were sitting, the bus lurched, and they fell all over each other, laughing. The guy next to me was holding a paper bag with a

Dos Equis in it. He took the last swallow and handed the bottle to another guy by the back window. "Hey, toss that out the window, would you?"

I was amazed, to witness a blind kid tossing a bottle onto the street. Ten minutes later, as we rolled down 16th Street, he still had it. He was looking out the window, waving the bottle. I figured he never wanted to toss it, in the first place. The group had spent twenty minutes since getting on, talking, inside their circle of shade, gossipy stuff, relationships and friends.

At Valencia, past the corner, the bus stopped. I had moved to the door, to get off, to go visit Paul. A guy got on, waving his wallet like he had a Fast Pass. He was clean-cut Chinese. He looked like a guy getting off work. He strode quickly to the back of the bus.

"All right, the party's over."

He flashed his badge at the blind and near blind, as his partner got on at the back door, a white guy, like a welder. Plain clothes cops. Good at it. They looked like a couple of guys. The group was stunned. They started to get up.

"No, not you, your buddy. OK, buddy, let's go. Off the bus. C'mon."

The guy looked flabbergasted. If he was blind, and I couldn't tell for sure, he hadn't thrown the bottle. He was either looking for a patch of grass or a trash barrel, for ten minutes, leaning out the window. Maybe he was listening for the silence that indicates a free zone. The cops pulled him off and led him to the side, behind a parked truck. The bus pulled up to Mission Street.

One girl said, "C'mon, everybody, we got to get off. We've got to help him." I could only imagine the chagrin to the cops. *MUNI COPS END BLIND CRIME WAVE. All in a day's work, your honor. Thanks for the medal, Madame Mayor.* I love it. If you're ever low on funds, and you want to take in some theater, ride the bus.

Life As Is

Dave is coming, sometime between now and ten. I'm always curious how circumstances prompt imagination. Whatever happens while I'm waiting will occur as if for free, gratis. Last year, I began to get a message. As if. Living a life as if. I began to suspect it was common. I've done it, living as if a poet, as if a father, as if a lover, as if a house painter. This life is no longer as if. This is life as is. Like the used car lot, full of *as is* cars. The new ones are all *as if* cars, until they are driven and become real.

This one is being written as is, with no need for as if. Any action begins in conception, before realization. Feel, think, do. Do, think, feel. Do, feel, think. Feel, do, think. Round and round. Leaving nothing out. Think, feel, do. Think, do, feel.

I feel, as if I think, as if I've done all that. Don't you? I'm beginning to suspect the lion stuff I wrote in the beginning.

"Well, Mr. Proust, you write long sentences. And you, Mr. Gogh, oh, sorry, Mr. Van Gogh, you use a strong brush stroke and a lot of color. And you, Mr. Brooks, have a tendency to be theatrical and irreverent."

I began to notice that this *hold-your-head-up* attitude was getting me to think of getting on the stage again. I have performed, at first, with my head down. In my first one-man show, *It's Showtime: Keep Talking*, the Chronicle called it *an off-hand manner*, decrying that my eyes were riveted to the boards, six feet in front of me. That was true, and it was not successful as a style. Heads up, with invisible eyes on the proverbial audience, and a leonine presence. Now, that has appeal.

Downtime is productive. I backed off from the lion identity. I lost sight of the presence of possibility. This is not posturing for fun, but being aware of life. Cutting out the middleman is living fully. It's *being* on stage, not being *on stage*. Who knows, I may end up painting Broadway, the Great White Way, with Dave, who, by the way, is not here yet, at 8:45. He has to get out of some house activities, but he doesn't worry me. If he doesn't show, he will, sooner or later.

I just looked out across the Picaro at all the tables and people and felt a calm come over me. A relaxation. A sense of surveying one's dominion, or is it domain? Not dominion over people but over the tendrils of being. It is the domain of belonging to a vast, interlocking chain of life.

This afternoon, Peter described in rich detail his sense of the Platte River in Nebraska before the white man came. Wide-water land, teeming with the interwoven lives of creatures, the Dominion of the Imagination, founded on the real, clear water, full of life, clear skies, full of life. All I have to do is take a deep breath, and I'm drunk. I don't have to get drunk. I was born drunk. It's a selfish high that includes anyone willingly, or everyone unknowingly.

Here's the lion's downfall, the thorn in the paw. I have made eye contact with an attractive woman, which is to say a woman has looked back at me. Shit, I look at them all. When they don't return my notice of them, I politely fold my tent and steal off in the night. This woman has shown a couple of qualities I like. She's in thought, pen above

paper, and she looks at the room with open eyes, a kind of curiosity. Nothing can tame the lion but a lioness. Frizzy blond hair, baggy sweater, a contemplative slouch, she draws out her words and paints them on the paper. Funny, how circumstances prompt imagination. Now, she has a giant latte. She hands her half page of writing across the table to her more mannish sister. And when the equality of the sexes has been made final, that mannishness will be womanish, as well.

Godot to Hell

I'm beginning to feel strained, waiting for Dave. Godot to Hell, Dave. I don't really mean it. I just like the play on words. Which is better than a *play on MacDuff*. Ah, my first joke. I love it when I make my first joke in any new book. It's like being told a new joke, a gift from Orpheus Marx, the sixth brother, the inspiration for them all. Going to the movies with Beatrice and Morgan, the other night, I made this one up, "And then there's the orphan who bought a horse that runs in the rain, and a bag of feed, because he always wanted a mudder and fodder." Beatrice said she'd heard it already. It was new to me. Where's Dante when I need him? The woman across the room is smiling in private thought. We must be leading parallel lives. Maybe she's got a joke too. *Hi, can I buy you a cup of humor? No, thanks, mine's full.* She's beautiful, sometimes, when she throws back her mane of tangled locks. Hmm. That's an eerie canal. She looks up from her papers, directly at me. Then, seeing my eyes looking back, she throws her glance at the far wall and knocks a couple of books into someone's swordfish dinner.

Stay away, Dave, I'm having a good time. If Dave shows up now, he will be in a state of grace. Let the night linger another hour. I know that when she leaves, I will follow soon after. I'm feeding off the energy of a woman's glance. I'm overcome by the image of lying in a woman's arms, through the night, on the island of the bed. Floating time, free from the world. What I want to know is, *How do I go about meeting this woman?* She keeps staring at me. I catch her at it. She catches me at it. Any fool can see we are both curious. She puts the same intensity, the same concentration into her writing that I do. Like little kids drawing, twisting their lips and opening their eyes wide, then narrow, then wide. She's putting on her sweater. She's tall. This time, looking at her, I show my shyness. It's better than being cool all the damn time. She and her friend are leaving. Nice jacket. Not a big ass like I feared. But gone. Another time, perhaps. She's too young, I fear. Fear. Fear. Fear. I feel as if I've done that.

Quiescence

The difference between illusion and reality is that they are partners. I'm a warrior. I've been hiding that fact, and hiding from it, for years. Whenever I wanted to risk my training as a clean-cut All-American boy, I drank. I shrank from the risks of strength and chose the risks of weakness. *An explorer of the dark side* (as I've been called) became an *explorer of the broken heart and the broken spirit*. My training would have me cold and capable. I am choosing to break free on the strong side. Whenever I feel myself constrained by social training, I move to act with more heart, more strength, more belief, more knowledge, more control, and more abandon. Warriors don't abuse their power. Abuse of power is contrary to taking presence in it. A warrior knows his enemies and his allies. Alcohol is this warrior's enemy.

That's enough of a treatise on being a warrior. It's not a discipline, a religion, or a caste restricted to any people or place. It is a state of knowing. Sami Farhat told me that the next step after poet is prophet. I thought, at the time, "Man, I'm not ready for that."

Renegade Christians went into the desert. Indians go into the hills. I live in the city. Paul and I spent 40 days and 40 nights in the devil's cave, the bottle. Demon Rum. Raising our hands like a water line in front of our eyes to keep each other awake and alive. We barely survived. There are no dead bodies. There are many paths to enlightenment. No one ever gets to the Golden City.

When I was 30, my wife said to me, in anger, "You're 30 years old!" I said, "I'm not 30 years old, I'm Steve." Now I'm a 42-year-old housepainter/poet from Illinois and Nebraska. But I'm not. Those of us who cling to our personal histories pull it around in a little red wagon, and we are known by the wagon we pull. I used to throw my poems out to someone as if to say, *There's the real Steve Brooks. Take them and make them yours and leave me alone to write some more*. But the poems are only the poems. They may be the finest thing about the red wagon, but there they are, right on top, in a nice blue binder.

Anyone who has the revealed truth in his back pocket, and acts accordingly, is a liar. A trickster. Watch out for him. Or he is frightened and hangs onto his pockets as if they hold the last dollar bill on earth. All knowledge is available to all people. It lives in the heart of an old man, sitting in the back seat of a junked '57 Pontiac, behind the Seed and Feed Store in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. Unless he died. In which case, it's being kept in a shoebox, underneath the bed of a blind old woman who lives above a

Chinese Take-Out in Boise, Idaho. Shit, it's been shredded and blown all over the Rockies. Oh, well, better luck next life. A man climbed to the top of the Himalayas and asked the wisest of the wise if the old man would tell him the secret to long life. "Don't hold your breath," said the old master. I'm scared shitless of being a warrior; the inevitability of it and the separation from all the shit that goes to make up a successful, normal life. I want to incorporate my spirit into daily life. I don't want a cave, a cell, or a hermitage of any sort. Why go away from what's available everywhere?

The other day, Beatrice said, "Now, people won't think you're drunk, they'll think you're crazy." I can deal with that. I like the idea of being thought crazy. I never liked the idea of being merely fucked up.

Major Concerns

Warrior of the Heart. I'm catching a little warmth from the sun in the window of La Bohème. It's a cold winter. Heat is hard to come by. Cold streets, cold nights, cold houses. George Tsongas just sat down at the next table. He's a poet even older than I am. Damn, it's so nice to sit in the sun and take my coat off. In the twelve days I've been sober, for the first few days, I kept my coat on, twenty-four hours a day. I sit in Peter's kitchen with my feet in the oven door and my coat on. In public for twelve days, I haven't been able to take my coat off and stay warm. It's not that I've got chills. Everyone has. There's an iceberg in the bay. My god in heaven, I rolled up my sleeves. Will winters never cease? I'm shy about saying hello to George. I've been in his general company for ten to twelve years, but I've never spoken to him. It makes me wonder if I engender the same fearful respect from others. Probably. I'm making eye contact today, as of yore.

Either I like people or I like my idea of people. When I feel strong, there's nothing not to imagine. People are worth imagining about. People are like exotic fruits with husks, rinds and skins. There's no telling what's inside. Even as I say that, I know that, generally, the pulp is little more than that. Succulence is unlikely and rare. Nothing humbles a poet like another poet. I have enormous respect for these warriors of the heart. By not talking to George, I can write about him. As I write, I regain my invisible eyes. I just startled a woman across the room by turning my invisible eyes to hers. This is not self-serving. This is my sort of honesty. I will speak to George, either when I'm finished writing, or as he is about to leave. I'm sitting in a pool of well-being. There's Dante for you. The Pool of Well-Being.

I still haven't spoken to George. I've sat in a bar, half in the bag, for hours, still unable to speak to the person next to me, either man or woman. This is not a condition solvable by booze or clever, social patter. This is the recognition of another's right to a certain inviolability. George has made no indication of his willingness to make contact. He is invisible. The border walkers spend so much time, inviolate, on the far ramparts of their sensibilities, of their senses and sensations, that it's no wonder they slip in and out of town unnoticed. The only effective rule of thumb I've had for meeting people is to let it happen. It either pops out of one's mouth, or circumstances make a meeting. It popped out of my mouth, as George was about to leave. We talked with the ease of people who know what the other is about.

A lovely woman just took the chair opposite at my small table. She's getting her coffee. This should be interesting. She sat for the sun, which is ten minutes from the rooftops, going down. Same conditions prevail with her as did with George. Meeting someone is always the same. It's best left to God's little gestures. The Nuclear Winter is Endless. This woman is part of an organization called Major Concerns. She's carrying a poster. At first glance, it's one of those love-the-earth portraits of our verdant planet, green and blue against the black backdrop of space. On second glance, the hemisphere has been largely encrusted from top to middle with ice and snow, but Central America and the coasts of North and South America, nearest the equator, are green. George's son is part of a group called *Squatters*. George is being evicted. What a lovely city. Lovely is the word for the day. The *Squatters* are attempting to protest the gentrification of this once open city. The real estate interests, a lovely euphemism, have won the day. Despite all, it's truly a lovely day.

Trace It Back

In a work of fiction, one creates a character and stays with him. In real life, one has many sides, and no one face will carry through the entire time. I feel sad and lonely. Lost. Confused. Depressed. Low. Unsure. Disappointed. Undirected. I'm running out of money. But that's not it. There's no work. Maybe Monday. I want to move out of Peter's house by Friday, in two days. Nope, that's not it. Finally, I realize a place for all this multifaceted sadness. Dave came into the Picaro to meet his girlfriend Beth. When she came in later, and before I knew it was she, I looked into this woman's face, and for a moment, I felt a bonding. Love, if you want to call it that. She looked like my mother

forty or fifty years ago. That's a psychological truism. I felt intimate bonding. Not just an attraction. Not lust or desire. I suppose, if I had my druthers, I'd pick someone entirely different. I'd pick someone full-breasted, dark, funny, exciting. But bonding is involuntary. It happens, and you're stuck with it. Of course, she's Dave's mate, not mine. I'll leave it at that. Good ideas don't make mates appear, and bad ideas don't work, either. Well, now I feel better, thank you very much. Trace it back. Feelings always have a root somewhere. Whenever I'm overwhelmed, I know it's about some recent word, deed, or person.

Today is Wednesday

"God, don't leave me." That was my prayer from last night, said quietly, calmly, directly, and innocent of fear. God is in me. I speak to God as a statement of, to, and from God. I practice saying, "God don't leave me," until it comes out like a simple statement, like *Today is Wednesday*. It's difficult to erase the fear, the cry, or the demand. Once the anxious emotions of normal life are gone, the prayer becomes the answer to the prayer. Well-being is assured by the simple presence I am inside of. The simple presence we are inside of is God, and the recognition of that presence is God's answer to the prayer.

Outdrink the Devil

All the times that feel like wine times or beer times, whiskey times, gin times, Pernod times, they already are, they already exist in themselves. A French chanteuse whispers in the ear, lamps glow, it's a cool night after a warm day, and one's future open.

White whiskered old man reading, eating soup with a spoon as big as his mouth. Pocket books: 5 for \$1. Bald guy with two black eyes, collar up, stuffing alfalfa sprouts in his cheeks. Dirty dishes on the table, fat bellies gone down the street.

So here we are. On an evening, at a time when the image of drinking asks pleasantly for its rights, the warrior of the heart asks himself what will replace it. Better yet, what will better it? Or best it. Only the heart itself can out-drink the devil. The heart that wants to drink, is not drunk, has not drunk, it owes itself a deeper draught of itself. Past and future drain the heart. Forgetting past and future is no easy task of

avoidance. And it's too easy. Being in the exact moment works, like a charm. Do it, as if it is a charm. It is not.

Jack is sitting at the same table, with his eyes vacant, his head down on his arm. I imagine concern or anger. I worry. I turn away. Steve, stop carrying people. Stop carrying yourself. I'm battling not myself and my son, but the demons that pull me from myself, from my perfectly empty power source. Years ago, in torture from the loss of Regina, I walked up the street to my empty apartment in Oakland, and all of a sudden, I felt the center of the moment. It was the moment of neither past nor future. It was the no-thought, no-feeling moment. I was stunned. Nothing. There was nothing there. It was an absolute vacuum. It was the gap between the sparks, between the breaths, between the heartbeats. Then, as quickly as I was horrified, I was brilliant. As quickly as the sun went out, it came back on, bathing me in total, wraparound brilliance. There was vacuum, and around the vacuum, there was *everything*. It is the only place to go, and it's the most frightening place of all, because it is the only thing that is nearest to everything.

As If Drunk

I did it. I stayed as-is and got as-if drunk. I got high. My brain is drifting from one delightful, connected image to another. It's 9PM and I'm going to take the next two hours. I had a full day, and I got too excited. I wandered into a residence hotel downtown, the Harcourt, looking for a job on the day they were taking applications for a painter. It was a sunny, warm day. Jack and I strolled 24th Street, and I found a wallet for sale for thirty-five cents and I bought my two favorite pens. This afternoon, in La Bohème, I ran into Jane Terry, who may have a studio/loft sublet in Berkeley for me in a couple of months. Barbara Englebert just stuck her face in mine. I haven't seen her in a year and a half. She was a strong figure in the last book. We hugged and grinned like we always do. We exchanged numbers, and she went back to speaking foreign tongues with people.

There's an old man, a science writer, sitting nearby, taking the name of a nurse practitioner from a strikingly attractive woman in order to combat some stress ailment. A guy plows through the chairs and stumbles across the old man's feet. The old man says, "You're not very careful. Do that again and I'll tell my mother." The woman's boyfriend shows up, and she said, "I'm making the acquaintance of this very interesting gentleman. Jay, this is Ed. Ed. Jay. Jay's a writer, too."

Everybody's a goddamn writer. I love it. Karen is her name. I've been coming within inches of some of San Francisco's finest women, lately. Close, but no cigar. Cigar, but no lightcr. Jay says he writes when he has to. He's an editor. Ed is telling a story of being jerked around as a writer of particular perceptions. Either he's totally full of shit and a practicing paranoid, or he's right. It's hard to tell. Aberrant perceptions are a dime a dozen or they're worth a million bucks. This old man's ego, suppressed as it is, is slopping all over Jay. Karen is avoiding the mess by concentrating on Ed's Xeroxed writings. Age is not an automatic indication of wisdom. Generally, it's a good bet to be a sign of the *hardening of the artistry*. Karen calls his article a preface, an introduction. Ed says, "Yeah, it looks like that, don't it, but not to the trained criminologist."

When I was riding the bus here, I felt dangerous, a word I use to describe a state of heightened power and expectation. If it's truly dangerous, isn't it only so in my mind? It's the notion of being out of the norm of ordinary social behavior. Like being drunk, for instance. Now Ed is squelching his own story. It's *professional confidentiality*, he says. I cast myself against Ed by comparison of aberration. Am I crazy, wise, dangerous, powerful, self-serving, and/or pretentious? Am I a warrior or a pitiful idiot, a master of the world or a master of self-deception? Don Quixote and Sancho Panza combined? A true warrior is humble. Ed is not humble. Ed is pissed. Sixty years of pissed. It's time for a poem. Lacking that, it's time to pick this old fart up by the stink and toss him into the street. Pity the street.

A Carload of Plums

It's 1:30 in the morning, and I'm as happy as a plum, on the back porch at Peter's house. Chris is watching an old movie on the little TV in his loft above me. "Americanizing" himself, he says. The absolutely wonderful cookies Chris' mother, Peter's wife, Sherrill, baked yesterday, are all gone, they were so good. I'm reading the Playboy interview with Gabriel García Márquez and the latest New York Review of Books. The junky little elbow lamp above my left shoulder flickers and hums like a patio bug killer. I'm in the house of a literary man who wants to go to Italy and never come back to the USA, but he loves the land, just like I do.

If I could figure out how to keep myself, while loving everything as much as I do, I'd be as happy as all the plums in the world combined, generation after generation. I'm lying in a blue sleeping bag with my shirt on, so I won't get cold shoulders, and my new

mustache is beginning to feel like spikes. There's a box of Cheer on the window sill, a pile of clothes on the bed, a pile of clothes on the floor, a pile of clothes on the old hide-a-bed by the door, punk posters and the St. Pauli Girl on the walls. You can hear the people upstairs talking and walking around. My pen sounds like an assiduously organized hen, scratching out her last will and testament on the ancient floorboards of the chicken coop, and I'm as happy as a carload of plums.

What a life! I wouldn't believe it, if circumstances didn't force me to believe it. My saliva tastes great, at 1:50 in the morning, and I'm convinced that great tasting saliva is absolutely one of the finest sensations given to a member of the human race. What can I say? No plum ever knew such joy. You may think I'm joking, but I'm only playing. This joy is real. I don't need it forever. Joy is always forever, even if it only takes 25 minutes to write about it. Somewhere above the Spanish Steps in Rome, where he died, Keats is smiling.

Great America

I got a car, I didn't catch cold, I saw some people, ate dinner, took a ride, sat down, went places, looked at people, and thought about things. Like a thought stroll. Everyday that I don't drink, I beat the devil. It feels good. Everyday I write a page that I like, I get a smile from somewhere. Life is available for simple pleasures and abiding joys. Some rent is due on the space. Upkeep minimal. I ran into Josh. He says I can crash at his place if I need to. Josh is from the New York City street scene, for many years. Crashing is no big deal to him. At 42, crashing is a *big no-big-deal* to me. I never did much of it. Just a long, sustained, ten years of crash.

Ian coughed up his old Pinto, like he had said he was going to do. Jack has driven off to visit his new punk, stoner, preppy friends. He was like a kid with a new toy. I had Ian sign the car over to Jack. Cars are fun to live without. They're like a day at Great America. A free ticket entitles you to endless rides and the chance to spend a lot of money on seeming incidentals. That's business. Now let's see if I can crank it up or down, and do something unheard of, yet, so far. This is peculiar writing. It is just what it is. There is no glory here.

That old man, Ed, really got to me last night. I opened myself up to him. Empathy has its pitfalls. The old bastard had me reeling with my own notions of being full of shit. Half my impulse is to be a lion/warrior. The other half is to keep it to myself, be an

observer, a contemplative, a hermit. Being humble is the crucial link that cannot be lost. My lifelong habit is to explain and apologize for being alive, believing and knowing I'm about different work than most, trying to be more than we are called on to be, as humans, in the ways we are proscribed to be, the ways we are expected to conform our boundless souls to a bound spirit in chained lives. Knowledge is so powerful it frightens even those of us who seek it, even those of us who experience it. I don't know where the path leads, even as all other paths are defined and offered. The definition and the offer of all other paths become the demand to follow them.

That's why I toss about in this writing. Part of it is the warrior's need to play the fool. Part of it is feeling inadequate to the task. Part is seeing the charlatans of true knowledge and fearing to become one of them.

*What if it's more than me, which it is, and like a great pouring
into a small vessel, the vessel is broken, and only in my ambitious
idealization is the vessel broken free into spirit and made clear,
and not, like clay, into broken pieces of earthenware.*

And so, I toss about, not new to the challenge but new at becoming its fulfillment. I suspect, all of a sudden that this dilemma will always face me. And I suspect that this is a cop-out, and I'm only adhering to hesitancy. Like Hamlet, revolutions can be procrastinated, mulled over, considered from every angle, but at some point, the shot heard round one's heart must be taken.

I reread Hamlet last year to see if I could take it for literal truth instead of as drama. Actions fulfill any posture one takes. If I were my parent or my god, I would see the growth in my life, but from the inside, only a massive transformation in the mirror would convince my fear and skepticism. I'm still shy, reluctant, unsure, and doubting. Don't leave me, God. I've come many years from the dreamer I once was. Every one of us is a Walter Mitty. Keats used to flog himself, not long after he had counted himself among the greats. There is a certainty that alleviates this vacillation. I know it. I know of that certainty. It eludes me. Then it pervades me. There is a power other than the power evidenced by people dominating other people. I aim to be, in that power, neither leader nor follower.

This is the last sheet in this notebook, and at 9:30PM, there are precious few places to find any like it. I walked across the street from the Picaro into the tiny

grocery/liquor store and found its one last writing tablet. Truth be known, I like poetry, better than this kind of writing, because I think poetry lifts the ordinary to flight, but this writing can at least make it sit up straight.

The Anniversary Special

Reading *Down and Out in Paris and London* by George Orwell, in the Blue Danube Café on Clement, listening to casually fashionable young women discuss skiing at *Squaw* and some model resume *thingee*. This kind of talk is a mind-warping *thinkee*. Sitting at ease in comfort, reading a book about poverty gives it a pleasant distance, as if it's a fiction to be delighted in. Ashley and her friend quarrel over a cupcake. *Please eat half of this! Ashley! Please! Oh, God! I can't believe I'm eating this! I'm so mad! Maaaad!*

In La Bohème, now, it's a different story. Here, there are poor, those who are in poverty, and those who've known it. This is my Paris, my Bohemia, and yet it's not mine. I'm a part of it, only as I'm here. There's rarely any camaraderie in this struggle. Particularly in the *United States of Good Luck. I need a job. Good luck. I'm out of money. Good luck. I'd like a little respect and recognition. Good luck.* The wanderers and seekers have a gentle, haunted look in their eyes when they're drifting in poverty, like newspapers in a fitful gust. Headlines, articles, and advice columns, turned to refuse.

As I read, I glance over at a woman I met in AA, a year and a half ago. She's talking to a gray-faced man with active, sad eyes and slicked-back hair; a man caught in the miserable self-pitying, self-deceiving reaches of the disease, when the juice does the reasoning for you, when any other kind of thinking is alien. Poverty has the same effect. It becomes the world. Incidentally, so does working for a corporation and having babies.

I'm in good shape, as that goes, but as I read about poverty and look around, I feel it as if I am destitute and hung-over. I'm neither, and it's to Orwell's credit, as a writer, and mine, as a reader, that I empathize. It's due to his ability and my character. I suppose I could read pretty stories about pretty people, but there's cleanliness here. Whenever something lovely happens to the down and out Orwell, it's luminescent. When nothing is taken for granted, everything has clean edges.

I'm sitting here, with my eyes welling up with the tears of broken men. I catch the eye of the owner of the café and I look away abruptly. Then I put a look of secure

confidence into my eyes and look back. Then I erase the look. I have the right to share this misery across an ocean and fifty years, haven't I? It's a dilemma I have faced often, as a poet, assuming some character or condition for purposes of understanding, then having my identification mistaken for my identity. If Keats could pick about the gravel with a sparrow, I can certainly pick about the coffeehouse mean-streets table-scrap with another human being.

My imagination is quick, alive, and at the ready. I have to guard against the magnet of imagination. I went into the toilet and began to think what taking a sponge bath in a public toilet could be like. Paper towels and a sink. How long could I stay in, without arousing suspicion? I thought of the black T-shirt I've been wearing twenty-four hours a day to keep warm. Does anyone suspect it's not for its appearance that I wear it? I tell all this to give the tale to what goes on in the identifying mind. If my thoughts have frayed cuffs, then so be it.

In conversation with Dave, Beth, and their friend Bev, who's a dwarf, Bev said she didn't care for Nathaniel West, preferring the books of a woman who says she cares so much for her characters she can't bear anything bad to happen to them. She doesn't like stories of degrading and degraded people. I can understand her particular interest, but I believe there's something elevating in Nathaniel West, and in art like it, if only in the art itself. On the other hand, I'm naïve. I'm a sanguine fellow, and those I know who carry anger and bitterness distress me. They seem lost.

I have \$5. I went into the Pioneer Chicken and ordered the Anniversary special. \$1.59. About half-price. Still reading *Down and Out in Paris and London*, the book propped up between the tray and the napkin holder. On leaving, a guy asked me for a quarter. I gave him a look of apology. In the next block, a young guy came running by me, followed by a heavyset security guard and two other guys, chasing. I don't have a resolute attitude about these things. I refuse to believe my own poverty. Therefore, I keep myself unresolved, not quite believing anyone else's poverty, either. Jack wants to have a roll of quarters and give them out, when asked. It's either that or nothing. It's impossible to justify the real need. No one who begs money is well off. Some are worse than others and only resort to it in crisis. Some have it as a livelihood. Some only want booze. Some need booze. Some need food. If I'd been told to stop the thief, I might have leveled the poor fool. As it was, silent Keystone Kops version, I moved out of the way and stared, as if entertained. They turned the corner, one, two, three, four.

Ah, 'twas ever thus. The *Pícaro* is populated like cattle grazing at a distance from each other in a field. I've come out of my identification in poverty because Orwell has found a place to honor the human spirit. At work in the bowels of a hotel, scrubbing pots 14 hours a day, he sees the spirit at work in the pride of his fellow employees. Their cuds are properly chewed, their grass properly digested, their milk properly given. Despite its unbelievable folly, I continue to respect the magical human brain and its manifestations. The malignant organ.

Tomorrow is Superbowl Sunday. The hometown team is a slight favorite. If the Niners win, San Franciscans will go, as they have gone, properly and improperly, ape-shit, this town will be a madhouse, Bedlam. If they lose, the sore losers will be legion. I, on the other hand, am looking for love, or its equivalent in sensual attention. It's the crapshoot that keeps me closest to notions such as fate, karma, serendipity, destiny, hope, and the divine right of wishful thinking. If I didn't have a lucky history, I might despair.

The Grand Piano

These are the last days of *The Grand Piano*. It's a big, sprawling, ugly, filthy, grab-bag coffeehouse. Haight Street has not yet been successfully boutique'd. It's a raunchy street, and The Grand Piano is its parlor. I hear it's being closed down soon, to be replaced by a Round Table Pizza. The walls in the back room are yellow. Yellow gets dirty worse than any other color. The decorations, such as they are, run from the talented to the grotesquely incompetent. Paintings, hangings, prints, mosaics, the sense is of found art, stumbled-upon, art-like objects, donated, left on the doorstep, stuff that's been stuck up on the wall to appease a debt, to cover a hole in the plaster, or because someone chose it, out of obsessive bad taste. What's truly good gets lost in the overflow, like a gold ring in the garbage. And yet it engenders a kind of freedom. The only problem with freedom is excess. People run amok with freedom, but the adventure, the possibility, and the rare moments of the exception are given a place.

I'm ill at ease in The Grand Piano because of the bums, the street dodgers, dopers, ancient hippies, panhandlers, the homeless; all the wretched refuse. And yet the room is full of smiling, grinning, engaged people. There may be precious little greatness here, but there's plenty of room for it. Even greatness need a place to fuck off, a place to kiss off the demands, great and petty, that plague civilized mankind. The

front room is a *mélange*, a *menagerie*, a great lot of people sitting around in the luxury of their idiosyncrasy, some more crass than others. Here, I feel even more foolish than I did in the backroom. But, I'm actually doing something. I'm describing the crowd on the park benches of the indoor public square, the thirsty milling around the town pump.

The sun is shining on Haight Street, the *Sun*, the great god of blessing and disguise. El Sol is shining, this particular afternoon. I've got three shirts and a jacket on, feeling bedraggled, and yet, I'm going back to work, tomorrow. The man next to me is truly out of work. Not having a job in this country is like committing a crime. He offers to buy a cigarette from me.

"Nah, just take it, that's what they're for," I say.

"Care for another," I say, as I leave.

"Thank you," he says, "maybe I can do you a favor some time."

"Could be," I say, without elaboration, without telling him I know exactly how he feels. My discomfort in the Grand Piano dissolves with a glimpse of the true human being. God protect me from the delusion of comfort.

The Blue Danube

Wanting to write is like wanting a drink. One listens politely to conversation, all the while eyeing the cabinet where the booze is kept. Everything that blocks the act or doesn't encourage it becomes despised. One steals a line or half a page, hoping it will carry, until there's a bottle, a chapter, then total immersion in the book, the drunken binge. The more one writes, the more one is inebriated, all thinking changes, and a ruthless selfishness takes over. The do-gooder concern of others is lost, there is a denial of what you know is best. The other life, of caring for responsibilities and looking after one's well-being, subsides to a faint echo, it recedes to a distant point on a receding horizon. People who love you call your name, and you look up in rapture. When there is time, room, and encouragement, a kind of joyfulness bubbles up and you hand out glasses for all to share in the celebration. Ah, drinking. Ah, writing.

Years ago, the great romantic love of my life, Regina, predicted I would end up like Krapp, of Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, alone in my room, playing and replaying my tapes, reading and re-reading the unsold remainders of my not-quite-best-sellers, stacked in the corner like emergency kindling for a gradually-freezing-to-death old man. She was talking about the booze of the private

imagination. She could see me going into the bottle of thoughts and words and never coming out. It's a common perception among those without the same thirst. She didn't know how equally seductive was my love for her, how I would have thrown over the habit for her, or perhaps she knew too well and pitied me. I would have given up my life for her and tried to. She saved me by leaving. No woman, since, has had that power.

I'm looking, casually, with that awful secret fear of fate at such a woman as I write. She's beautiful, in that way that pulls me like a black hole. She's made herself homely against the world with chopped hair, no makeup, and baggy clothing. She's the kind of woman that tempts me. I suppose it is an equivalent succubus to writing. Nothing short of everything is enough. The risk is not great enough, unless it's total. Here is your abyss, come closer, my love. Wine, Women, and Song. I've recognized the wine for the demon it is. It will always remain so, but song cannot function for me unless I come to my strength in it. Having said that, I admit there's a level of the imagination close to overdose that tempts me. My writing has ruined more love affairs, lost more jobs, than booze ever did. I have to laugh, not heartily, when I think of those who might believe it's only drinking that's gotten me to 42 in poverty and estrangement. Drinking was a parallel state, a corollary, an analogous state, more easily perceived, more readily blamed, more quickly to be pitied, and more conveniently dismissed.

I crossed a barrier last night. I went to The Little Shamrock at 10PM on a night of revelry, in celebration of the 49ers' victory. I drank four pints of Coca-Cola. I put myself in the relaxed posture of having had my drinks. I spoke frankly and openly, I moved like a tiger, a dancer, a much-loved man, and finally, after many years of drinking and a couple weeks of testing the new life of the non-alcoholic drunk, men and women grinned at me. I grinned back. I'm not sure how to describe this passage. Without trick or excuse, I felt like a lion. I felt gentle and strong, sure and unafraid. I had a great time in a bar, where I had, for years, pretended to revel.

I was right, a few nights ago, when I thought it was a night for the women. I was off by a couple of days. A very attractive woman has just approached me with that gleam in her eyes, the magic set that comes out on the tongue as, "I've seen you, somewhere. Do you come here all the time? Well, the next time I see you, I'll know your name." When women go on the prowl, it's the turning of the tables, but it has a glow about it that men wish they gave off, and would, if their glow wasn't so common and so constant.

I will call her Elaine, because that is her name. (Don't you just love it when writers talk like that?) Say, do you read here, often? I'm sitting in the fullness of the sexuality of

either my life or the life of my imagination. Elaine, talking to a scrawny little guy who leans into the conversation, his nose pressed against the glass, has propped her high-heeled feet up, on the chair between us, aimed at me. Her feet swing slowly, sensually, twisting against each other. And then... and then... "The Blue Danube is closing early, tonight. We thank you for your patronage."

Elaine gets up, walks by, grins and says, "Bye-bye."

I grin and say, "Bye-bye."

Man-Made

I'm beginning to suspect, like the faint traces of a suspicious odor, that I have truly manufactured myself in this life. I've taken the clay that God gave me, that my parents manhandled, and sculpted something truly original, perhaps obscene, if not downright ludicrous, but goddamn if it isn't sitting in the Louvre of my heart, praised all around, with a bank of lights on it, and a velvet rope for a garden fence. Forty-two years in the making, chip, chip, with a giant sheet over it, a cord attached, and one day, off comes the sheet, and voila.

"My God, aren't the folds well done," and "What an expression. If only he could speak, what tales he could tell, what magnificent music he could make," and "What a prick. I sure wish my George had a prick like that," and "Look at those eyes. They speak worlds. They seem to look right through you, if only...."

"Move along, please. The exhibit is closing in fifteen minutes. Move along, please."

Let's Imagine

Let's imagine what would happen if a totalitarian state were to spring up right here in the United States of America, and not just the pathetic oligarchy of greenbacks we've got now, but a genuine police state, which is really nothing more than the triumph of the camaraderie of fear.

Who among my friends would rally to the cause of Joe X's freedom, saying, for example, that Joe X has been stripped of his dignity, position, freedom of movement and voice, and will soon be imprisoned and/or murdered by the state? M. would look the other way and pretend to feel real bad about it. D. would supply information. R. would

throw himself on the pyre and just as surely die with Joe X. His world would allow no other response. K. would go underground and with skill and calculated abandon, secure Joe X out of the country, or a lot of rotten bastards would die in the effort.

What would I do? I would talk my way out of it, or something unknown would happen, and I would happen right along with it. It's easy enough for me to paint myself into a corner of words with words. It's my paint, my corner, and my hypothetical reality. What would I really do? Damned if I know.

And I'm surely wrong about M., D., K., and R. Maybe not R. He's tied down by his ethics as surely as Joe X, is doomed. M., D., K., and I are probably just as doomed, but we don't know it yet. America is the land of celebrity. The surest route to fame in America is to cartoon yourself. Celebrity cuts about as much shit as anyone would ever care to eat. The only true meaning of need is in the true need. Nobody ever finds out what they're made of until the true need arises. All the rest is window dressing.

Peter Thinks

Peter thinks I came to his house, two and a half weeks ago, broke and dead drunk, because I thought he would take care of me, but I didn't come here because he might take care of me. If I wanted someone to take care of me, I could have solved that problem, years ago. I've passed by, or walked away from, so many chances to be taken care of, it seems equally certain that I'm self-destructive and willfully self-abandoned. I came here because Peter is a writer, and no matter what else he accounts himself for in his life, or how long he may be between creative spells, I believe he is a writer. And no matter how else we may differ, or whether or not we may be diametrically unlike each other, the fact is that he's like me, a writer, I'm drawn to it.

And what that all means is that I can count on a mutual recognition, like twins from Elkhart, Indiana, separated at birth, running into each other in Jakarta, Indonesia, one dressed as a car dealer from Tallahassee, and the other as a disciple of an obscure Indian guru. Something is recognized in the eyes, in the way the heels hit the pavement, or a gesture with the soft pads of the palm, and a union is rejoined. It's a sliver of sanity in the confused garble of an overly busy world, the way we imagine a policeman knows our criminal intentions. It's *something*, at a time when *nothing* has taken pre-eminence. And yet, that is a kind of being taken care of. My only desire is hoping I can return the favor, a favor impossible to do intentionally. It's a favor, it's help, it's being saved, in the

same way that turning a corner and seeing a color or inhaling the aroma of an odor helps us all to be alive in our lives, is a favor, is being saved.

An Elephant's Ear

It's the ear of an elephant. It's near an elephant. It's irrelevant. Let me attempt to explain the phenomenon of the night in *The Little Shamrock*. When I was a young man, I was innocently arrogant. I believed the world was mine for the taking. All things were possible. I was talented, intelligent, and passionate. I did everything I wanted to do, and I did it well. I didn't feel nor did I act arrogant. I simply saw things come to fruition. I was shy and shy of ego. There was no ego to erase my shyness. I was innocent. Then I became un-innocent. The garden gate slammed shut behind me and I wandered the frosty streets, ashamed.

So, with an abundance of the-lack-of-anything-better-to-do, I sought knowledge. And still, talented and intelligent, I gained knowledge. But, innocence kept up a clamor in my heart. I gained more knowledge. I became silly and scary, oversexed and scared shitless, and arrogant, once again. Arrogance is a strong wind to blow a weakened man. I wore a parka of worldliness against the cold. And innocence kept up a cry in my heart. And I drank. And drank. And then I drank. Seeking to know everything there is to know drowns out the innocence, but innocence returns, remembering little of the storm. Innocence began to re-inhabit my heart.

The knowledge didn't go away, but where was the arrogance? Gone forever? What's a new word for arrogance? It's a simple feeling. It is the enjoyment of the sense of oneself, something like being a lion. Last Sunday, it came back. Not like the dreams of a lion in the zoo cage, not like the manifesto of caged lions, not the *other life* of Walter Kitty, but, in the fullness of being, it simply was and is and ever shall be.

For all you Bible scholars, mankind is not supposed to feel like a lion. Having suffered the fall from grace that knowledge initiated, we are supposed to feel like donkey shit and damned glad for it, thank you very much. God is supposed to clean our donkey shit souls, to the point where we are cleaned into pure spirit, adios donkey shit, hello eternal bliss. I don't hold such a view of salvation, the way it easily dismisses humanity in one fell swoop of forgiveness.

I know from experience that my life has not been a simple one, and for many years, I would have preferred to be born a shit sandwich. But some stubborn survival of

the virtue of being human kept a drumbeat in my soul, like an endangered species heading up its own Greenpeace. Call me irresponsible, call me unreliable, but being a human animal is so fucking fascinating, there must be a god somewhere who's been waiting around for us to dump this age-old guilt trip and get on with it. OK, so now you're finally convinced I'm an unrepentant blasphemer. Good, now maybe you and I can have some fun.

I'm a Romantic

I'm a romantic, small R. I belong to no school, no grouping. Please don't call me a Romantic, capital R. A true romantic parks his motorcycle on the sidewalk, only when he feels romantic. A Romantic thinks parking his bike on the sidewalk is a calling. Being romantic is as sensible as being sensible, and it doesn't need an academy. Novelists live in an entirely different realm. It's alien to me, but I'm glad they're around.

I'm tired. My back hurts. I wish I wasn't tired. I don't feel romantic tonight. I feel like hitting the sack early. I won't, out of a sense of duty to the few remaining hours, and because *she* may decide she's tired of playing hostess to everyone's fantasies and come into The Blue Danube for a late cappuccino. Elaine is her name, and she's a schoolteacher. All schoolteachers are half mad. Who else would presume to teach young minds, who didn't think it was essential for the survival of the tribe, as in canoe building, fishing or weaving. All other teaching is half-mad. Romantic, even.

The Warm Glow

An old man is waiting for the movie to start. A woman, with an elaborate hairdo, sits down in front of him. The old man leans forward and tells her to move.

"Who are you to tell me to move? You've got a nerve," she says.

"Madam," he says, "I'm 82 years old. I've got a right."

Tina looked at my beard, when I was in The Little Shamrock, the other night.

"You should shave that off," she said.

"Why?" I said.

"Because it's got so much gray in it," she said.

"So what?" I said, "I'm 43 years old. I've got a right." I've got a right to be gray, to have a salt and pepper beard to go with my youthful face. It's Gray Rights.

As I've gone around town lately, I've had place memories of women I've known over the years, remembering being eroticized, aroused, romantically enraptured from back in the days when imagining almost any woman naked was highly erotic. With all that history, one might assume, as I have assumed, I would continue to be eroticized, but I'm not. It has subsided to imagination, on the level of merely remembering erotic times. I'm still capable of putting myself in my own shoes. I'm at that time of life when blessings become curses and curses become blessings.

Like the propeller on top of a beanie spinning, red blade, green blade, blue blade, yellow blade, spinning to a blur, everything well defined and then suddenly gone to a blur. It makes me want to take a drink, get drunk, and say fuck it, to kiss it off and feel like shit. There's fixity and assurance in that, something to define the world in absolutes. I won't, because my curiosity has not yet been shaken down. I haven't yet gone through this particular period in the life of a human. There are unknowns that interest me. I don't know why they interest me, except I suspect there's a genetic curiosity that's still playing leapfrog and climbing trees while I enjoy the show.

Goodnight Irene

I'm standing outside a café, while inside, all my friends are laughing. They're telling stories on me. "Remember when he said..." and "remember when he did..." I'm despondent, leaning against an old yellow fence, looking across the street through the windows at the scene, glowing from the warmth of lamplight, wooden floors, cappuccino, wine and ale, and people not lonely in their camaraderie. I debate with myself about entering. I imagine I'd be greeted with shouts of joy, welcome, and recaptured belonging.

I wouldn't shout joy. I'm a ghost. I lean against the fence and dream myself returned to a lost life. It was a mistake to return. But I'm here, and the longer I stand here, the colder it gets. The colder I get, the less warm the glowing café seems. The café lives on like a dream of a lost love. Every episode of reunion turns to stone, ice, death, or pain. A beautiful face melts, cracks, rots, and becomes ugly. Beyond wanting it to, the dream answers itself. Waking from the dream is cruel. It's less cruel than the dream, but less fantastic. Sleep crawls out of the eyes, and the eyes look at things other than the fantastic.

Beauty presents itself, and the eyes begin again to see. Beauty is a simple thing and shed of the fantastic, beauty is not cruel. I have broken all the bones of the

fantastic, and still beauty smiles. Beauty is in the eyes. Never consider beauty the enemy of the eyes. Beauty is waiting for the eyes to shed their dishonesty. It's a simple cataract operation, done with mirrors of light. It doesn't hurt the eyes, but the dishonesty will claw in and screech, beg for mercy, and promise the world. Dishonesty can also be pretty but holds no beauty. Dishonesty will tell you that truth hurts. Dishonesty knows how much truth hurts. Smash *all* the bones of dishonesty, all of them. Then read Keats, Hamlet, Jeffers. Go for a walk. Watch the tiny moments open up like Genesis. Every story I tell is a song to the end of stories. Exorcised out of stories, the only one left is the untold story, the one just ahead, unknown.

I will turn autobiography inside out, junk the past like an old pair of Dr. Denton's, gone in the heels, make rags of it, reinvent the future, remember deeper than the details of any one man's life, remember into the laughter that keeps us all alive. I went to a wedding, years ago, held at New College, in a building that had been a funeral parlor.

"It's appropriate," I said, "because marriage is a kind of death."

No one laughed. So few believe in death as the opportunity for birth. I don't dislike my past. I don't dislike my stories, but remembering the past is like reading someone else's story. If it instructs us all, it has its rights and uses. If it locks up the heart, it's like a stone that leaps out of the lake, sucking up the ripples with it.

And the propeller spins. Round and round. Earth-bound feet. Heaven-bound wings. I'm trying to sound as impossible as I can. The spirit wants it, and who am I to resist the spirit? It's a power greater than I am, and it hasn't failed me yet, even if I do feel like an idiot half the time and a genius the other half. Round and round. Spinning.

The Irrelevant in the Room

When someone smiles for real, it bursts on his or her face with as much surprise for the one who sees it as for the one who feels it. It's Saturday afternoon in La Bohème. Dave and I worked today, but he was sick with the flu and got worse, and maybe I'm starting to catch it, so we knocked off at two. Last night was significant, I think, and I'm warming to talk about it, but I'll have to let it be and come out as it does. Here's one theme. One of the reasons I drank was to weaken myself. I enjoyed hangovers, because I felt weak and frightened, as I had felt powerful and unafraid the night before. With the end to false weakness and false strength, and the opening up of true strength, there is no need for the bottle.

There's a woman, nearby, with a sculpted face - Aztec or Mayan - no makeup, could be lesbian, unintentionally seated at the same table as two fashionably painted and draped women who chatter amiably with each other. The Aztec woman glances up occasionally in near amazement at the two. The three women are seated at a small table with no place for an intelligent, unusual woman to hide. She fidgets a bit and redoubles her concentration on her reading. Given the human averages, she probably admires them and wishes she could be like them. To them, she's the custodian of an empty chair. As I turned the corner, leaving, I heard, "She says she has a friend who collects elephants, except their trunks have to be up."

Emily

I ran into Emily. I adore Emily. We almost had a baby together, five years ago. I was still in fantasy-love with long-gone Regina, when Emily and I met. We were together for a year. We still like each other. I see her about once a year. She's married now and living in New York, going to London, then to Moscow. She produces television. There was a live hook-up recently via satellite between performers and audiences in Moscow and New York that ended with the Americans and Russians waving at each other. Emily did that. She asked me why I didn't ask her to marry me.

"Because," I said, "I'm looking for a poet's wife, and you're not a poet's wife." That's true, but it's no longer sad. She said, "I've become everything you abhorred." That's no longer true. Back then, in my extremist bohemian days, I would have liked Emily to throw over her TV career. Not anymore. If there's anybody I want running American television, it's Emily. When I imagine Emily talking to the Ruskies, I smile. They won't know what to do with her.

And Chris is a Commie. We're going to destroy them from within. I feel sorry for the poor little Commissars. Idiosyncratic innocence will bring down the Iron Curtain like laughing termites in their wooden hearts. For three hours in The Blue Danube, she and I eagerly renewed our affection. We've reached the stage of the everlasting hug in our relationship. I considered making love. "Do you have affairs with ex-boyfriends?" I asked, pointing at myself. She and her husband had an affair each and disposed of that. I was happy to be her always friend but, "Will I ever find a mate?" I asked her. "Maybe when you're 50 or 55," she said. That shocked me, but I liked hearing it.

I'm content with my single and singular life. I'm not lonely, but: *The presence / of loving someone / opens the memory / of someone one once loved / and the possibility of someone / one might love.* What's missing in my life is only what's not here. I have love in me with no particular place to put it. I put it all over the place, which is fine, but it feels scattered, occasional, and limited. Emily is immersed in her work, and I'm glad. She's hyperactive, quick, and volatile. My empathic nature makes me act like her, and I have to counsel myself to take a deep breath and regain my own rhythm. We are opposites, and I'm fascinated, stimulated, and nourished by her, but my obsessive desire to possess Emily is gone now. It didn't work then. What's replaced it feels rich and long-lasting, but if I find a mate, I'll know it. She'll belong here beside me, and I'll belong with her.

Emily wants me to begin to write to her, and she wants to read my writing. The problem I have with her is trying to think of her as the poet's wife. There's something unbroken in our feelings for each other. But there's something unfulfilled, too. I wasn't serious when I proposed an affair. It was a fond look back at the dimmed past. I was surprised when she asked me why I hadn't proposed to her. We were close to a match, but we were on different trains at crossed schedules. Now we pass in the night, and there's a feeling of life's little tricks, how what could have been is a hair's breadth from never was, and a chasm apart.

The Dogs of Hades

I'm sitting within earshot and too close for comfort to a couple more miserable than the hardworking dogs of Hades. If there's any proof I must be doing something right, it's that women find me attractive and no marriageable woman will have me. And now I've gone and grown a mustache so prickly that it makes kissing like diving in a briar patch. But Br'er Rabbit may have a sister. I told Dave that if he sees me without my head, he'll know I've fallen madly in love.

As I was coming out of *Dimanche Dans the Compagne*, I walked past the storefront office of I.L. Ferguson, Psychologist. There were hand printed signs declaring *Retirement Sale*. The shop was covered with everything in a man's possession. 3,000 books for sale. Silverware. Two suits, one tuxedo, cap and gown. Toaster, chair, ties. All his etceteras were for sale, cheap. An artist need never retire. Only failure in his own eyes kills the artist, and failure to an artist is the nightmare of small vision, no courage, and poor ability.

The Central Character

It is so cold on this back porch that, once in, I never leave the cozy confines of the sleeping bag. I put anything I want around me, within a foot of my edges, and I never disturb it during the night. Poets are peculiar people. They take themselves and their lives and use them as a kind of laboratory, as a globe to circumnavigate, a terrain to traverse, an ocean to explore, a tree to climb, a playground, an adventure to relate, a patient to analyze, a lover to marvel at, an instrument, a life, by precept and example, by experiment and curiosity. They find themselves to be a population to govern, an audience to challenge and entertain, they find themselves on the road to Damascus, lame and alone, and they offer succor, they treat the least of these, the sparrow of themselves, the same as they do the King of themselves. And they go astray, but there is no wrong path to those whose eyes are always open. There is someone to meet wherever one human soul goes, and wherever they go, they meet that one soul that is the human soul, in themselves.

The Final Man

Now, there's a title. It came to me in a dream. In some manner, my life is a fiction. My job is to be as honest as I can be about my fiction. Whenever I try my hand at fiction, which seems completely within my capability, at some point, I stop. I am stymied, unable to continue, disturbed by the fictitiousness of it all. I marvel at the craft of fiction. I admire the sustained manufacture of alternate worlds. It is no less an art, no less true, no less real. It's probably little more than the difference between inductive and deductive reasoning, metaphorically speaking, of course. The confusion for me in the past was my ability to perform in arenas other than poetry. But I did so as a poet. Poet writer, poet actor, poet playwright, poet painter.

In Café Commons

On the bus, I overheard a man and a woman commenting loudly on the world and its mysteries. She said, "I wonder why they put cuffs where they do." He said, "I wonder why the numbers are so big on that gas station sign."

I thought, "If my poems take a while for *me* to understand, they must be total gibberish to the average person." I laughed at the thought. "I wonder what this means." "It's gibberish." "I wonder what gibberish is."

Mason Jar Pickles

My demon is alcohol. Peter's demon is anger. Whenever he's angry, there's no dealing with him. He's off somewhere, inside a bottle like a bottle. "There's so much hatred in the world," he says and then he plans to get the garden hose and hose down Chris's bed if he, ever again, smokes in his room. His anger has lost jobs for him, it has fucked up relationships, and it has spoiled his output as a writer. His anger inhibits the free flow of his love. Awareness of his own personal demon is the missing ingredient in his perception of people and events. I left the house in a hurry this morning, skipping the usually terrific Sunday breakfast.

"Because," I said, "I've got a lot to walk around and think about."

Truth is, I fear Peter's anger, which began last night, triggered by Chris's negligence, and by what Peter calls Chris's anger. But what about Peter's anger? I went to sleep, with Peter banging around the kitchen, singing hard, mournful rock and roll blues, trying to be lighthearted. I dreamt about a friend who was angry and had no place to live. Peter is worried Chris will burn the house down, and Peter will have no place to live. I want to talk to Peter about it, but I'm afraid of his volatility. And I don't have a place to live if his anger burns him up and he hoses me down.

I called Joshua, who offered me a place to crash. But I don't want to run out on Peter, either. I'm making money, I'm healthy, and I understand addictive obsessions. I kept my remarks low key, last night, and I try to be a decent houseguest. It's a tough situation, and maybe I'd be better able to talk about it if I weren't an added concern.

These days, the only thing I allow myself to take from Peter are his pickles. Laid up in mason jars, they are terrific, and every slice is a delight. Even though he's quite generous with food, it always feels like taking a quarter out of a jar full of quarters. They're never missed until the jar is half empty, and then it's too late to hide the theft. I suspect that Chris is also afraid of Peter's anger. Shit, if I'm afraid, all 200 pounds of me, with my own anger when I feel threatened, I'd bet the farm Chris is, too. And Chris, now 16, had to be defiant just to believe in his own incipient manhood. Peter is, after all,

the man his mother chose over his father. And even if Chris despises his own father, he has a son's mind to resist the interloper.

I called the house an hour ago, to check in, for Jack's message, and Peter's voice was angry. It's his day off, and that means there's no outside impetus to put on another face. I'm inclined, by my nature, to placate and conciliate, to be a peacemaker, but sometimes it isn't peace that ends the war. My non-judgmental nature allows the long, slow development of reasoned judgments, and in the process of my own slowness, I'm treated as, and often believe myself to be, uninvolved, or self-involved, or a patsy for abuse.

It's a misconception I seem to be able to live with. I prefer it to abrupt, unconsidered retaliations. My anger, my hurt, and my sadness at the actions of others are only ingredients in the kind of response I choose to make. I'm a positivist, and negatives can be integrated into a positive attitude and its actions. I prefer it that way. It doesn't make me feel good to act otherwise. A short-term limited response may have its appeal, but it short-circuits a better, fuller life.

On the Bus

I've gotten myself in a functioning frame of mind, working everyday, taking care of business, getting along with people, planning for the future, taking reasonable steps, sleeping, eating, buying new socks and underwear, and I don't write. The process goes on hold, gets put aside, and nothing happens. Nothing bad happens either. I become a solid citizen, but I don't write. The time goes by, pleasantly enough, and all the ideas that form in my brain drift off, images come and go like passing buses, and then a gradual aching begins, an irritation that indicates the desire to write.

This is when I'd get drunk. Throw the monkey wrench. Bring the pragmatic, satisfactory, everyday success to a grinding halt. Throw my brain in reverse, drive it off the road, flip it over several times, and wake up in a ditch, fucked up, but definitely not in the routine. I have a lot to say, having been moved and struck by some things, but they're sunk, like treasures in the briny deep, and I need to resurrect them, and get on with the voyage.

Most don't understand this process, and why should they? Most would think fucking up a perfectly charming and workable routine is insane. It may be, but it's also calculating, even ruthless. Peter can't write, because he can't be ruthless with his

obligatory sane life, but of course the need doesn't go away. It continues to bubble to the surface and comes out in petulance, anger, and rage.

I feel like having a drink. Having a drink, I feel like having a bottle. Instead, I will get myself into a state where I am as if drunk. As if drunk, when it works, is drunker in freedom than being chained to the bottle. Giving up booze is like giving up salt. Nothing has as much flavor, at first. Until you lose the taste for salt, and then all the flavors are intensified, not obliterated by the salt. First, read a book. (*On the Road* by Kerouac) Then, feel like a sexual magnet.

Americans, get out of your cars! *On the Road* is not about cars. It's about people. I left The Blue Danube, a café of inner suburbia, and got on the bus, eschewing the automobile (a white '74 Pinto). I'm now in La Bohème, which is as bohemian as can be found in this city, Baghdad by the Paycheck. On my way here, I bought some "Brown's Mule" plug tobacco and watched the people of the city on the bus and on the street.

I saw a half-naked woman, a family with a baby, a punk with his skateboard, an old woman in a black leather jacket with a cane, a young woman with a clean, lively-eyed, sculptor's model face, carrying a giant tube, two gay men telling jokes, an old Rastafarian carrying a tattered cardboard box, a laughing girl in clown white makeup and red lips, a young wino pestering an older man who knew him, to no avail. No dollar.

The guy in the corner store said, "Tell me what you think of the Brown's Mule. I've been wanting to try it, but I'm chickenshit. It'll knock you on your ass."

It's good stuff, my friend, and I like being knocked on my ass. Even by Mr. Brown's mule. I'm getting drunker. No work tomorrow. I'm going to The Rite Spot later and pay Steve the waiter the five bucks I owe him. I love paying off loans. I may have found a place for me and Jack to live.

On Sunday night, I went to see *The Rolling San Francisco Renaissance Show*. I also went to witness it, to see who might show up to see a two-part retrospective on the beatniks and the hippies. Gerald Nicosia did the Beats, based on *Memory Babe*, his bio of Jack Kerouac, and Alan Cohen did the hippies, based on slides of his newspaper-magazine *The Oracle*. What remains in my mind of the night was a scene from a documentary Gerald ran, interviews and writings from a dozen of the Beats.

In the film, Alan Ginsberg is shown, a few years ago, fairly recently, standing on the grass at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Something or Other, in Colorado, talking. I've seen Ginsberg many times over the years, and one time I stood next to him on the street outside Mooney's Irish Pub, while he eyed me to see if I was

acceptable meat for his grinder, and he always seemed to me something of a charming buffoon, always playing his Alan Ginsberg character to the hilt. But here was a different Ginsberg. He was just talking, and it wasn't what he was saying, it was the way he was saying it.

I thought, "He's not talking to me, he's talking *for* me. He's not playing a role. He's not being an alien. He's not playing the oddball poet that he lets people gawk at. He's not talking at an alien audience. He's not talking to the people. He's talking *for* them."

Immediately, I began to consider the possibilities. I began to think about, as a poet, moving beyond being the peculiar, alienated, outsider, inspired, insane genius playing to a bunch of the uninterested, but to speak for the audience, for readers and listeners, to become their voice, speaking for the human heart. Not speaking the poet's heart to a frigid tin ear, but the human heart to the profound and heart-pounding human soul.

This may be the province of aging, the result of aging. I'm gradually assuming a new position in the panoply of earthwalking beings. I don't know yet what effect it has on the product, but I know how it feels, and it feels good. It feels connected and part of. It feels integral. It feels suitable. Let's watch this one play out, shall we?

I Am Called Joe

A quite young, quite beautiful girl comes up to the man's table, as he is writing. She says to the man, "I am with you. I am yours. I want you for mine. We are together. We are the same. We are one." He says, "Tell everyone. Tell everyone you know, until it cannot be otherwise."

Over 40% of your body heat goes out through the top of your head. Wise men wear nightcaps. At 4AM, I crawled deep into my sleeping bag and tried not to think about it.

"If I asked you to marry me, would you say yes?"

I walked into The Blue Danube at noon, and bumped into Connie, Mike's roommate lover, and standing next to Connie, was a beautiful, young woman. Ah, prophetic dreams. The line at the beginning of this paragraph burst to my lips, but hesitated before leaping to her ear. And so I sit, after taking lunch with Connie, across the room, still madly in love with a beautiful young woman who must, or I'll bust, fulfill her part in the dream. We had eye contact to reinforce my desire, but she's busy, hunkered

over her book and tablet. I catch sight of a graph chart on one of the pages. Now she must throw the book down, in disgust. It's probably a chart of the hourly incidence of male aggression she has witnessed in her life. I've retreated to the far corner.

"That's the wrong direction," Connie says as she leaves.

"That's my technique," I say.

It's become important, born of my shyness, for women to make a move. If I were a rock musician, it wouldn't be a problem. Because I'm a poet, there's no great public show for me to make that might pass for the first move. As I write, I'm beginning to calm down. It's like an artist and model. At first impulse, he simply wants to jump her bones, but he takes that energy to the paint and canvas. He lets his eyes do the devouring and the brush do the loving. Her lines, her bones, her movements are beauty to my eyes. My eyes feast. My eyes need to be fed as much as my hands, heart, and brain. I love her long-boned, sinewy hands. She has a vitality that activates her shapes and forms. A woman, whose face intrigues me, can have just about anybody she wants, but I can't chase after some woman. Chance must do its work. She's not going to come chasing after me. Kismet has to turn into fate.

I Feel Rotten

I feel like the hangover is wearing off, and now I just feel let down and crummy. The parallel between drinking and writing holds up. I was just getting a real buzz on and somebody took away the bottle. I went sour. I crashed. I still had the energy, and we ran around town and did a bunch of shit, but I was progressively on a bummer. I'm acting out Peter's frustration at not being able to write. It forces a kind of rage. The woman disappeared. I picked up with Jack. Then, I went into a largely lesbian coffee house near my last girlfriend's house, and I got angrier and angrier. Now I'm back in the place I started from, after driving Jack to the top of a lonely trail above Baker Beach, so he could meet Chris and his friends. That felt good, actually.

I like living my life with Jack, but I still wasn't writing. It's time to do nothing again. Noel just wandered over and laid twelve bucks on me. He borrowed ten about three years ago. Noel is usually a street person. Paul tells me that Noel's good at hitting up cabbies in the hotel lines. He hangs out in Winchell's Donuts, reading and writing, like a regular intellectual. He has shaved, and I didn't recognize him. He's decked out in spiffy

new duds, looking pretty good for a gaunt-faced old buzzard, in his safari hat, corduroy jacket and wool sweater.

"Jesus," I thought, "it's Noel, sitting in The Blue Danube, taking the soup and salad."

He says he's got a job. I suspect it's actually money from home. His family comes from a posh suburb down the peninsula. He handed me the ten bucks and two bucks for interest. I almost pushed the two bucks back, but as I said to Steve the waiter, last night in The Rite Spot, when I gave him five bucks, and he tried to refuse it, "Take it. It makes me feel good."

"Well, shit," he said, "Feel good. Feel as good as you want."

Noel always calls me Joe. I love it when he calls me Joe. To Noel, I am Joe. I got the bread and cheese plate, with Original New York Seltzer Natural Vanilla Cream. On Noel. Thanks, Noel.

Some of Chris's friends came in and said that Chris was at home. So I finished my brie, got up and went to see if Jack was there. Chris wasn't home, so I drove out to the Golden Gate Bridge, and then down to where I left Jack. No Jack. I almost got out and went down the trail looking for his mangled and mutilated body. That's silly. So, I'll just sit here and wait for the boy. He'll show up, with Kerouakian tales of fires on the beach and cosmic raps with nubile Einsteinettes. Or he won't.

The Always Wife

The problem with this writing is that I'm acting like it's all settled, like I know something and I got it all figured out, like it's smooth sailing from here on out, like I won't be an idiot anymore, an asshole, confused, crazy lost, when I know deep down, half the time, always, in a sliver sort of a way, that that's all bullshit. Take women for example. I know I love women, I love them for as long as I love them, on the level that I love them. Whenever I try to love them forever, on that level, I'm full of shit. I look at every woman I fall for, and I ask myself now how would it be to love that woman forever, all by herself, just her, and her alone. That's bullshit. I'm a poet, I love like a poet, total, absolute, all things considered, everything in one, for as long as the poem lasts, and then it's done. The only kind of woman who can ride that out is like the Muse, the always wife, no matter what, a part of yourself, inescapable and relentless, sustaining and inexorable, like riding a bicycle, you never forget how.

I feel like Cassidy and Kerouac rolled up in one, I just wrote a page like both. Yesterday, I went crazy, like I do every few weeks. I got a heat on, with or without booze, and I thought I was going to accomplish *Everything In The World*. I did and I didn't. Today feels quiet, gentle, contemplative, sweet, good, and the nasty trance is gone out of my eyes. I'm not confused about the energy I feel when I believe it's in the writing or in the women, when it's only in me, burning. It probably doesn't burn on the page as much as it burns up the pagemaker. I'm settled into a corner chair, my imagination is free to go out and play or stay in and play the piano. If you're a sane American, you're fucked. If you're a non-sane American, you're in real trouble. *I am waiting. I am waiting. I am waiting for someone to come out of somewhere.* I'm not going to lure him out with booze. This time he comes out un-lured and unmasked. I feel as if I've been drinking or should be drinking. It's raining outside in the Mission, and it's terrific, lovely, glistening up everything, making the lights glow, turning the inside life cozy, with people more interested in each other because of it all.

I got a bunch of money yesterday but no guarantees of work and the place Jack and I want is uncertain, I have a great urge to spend all the money, I've been spending it on carry-over stuff, new heels for my boots, a new Salvation Army shirt, a month FastPass for the buses, gloves, notepads for this writing, pens, god knows what else I can think up.

Sail Away

In America, land of the free, home of the brave, the ideals of frontier and pursuit of happiness don't stop with cars, space ships, airplanes, and invention, but slop over into spirit, knowledge, wonder and imagination, into exuberance and joy, making all of us prey to the magic of any sort of imagined personal power. A Muni-driver-trainee was sitting up front on a 22Fillmore, and the old-timer driver was clueing him in about the facts of life. The trainee thought he'd never get good at the job. The older driver said, "Listen, after you've done it, day after day, for a long time, you'll get good at it. Hell, you do it, day after day, you bound to get good at it. You make love to your woman, day after day, for a year, you bound to get good at it. Don't worry," and all us three passengers laughed. It was a swell laugh. It was a good laugh. It was a clean, well-lighted laugh. And then they went into Harry's Bar, and I went over the river and into the woods. It was a good river, and the woods were swell.

I was eager to try such a year as the driver described. I was up for it. I bounced across the street, light-footed, my heart was singing, and that aint bullshit. I feel like dropping down a couple of gears in this narration, because I'm beginning to believe what's happening. I felt like drinking a river today. I think I did. I'm getting drunk without drinking. I'm going to get 86d from some place for being sober. I'm going to take it for what it's worth. I'm discovering, one after another, the inclinations I used to attribute to and excuse as being drunk. I'm sober nearly a month now, without hesitancy or apology. I'm going for it. My sober self is facilitating, guiding and protecting my drunken self. *Gun it, Stee-vee. The road is long and wide ahead. Put it to the floor. Don't depress that accelerator, express it!* It's odd the combo of feelings. Slowing down is actually speeding up. More attention to detail. Walking is flying. Fly away!

Back in the Blue Danube

I'm drinking *Awinna Ragtime Sarsaparilla* with the active ingredients, sarsaparilla essence and Yucca foam. Kerouac convinces me it's time for me and Jack to go to Mexico and there write another goddamn expatriate American novel, all about the crazy Americans who go somewhere, get crazy, write about everything that happens, crazy as shit, profound as shit, like Americans believe everything is, like this crazy *sass-per-rilly*, as one cowpoke says to the other.

On the Lam

Two people nearby discuss what they might give up for Lent. One finally speaks up, mournfully, "How about life?" The other thinks a moment and replies, "No, you're supposed to give up something you enjoy." It's amazing what you can pick up in a café, listening to other people's conversation. I never quite relax in a café like most people seem to. Cafés are workplaces for me. I try to imagine just where it is I do relax. Maybe, in the park on Sunday, when the band plays. Peter just came in and asked me if time would come when we could exchange jobs.

"So I can write," he said.

"I don't know," I replied, half-afraid of the subject, "I'd hate to give up mine."

I was about to advise him to get ruthless, when he spied a woman of his acquaintance and went out on the sidewalk to talk. It's a glorious San Francisco winter

afternoon, a sunny Saturday, full of bustling people on their day off. I don't take days off. Taking time off is another good substitute for booze. Booze always served to shut down the engines. I remember Christine telling me she had never seen me relaxed. Paul never relaxes. It's all part of the job, Peter.

The woman who was telling the Lent joke was alternately laughing and very subdued. She told her friend about the newscaster in Florida who shot herself on the air. Across from me is a table of male models, talking to an older gay man. The models are striking human beings, not quite real.

Peter grouched, bitched, sarcasticized, and then praised his beautiful daughter, Maralie, who works behind the counter, for her sultry intelligence, good looks, and her ability to do a good job. I predict Peter is going to explode soon, and some of it is going to get all over me. Brains, blood, guts, flesh, the whole unholy mess of a man tormented by the opposite pulls of his life.

These ingredients go to make up an afternoon in the warm sun on a cool day. Actually, occasionally, when the wind is right, often, most of the time, I relax inside the writing. I'd like to take up a new hobby and start relaxing like a normal human being on his day off.

Regina

Every time I see a tall, extremely good-looking woman, with a strong face and an air of self-possession, I think of Regina. I imagine her walking in, after looking for me, finding me, and sitting down as if no time had passed, as if she's just been round the corner for smokes or brunch with a friend.

"Hí," she says, with a big smile and total self-assurance, as if she owns me; lock, stock, and barrel. She does. Always will, until or unless some other woman jumps her claim and I yield up my mother lode of love? It's all crap in my head, it's been there for nine years, and nothing has dislodged it. I imagine, for my own sense of wellbeing with the rest of the Sisterhood, that I ought to assume the best of it, let my lost love remain on her throne, and let the pretenders take their shot. Shit, the throne for Regina was there before she showed up, it isn't so much that she's the queen, but that I have to think someone is, someone with just as much majesty and noblesse oblige.

I'm in a state of heightened expectation, tonight. Partly, it's because I think Peter is about to blow. I'm going to load up the back of the car with my few belongings, ready

to take it on the lam. Partly, it's the woman thing. There are a lot of attractive women out tonight, on their own alone, and I sense attractions. I have sad, wild eyes tonight, vulnerable and searching. The gods punch up my mood and my aspect. These things are hard to disguise, I like the theater of it, anyway. I do my usual nothing, in response to the gods' program, and we'll see.

Peter is making me fearful. He argued all day with Sherrill, and with Chris, or so Jack tells me. And when I saw him in the bathroom, grooming himself to go to work, waiting tables at Ernesto's, he had a wild, mad look in his eyes. Not merely angry, but possessed, obsessed. He needs to go to RA, Rageaholics Anonymous. I wonder why I let myself in for this stuff, except, what frightens me intrigues me. I begin singing, "All I want is a room, somewhere, far away from the cold night air..." and baby makes three.

I Get the Itch

Now I'm close to the heavy. Now is when I get long in the bottle. When it's time to be gone. I called my old buddy, Christine, in Many Apples, Many Sodas, and I could hear it in my voice. Cool, steady, lodged in determination. Punk Commie Chris told me tonight that Peter is boiling, rumbling, about to toss the top off the pot. I got Jack, and we loaded up the car. Normally, I'd get loaded in myself. Tonight, I bide my time and bite my tongue. I lay low. I'm in La Bohème and it's rockin'. People are bouncing around, under a new show of paintings on the walls by a woman named Nina Whelan. Pretty good stuff, rich, dark, and thick. Paintings of people heavy into each other and themselves. I'm going to stay out tonight and run some joints, just to see. Could be a lot of noise, tonight. I'm going to keep my eye on it.

That Person

There's only one good reason to write the way I do. Everything else is going the wrong direction. I dropped out of group ethics, a long time ago, but it seems, fairly recently, in real time, a few years, ten years maybe. Without knowing why, I sat down in one place and began to take on the world, one at a time. One person. Only one. No big show. No mass appeal. No audience. No readership. No more than one. Making an ethic of my condition. It's just what I do. I'm writing this book to one person. I've always been connected to the arts that affect one person at a time, even though I've had the tools to

become a public artist. The world changes for fair, for true, in one person. Mass actions lead to mob rule, nationalism, the destruction of the planet. Inevitably. It's time to go entirely the opposite direction. Singers, actors, writers, painters, composers, all get rich when they get mass approval, and then the mob wanders into the marketplace and buys their product because it's been approved, irrelevant to its true value.

I'd like to have my books published, so I could have a good copy to give to one person at a time. Two years ago, when Paul and I went on our magical mystery tour of beer, beds, bards, and ballads, I got a kick out of his trick of selling his books for whatever they'd bring. He'd hand over a copy, inscribe it with whatever words leapt onto the flyleaf, and we'd eat or drink, according to whatever that one person would throw on the table; one book, one person, one dollar. It's the way I'm engaged by one person across the table or bed. It's an even exchange. When I walk down the street, get on the bus, go into a room, I'm always thinking of the individual. That person there. That person. That person.

Years ago, I sat in The Precita Park Café, a great place that some of my friends ran. It was packed. *My God*, I thought, *it's an entire room full of Centers of the Universe*. Every single person is the center of the universe, in every room, on every corner, on every bus. All of us are the Center of the Universe. The Final Man and the Center of the Universe.

The Naked Jaybird

I go to the Richmond District Library on a sunny Monday morning, and I walk out of where Brautigan used to write, carrying Kerouac's biography, thinking of Keats, who said:

However I should like to enjoy what the competencies of life procure, I am in no wise dashed at a different prospect. I have spent too many thoughtful days and moralized through too many nights for that.

I crossed the street where Paul and I woke up and walked drunken into an altered world, where the sense of freedom was palpable and constant. A pang of remorse at those lost moments crossed my mind. I sunk a hook into the feeling and reeled it in, ate it, became it, and walked free, down the sun bright morning street, among the young Chinese buying three dollar Hallmark cards, the painters soaking a storefront yellow, as

fast as they can, the cars turning in absurd circles, chasing their own bumpers. One moment I was broke again and hating it, the next moment I was free as a naked jaybird.

I drank to live more and be free. Drinking was my Dumbo's feather. The last few days, I felt myself getting stiffer, harder, and tougher. The more I became rigid, the more I wanted a drink, to get loose from the noose. My career has been a gradual, calculated derangement of my senses, to get myself to a place where all the groundwork has been laid, where I could rest on the assurance of solid rock and then proceed with the adventure of building a wild house of love, a brothel of intellect.

My day-to-day fears of being thought crazy are coming to a head. I anticipate trouble. Dave is telling me he likes me but I'm crazy, whenever I let out some blurb from the brain, some piece of absurd profundity, just a joke, really, but calculated to test the waters. I've taken away everyone's excuse for my thoughts and behavior. Every indication I have for breakthrough, in any perceptive art form, has come by some breakdown in the vast spectrum of control and propriety. Now I've seen it all. One gets used to seeing old Chinese women, and some not so old, Groucho Marxing down the street, carrying large shopping bags hung from their arms like dead water buffalo. Well, this one particular old lady comes by, like the Powell St. cable car, dragging her bag by on wheels. Rattle, rattle, screech. She does a block, in nothing fast. I imagine her route in the neighborhood being reproduced in the next MUNI catalog.

The Trieste

Bob Sills proposed to me, a few years ago, that he and I divide up the world, as writers, and take over, that we make it our little secret. We would set out, poet and fiction writer, to build ourselves a reputation as home busters, rouse the populace, and raise an admiring, jealous, vengeful curiosity, thereby ensuring the success of our books. I was intrigued but finally pulled back from the idea. I didn't like the secrecy and the manipulation. There are no secrets, there is only secrecy.

One night, we went to a sedate party. Bob gave me the high sign. We got stinko. He ended up puking blood in the bathroom, and I ended up beating on his hunched back, disappointed in the stupid result of our grand design. He left a note, promising to kill me if I ever pulled any shit on him, and I wrote him a note telling him to go ahead, if I ever did, because I was out of the game. Jack is next to me, heaving sighs of exhausted anxiety. It's time for a break.

The Effects

I'm dying for the effects of alcohol. I'm equally determined to ride this out. It's as bad as a hangover. I'm waiting for a breakthrough. I have to believe I can live freely without the tricks and the hurt. It's passing. Sarsaparilla helps. I calm down. The malevolent urge subsides. It's amazing. The urge to kick ass, kick the legs out, kick over the apple cart. I called Joshua about crashing with him. I only got his machine, but doing anything helps to break the shell of frustration. I'm going nuts again. I have to blow it out my ass. The pressure builds and builds. I feel constrained and restrained. I feel strained. Goddamn it. I'm so damn calm on the surface. This coffeehouse has gotten boring. I need a change of scenery.

The Edible Complex

I'm in Rockridge, Oakland, in a corner coffee house called *The Edible Complex*. I wrote a bunch of poems here, last fall, when I was courting Judy for the second time. Here I sit again, feeling somewhat liberated. I stood at the counter a good long time before anyone noticed me. They shook themselves and wiped their eyes, when I finally came into focus.

"I'm in my invisible stage," I said, but of course they didn't get it. There are good paintings on the walls. I want a home I can make poems in, make food in, make paintings in, make music in, make love in. "Perhaps," I thought, "I might do well to take time out in the course of this writing and write a few poems. When I pose the question, poems seem a different language, foreign, even extraterrestrial.

I feel a different freedom in Oakland. It seems you can make something here. I always have to battle San Francisco. It's complete. It's all been done. What's the point of dressing up San Francisco, or showing some beauty, or shaking down some truth? What the fuck. Everybody's smug and complete, or working on it.

I copped the corner table in the back by the toilet, jammed up underneath two good paintings of Oakland, and the women seem to have bigger tits in Oakland, and even the lesbians seem friendlier. As I was walking by the woman who was sitting here, she said, "Excuse me, do you have the time?" I turned, but she was asking someone else. This table is like the captain's table, below decks, the hub of the ship's activity. You can hear the ropes and decks creaking, and the first seagull cawing, and the shouts of men,

"Land Ahoy!" I thought about calling up good old Judy, but that's stupid, the woman doesn't even like holding hands, but I do like her. What the hell, anyway.

Circling the Details

*I'm tired without someone to love, running on God, and it isn't enough,
seeing God in everything, everyone, all action, light, and sun, lying in the
back of a pickup on I-580, watching a hawk, lying on the wind in the hills.*

*Scratching a dog, with a stance like a young deer, face like a wise, sad,
old man, loving my work, my friends, faces, ideas, memories, lying on time
like a hawk, circling, no fear, no hatred, my eyes on tiny creature details.*

*The hawk is love of the air, the hawk is love in the air, I look at my hands,
conscious of the love in them, I am love in them, I am all the things I say,
and I'm tired, without someone to love, strong as a young deer, face like
a wise, sad, old man, circling the details, running on God, light, and sun.*

A Famous Artist

I'm in the Channel 25 studio, with Josh, waiting for Simon Dray to tape his show, *The San Francisco French Connection*. Josh met Simon when they were both street singers. This is a break in my life. Josh ran me around town after getting me keys to his place. We went to see his girlfriend Marja, just back from home, in Sweden and New York. We did a fast U-turn on Market Street to pick up Sherry, another old girlfriend of Josh's. I just found out I'm TV-photogenic. Josh says I look like a famous artist. Put that in your back pocket and forget it.

Nukes Anonymous

After an hour in the Grand Piano, I'm back in The Blue Danube. I wondered why I come to this sort of café. It's a *Boutique Café*. It has pretty girls and women, but that's only part of it. I come here because I'm a child of the middle class, and it gives me the

comfort of familiarity. I'm initially uncomfortable in the places of the upper and lower classes. Class is the last barrier, the great separator. My true associations are with those who've broken free from class structures. Poetry is an elitism open to everyone.

For a long time, I resented the turn to conservatism in this country, as I saw it represented by the movement to eliminate drunkenness. I saw the strictures as the suppression of creative, individual, anarchic vitality. Now, I see my own sobriety as a challenge to act on those principles without the crutch or the excuse of the drug. Early on, in this phase of my resolve, I feel paranoid about condemnation. I walk down the street like a criminal about to be exposed, but I want to do the exposing myself, and I want it accompanied by joyfulness. That joyfulness has gone away, right now.

I could have had drugs other than booze, the last few days, but I stayed away, feeling a curious annoyance. I was tempted, but I'm not habituated outside booze, so there's no compulsion there. I feel the desire for substances to enhance action as the desire for action. That desire isn't complicated by years of habit. The original appeal of booze has been drowned by physical and emotional habit. I'm watching Josh and his woman-habit, and I feel like I'm beginning to break that one. Long after the awareness has cleared, in any compulsion, the habits continue to enslave. The habit has to be broken, and time is the only tool.

I Used to Hold a Beer Bottle

I used to hold a beer bottle, stare at it, and wonder why I was still holding it, it held no appeal, had come to represent only negatives. It's simple, really. That beer bottle had grafted itself to the palm of my hand. First you rip the bottle loose, then the skin heels, then the hand moves freely, then the hand functions anew. Then, and only then, and it's a long-term then, does the hand forget it's old partner. I suppose it's like the amputee who still feels his legs and believes they are still there, even though all the evidence is to the contrary. Having been a drunk is more like having been a Siamese twin, and the twin brother is gone. But this surviving twin is taking all the good blood and dominating all the talking, the living, the eating, etc. Freed from such a worse half, it still takes time to stroll around unfettered. Shit, even Elvis Presley had a dead twin to overcome. I think it's going to take Peter ten years to beat his devil, anger, and that's if he starts today.

The country eliminates racism and sex discrimination, and 25 years later, it's just beginning to function as a habit of freedom. The world must stop its addiction to war. It's at the point of self-annihilation. The awareness of change has begun. It will take many, many years of one-day-at-a-time twelve-step work in Nukes Anonymous for the world to build a new habit. The children of the children of the Nuclear Age may have the potential for a drug and bomb free life.

Here's another addiction we have yet to break. All writing, poetry, novels and plays, movies, etc., depend on conflict for their content. And yet, it occurs in me that to write a love story, I need to tell the positive truth. Nothing is more powerful, more frightening, more romantic than the truth. The reality of it doesn't tear at the heartstrings, it sings in the blood.

Frame Of Mind

Jack, I don't think I'll ever get over it, or get used to being in a poetic frame of mind, when I'm around someone I care about. Everything tells me to be sociable and talk, when all I want to do is drift and be all eyes, without worry or concern for any person, place, or thing. What can I do?"

"Well, Dad, I can't help you. I'm going over to Chris'. Bye." He said it without rancor or contradiction, but in the wisdom of not knowing what is not to be known.

And he strides off, his long, gliding stride erasing the intersection of Haight and Masonic, and I turn and look at the pretty girl on the bus bench. My, what a lovely world.

So, here I am in the Picaro, on my way to La Bohème and The Rite Spot. I'm working tomorrow. That's good. I get to La Bohème, and the bus-stop girl is sitting a table away. I smile. She leaves. I still smile. I'm fitting myself into a very old suit, a birthday suit. I'm turning, in the four-way mirror of feelings, and damn, it fits. Nice material, too. Looks good. Feels good. This particular personality goes way back. It's time I was myself, instead of exercising my empathic identification with everything and everyone else. *Intense gentleness*, I remember telling Barbara, a few years back.

The Enema Within

Before I left Peter's, he asked me if I ever feared for the loss of my soul. No, I thought. It seemed impossible. But booze came close to erasing my soul. Last night,

Susan asked me if I had no soul. I'd just met her. She was with a group from AA. I told them I was constitutionally unfit to be an AA member. She said she couldn't let me take a leak in her house.

"If I let you in, I'll never let you out," she said ruefully.

I expect to see her tonight, over coffee, at my suggestion. Lee told me today what a wonderful person I am. Barbara just grinned her love at me. Josh wants to be like a brother. I'm confused by this attitude shit.

"Everybody has advice for Steve, but Steve doesn't take anyone's advice," I thought, carrying it to the extreme. I ran into Peter on the street. He was chatting lovingly with his daughter. When he saw me, he went cold and stood there like I was a thief. He had his hands in his pockets, fingering his valuables, his dick and his asshole.

I thought, "Fuck you, Peter. You love your daughter, because she's the perfect fruit of your loins. You've never felt gratitude to anyone for anything. Your self-professed idealism is only ego. You don't like people who are doing well, because it reflects badly on your misery. You are a petty man."

Leaving him, I vowed to put an end to our fourteen-year friendship. It feels like an albatross. The last night, before leaving his house, he said, "Well, you know, Steve, this could mean the end to our friendship." He was referring to his going to Italy and never coming back, but it felt more like him telling me to stay out of his life. I'm dissolving bonds again. Fragmenting before unifying. I stopped reading *Memory Babe*, in sequence, and began skimming for various scenes and relevancies. It's sad to watch the gradual, inevitable dissolution of a man as the booze takes over and cancels out all the virtues of his vision.

It's also sad to watch a man's growth die as he reverts to the worst regressive pulls of his past. Kerouac was right to see the tie between work, self, voice and the world as the soul living in this life, but he was unable to take the soul-making life, as Keats saw it, into the workshop of his daily action. We are, each of us, mad and sane, good and bad, strong and weak, tragic and comic, and it can be brought into sympathetic balance. For years, I've been walking the borders of the mental and emotional limits we've been told to avoid like the plague. It's time to draw back and develop the realizations and intuitions of all that time and experience. I'm glad I quit reading Gerald Nicosia's *Memory Babe*. It was depressing the shit out of me.

A Spy in the House of Everything Under the Sun

Nothing is more romantic than the truth. It's been my unconscious intention, since beginning this autobiographical-journal-narration, to write without pyrotechnics and keep it clear, honest, simple, and still interesting for both of us. It's a revolution to write without bullshit. Henry Miller hyped himself as he shaped and shaded the truth. So did Kerouac. After all those years of four letter words and self-incrimination, it turns out they were still bullshitting. It's called style, i.e., editing the truth for someone else's pallet, ear, eye, and education.

I continue to think of myself as *A Spy in the House of Everything Under the Sun*. Aren't we all? Does any human being get to the point where they feel, say, and believe, "Now, I am completely at home in my skin," and stay that way forever? Susan dragged me to an AA meeting, last night.

"Wasn't it a wonderful talk?"

Shit, it was the same talk. Only the speaker was different. I think AA is another pseudo-religion, a *true way of life* that can handle all your problems "because you can't." She tried to draw me into the fold. It's hard to hold onto a good idea, when someone else has a good idea they believe is far superior to your good idea. Afterwards, walking, she told me that despite her almost *uncontrollable* desire to fuck my brains out, she has realized her occasional friend lover, Keith, is special to her, and *We can't*. Also, she had a strange, sudden recurrence of herpes, after ten years.

Later, at Josh's, he started a joke about "a woman named ..." and Susan said, "I don't like anti-female jokes." So he started another, "What do you call a dog ..." and she said, "I don't like anti-dog jokes." So I said, "How about an anti-male joke? I bet you really like anti-male jokes." "Oh, yeah," she said. I waited for her to laugh. No laugh. After she left, Josh said, "Well, Steve, God is teasing you." So he is. So he is. Which means the same as, "So be it."

It's strange. I was reading over some pages, thirty or so back, about my decision to direct all I do to one person at a time, and it triggered a memory of Sherry saying to me, six months before I began my first book, "Steve, you always talk like you're speaking to a roomful of people." That was a defensive pattern of my early adulthood that never stood up under the needs and joys of the poem. Or of love. Sherry and Emily were my finest girlfriends. Friends, who were female. There was love, and it was quiet and reassuring, simple and direct. Smallish women, attractive, but not screwy-gorgeous.

Smart, but using it for their own growth and not for the manipulation of others. Nasty women are not women but little girls. True women don't manipulate, dominate, jerk around, or avoid men. They live in and of themselves. They don't want to save or be saved. They are few and far between.

Now, back to AA. It is a wonderful organization that aids and serves people, and does so, beautifully. I like it. I like the people. I feel warm and protected in their rooms. But, finally, I get the same feeling going to my parents' church, where I grew up, or any church that sees me as a welcome newcomer. It feels terrific, and I go for it, like toward a good-looking woman with a bed. It is solace, security, protection, and peace, unless you have any sense of aloneness or individuation or creativity, or if you believe that god is only the big *whatever* that created all the gods that humans worship.

Susan is that little girl in 4th grade who wore glasses, got all the answers right, and kicked the shit out of all the little boys. I mean she would walk up and deck some poor Charlie for having parked his bicycle too close to hers. And I mean she'd *deck* him. Then she grew up and invented her absolutely *uncontrollable* urge to fuck any guy who struck her fancy. I mean she'd walk up to some poor Charlie and *fuck* him. And I mean she'd... you get my point.

I've changed, again. And, as I change, I see everything I've seen before with new eyes. When I felt and believed I was weak, I saw everything and everyone in that light. I taught myself to trust in, and rely on, others. I trained myself to accept the helping hand of others. But trust is something like love. It cannot be dished out like a big spoonful on everyone's plate. It is a connection between two people who share the sense of it. It transmits back and forth like a completed circuit. I told Lee today about my encounters with Susan. I was deeply affected, and he warned me not to be so affected. I said, "Shit, Lee, it's my job to be affected."

I don't like it when I'm not affected. All I want is to pay attention, the whole while. To be a poet is to feel and see. Feel *and* see. And then, and only then, to write. I'm going to end up with one of the most chronicled lives ever, and even then, it's only notes on a life. Life is utterly fascinating, and it goes on and on.

Zen Time

I can make things move just by putting certain marks on a piece of paper. Proof? Did your eyes move as you read these two sentences? I can make objects move simply

by making certain sounds with my mouth and throat. Proof? *Please pass the ketchup.* I love Zen fables and parables. See the truth marching. It wanders. God is prick-teasing me. I went to work, today, painting with Lee, and the new painter Kristin showed up. She's 23, bright, sexy, a true androgyne. She's a good worker and a young writer. We collaborated on her film script in the course of our conversation. She wants to meet for coffee and talk. She has a Nicaraguan boyfriend who supplies her sex fix. I'm barely an alternative source. It might be time, at my age, for me to begin to chase women, but I can't. Josh is the past master at that, and he's as accepting of my presence in his house as Peter was the opposite.

A Great Sad Face

I'm just beginning to read William James. *The Varieties of Religious Experience* convinces me that I'm better off going through a very simple process that consists of staring at the wall, thinking of nothing, recognizing a word or image, writing it down and following it through to its own ends. In short, writing poems.

I'm planning to defend feeling at the expense of reason, to rehabilitate the primitive and unreflective, and to dissuade you from the hope of any theology worthy of the name. I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion and that philosophic and theological formulae are secondary products, like translations of a text into another language. (Henry James)

I sat in La Bohème, the other night, and stared at Jean's face. Jean is Susan's friend. Susan is Jean's sponsor in AA. Jean's a painter. Here is my passing poem about her.

*The greatest sad face since Shakespeare invented soul,
she turns downside up, like sun on a rainy day, she'll chew
cigars in her nineties and bake cookies for the road crew,
their dogs, and their happy wives.*

*She can sense the heartbreak behind a spinning hubcap
rolling by at five hundred yards, dented ten years ago
when Johnny kicked it instead of himself, in grief,*

because Frankie married a sailor and shipped out,

*She'll lie down on top of paintings and novels and
twelve-string guitars for a bed of a lifetime she made herself,
never took a lesson, ate rutabagas for fun, because that's all
she had, and the watch on her wrist drops down her arm, until
she leans on it, elbow to second hand, having the time of her life,*

*And everybody thinks she's sad, shit, sad aint nothing but a
good feeling in the downpour, and a life full of downpour
hasn't been sad since 19 and 54.*

A Stainless Steel Dog Dish

It's Valentine's Day, and Jack is the closest thing I have to a Dear Valentine. Feeling is everything, and everything that results from feeling is everything else. Everything else is a lot of stuff and varies from alpha to omega. There's good alphas and bad alphas, and the same goes for the omegas. There's a lot of different kinds of in-betweens, too.

The girls from the Mission come into La Bohème to use the can. Can is a word for pot to piss in. The Chicanas of the Mission have a pot to piss in, thanks to La Bohème, or *the* La Bohème, as in *the* El Camino Real. An aging, flashy woman, in silken black and platinum blond, with laryngitis, on the Mission bus, turned around and gave me a heart-shaped piece of chocolate, wrapped in red foil. She surprised me, and I said, "Thank you, I surely do appreciate it."

I feel like drinking tonight. I feel wonderful. I feel healthy-happy. Now is when people who drink, drink well, in celebration. It's easy not to drink, because I already feel great, but it would be easy to drink, because it doesn't feel negative in any way. It's odd, it's easy to fight, but it would be easy to forget the fight. This is the frame of mind I was in when I went off the wagon the first time, almost two years ago. I have ulterior motives. I want a woman, and I'm so reluctant, sober, to do anything about it. Women seem remarkably unwilling to make any move. Either they don't, or I'm blind to it. I'm going to stay out, go to the Rite Spot and see what.

Christine wrote from Minneapolis, saying she would miss the drunken Steve, the outbursts of affection and the fascinating monologues. I wrote back that if she'd pay my bail, then nurse, protect, and guard the recovery, I might go for it, but I feel so free from the psychology of the drinking life that I'd have to risk a great deal to get into it. It always takes a collapse of some sort to end it. Drinking goes on and on, as long as the drinking self thinks it can get away with it. I have a considered awareness that knows that drink is progressively destructive, but that's matched by the virtues of destruction. It is the Anarchy of Determination. All things built must be broken down and rebuilt. It is an eternal cycle. It's been forty days of sobriety, and I like it like I always did like it, especially when it came every day. Heaven was waking up sober every day and getting a heat on at night, and that was not even every night.

This rap is sobering me into a sadness. Fuck that. I re-determine to get drunk without drinking, bring back the twinkle and sparkle in the eyes, the chuckle in the throat, and the jackal in the closet, where he belongs. I'm not smart, I'm brilliant, like the sun glinting off a stainless steel dog dish.

Tongue in Pen

I want a drink. I want to change my brain after the workweek, go into a different frame of reference. It will happen by some unforeseen development this night, Friday. Drinking is not one drink. It is a long time in the bottle, and it doesn't stop when the goose is out of the bottle, it only stops when the goose is dead. I need a new environment. Like Oakland, for instance, but first, I go the other way.

Sit still. Be quiet. Do nothing. Draw the bow back. I'm on a secret mission to be dry for a year, until next January 4th, to witness the changes in my life under such a particular reordering, so I did 3/4 of a crossword puzzle. Big deal. Even dog dish brilliance has to take a break. So the clouds drift across the sun, and the glint doesn't glint. Sitting in this café, any café, on a Friday night, pen in hand, waiting for the muse of the moment to arise and arouse, is partially ludicrous. I begin to lose the inherent will to believe in the creative mind's power to elevate circumstance into anything like magic.

The Magic of the Ordinary

I'm still trying to maintain my amateur standing as a human being. I've been reading my poet friend Andrei Codrescu's book *In America's Shoes*, reading about times and places and people I've written about in my own books, and damn, he does the same thing all the autobiographers do. He makes his fellow poet-travelers into demi-gods. Shit, I know these people. It's a trick of hyperbole. What he says is mythological truth. Creativity is magical, but it isn't my magic. I'm not magical, simply because I can tap into something most people only witness.

It is the sun that glints off the dog dish. I'm only the dog dish. I'm not the sun. Poetry is the thing that makes the poet. So far, I've managed to stay clear of, or instinctively thwart, the egocentric notion that elevation to the status of *poet* is a good thing. Whenever anyone puts *this* dog dish on a pedestal and enshrines it, I somehow manage to tip it over and slop bloody horsemeat on the marble. The great adventure left is the final discovery of the absolute magic of the ordinary. My dreams are better made than any movie I've ever seen, and I love movies. Dreams are ordinary magic.

Mike and I are going to some AA meetings and begin to explore why we don't like them. I think it's because it's a limited growth situation. They help you get over booze, but they don't help you get over AA. All levels should be designed to be surpassed. A good parent raises adults, not children. I plan on being 86'd from a bar for not drinking. It's a subtle plot to undermine the entire booze support system. Mike and I used to hang out in the same bar, The Little Shamrock. Since then, we've both gone back, sober. We've found out that drinkers will spot a non-drinker and, at first, get a kick out of it. They spontaneously tell you about their own drinking and the problems they've had with it. Eventually, however, they turn on you, because you're undermining their mutually reinforced support system.

There's a lot of false celebration, false camaraderie, in bars, even in the ones where the communal links are genuine. It's hyped up. If you enjoy yourself, without the help of the booze, it runs contradictory to the program. Sober is a poor word for not-drinking. It implies some dreary leaden self-imposed restraint. It implies unfree, when all it is the wide-open space of being free or unfree. People who are unfree in their sobriety imagine freedom from the juice but only get an imitation of freedom, however liberating it may feel.

The Sham Rock

There's a sweet sanity that, once it gets hold of you, hangs on. It starts when you're a little kid, and if nurtured, it grows in you like an alien monster, and eventually it aims to take over your entire being. All the better parts of humanity love to play. I like the waitress, Carrie. She hasn't been unfriendly to me. I suspect if I make myself present and unaccounted for, she may open a little, each time. I ran into her on the street the other day, and she was genuinely wide-eyed glad to see me. Now she has on her glazed waitress look. Still, her glaze broke a few minutes ago, and she actually recognized a human being and not just another "May I take your order."

Jungle Vines

Today is my birthday. Coincidentally, I read Andrei saying, "Life is, in fact, a series of wombs..." and, "The practice of thinking 'in utero' is the most dangerous discipline of our times."

Today is my birthday. The day of birth. Rebirth. Upper birth. Lower birth. He birthed upon the scene. Andrei has a Rumanian perspective on the slow death of America. I agree, but as an American myself, I feel a different or at least more particular response. The wind that fills the sails of the soul is still blowing, and if there's an American soul, I feel compelled to enliven it. Through a series of fortuitous moves, sly and deft, I have maneuvered myself into the best seat in La Bohème. Susan is nearby, with Jean, attempting to save Terry's life. I've known Terry for years, bit by bit, here and there, and she doesn't have that infectious, born again glow that Susan slops all over everybody like the Bubonic plague newly arrived from the Holy Land.

Susan comes over and says, all aglow, "Oh, it's your birthday. How wonderful." While I contemplate some murderous reply, she adds, "Jean hopes you live another year." "Yeah," I say, "I think I will." I'm hesitant to join them, even having been invited, because I know I'll be sarcastic and witty. It's fun and partially satisfying, but mostly it only adds to displeasure, and it births nothing. Almost everything we manufacture in place of simple being is a stillbirth by Cesarean section.

"My, what a lovely baby."

"Yeah, but it's dead."

Now, in regards my own in utero process, I find the change from drinking Steve to non-drinking Steve, becoming the raw lion, is working, but I still feel crazy, and I have yet to settle into my new skin. I've never hollered bullshit in a crowded fire before, except when I was five sheets to the wind, and the urge comes upon me, but I don't have it habituated, yet.

Apropos, in a similar vein, I made a good step last night, with Carrie, the waitress in The Shamrock. She came by me to retrieve a bag of Cheetos, and I said, stewed to the gills on five bottles of Perrier, "You're very attractive, but I don't know what to do about it." She said, "Well, it's my last night, and I'm leaving town tomorrow, but my name is Carrie." God is teasing me.

Back at Josh's, I had a wonderfully understanding kind of conversation with Marja as she read some of my writing. Josh was agitated. Not at the two of us talking but at the two of them not talking. She really is wonderful, and the answer to all my desires, but Josh got to ask the question first. Fate is going to have to kick in a little more actively, if anything of a major nature is going to happen. Mike, a friend of Alan Cohen's sat down and offered to sublet his house to Jack and me in June for four months. Mike lives with *his* eighteen-year-old son. I've talked, written, and breathed myself into a mellow space, so on to babble. I believe the only way I'll ever achieve my own hesitant, inevitable revolution is through determined anarchy under a regime of calculated sobriety. And that, my friend, is my political treatise for the day.

I just leaned into the circled wagons of Susan, Jean, and Terry and said, "You know that conspiring to overthrow the government is illegal. You might want to break this up." Having done that, I felt crazy, again. Then Emmanuel, the painter, sat down and, after talking about this and that, said, "I am *bored*."

"Is that a cover word for anything?" I asked. Shit, I'm not bored, I'm horny. Emmanuel says, "We are born into this world alone, we live alone, and we die alone, and we should be grateful for those who come along to share in our loneliness."

"Yeah, yeah, but fuck a duck, I'm horny. God continues to dangle carrots in front of me and then lift them slowly out of my greedy reach. I'm learning patience and perseverance like learning to tie your shoes with jungle vines. (Don't think about it. I don't know what it means.)

It's still my birthday, but now I'm in the Shamrock. I'm reminded how much I've come to despise alcohol. It's curious to examine this phenomenon. Ingesting mind-altering substances is like being taken on a roller-coaster ride and experiencing

emotions that have been dragged out and set before me like a lab experiment. So there sits the emotion, like a dead frog. Billie Holliday is singing on the sound system. There are women, half a million miles away at the other end of the bar. Strangers with glum faces wander in off the cold street. A slump-shouldered, balding young man, in a crew neck sweater, sits at the bar reading *On the Road*. He's brought along a dictionary to decipher the more erudite sexual references.

It's Sunday night, and Josh has one of his other girlfriends over. Lisa is Mediterranean, sexy, flashy, and intriguing. Marja is the kind I want to marry. Lisa is the kind I get a healthy kick out of. Both are appealing. Given the absence of a Marja, I'll take a Lisa, every time. No quarrel, no contest, just differences that cut nicely into the desires. Wanting to make love to every beautiful woman I see is like wanting, being compelled, to touch a piece of sculpture. I want to touch it, just to see. It has to feel like something. One sense prompts another, the eyes of the fingertips, the fingertips of the eyes.

I've thought for a long time about writing a book about alcohol, but women are more interesting, finally. A woman like Marja has finally become exciting. An exciting wife. It's a new idea. As I drop off the thrill-seekers parade float, I notice, lo and behold, I can smell the roses. There's *more to life* when *More Life!* is no longer a call to arms. God has set before me a primer in my options and notions of women. Not that I automatically get what I want, but the only decent route to getting what I want is to know what I want. And the lion inside doesn't want any bullshit. He likes getting used to this kid from Nebraska and getting out of the grape and into shape. The lion thinks there's a real good chance for total takeover, and he's licking his chops and purring like a pussycat. Go, lion, go. You can have your antelope and eat it, too.

Midnight

The day-after-my-birthday begins, and I just did an awful thing. There's graffiti in the toilet at the Rite Spot, and I just went in and re-inked it. It's been there for a while, and it reads, *Steve Brooks is the only poet left alive in San Francisco*. It had faded and was written over, so I re-inked it, like the caves at Lascaux redone in poster paint. Oh, the horror, the humiliation, the indignity. It was my birthday present to myself.

It's twenty minutes after midnight, and things happen neat, when I least expect it. As I was writing the previous sentence, I heard someone say, Birthday Boy. There was

another one in the bar. I asked the waitress, and she pointed out a burly guy with a bunch of people. It was after 12, and his birthday was the 18th. We shook hands, and he offered to buy me a drink. I declined.

"I quit," I said.

"I should quit, too," he said, "but she tries to get me drunk, so she can take me home." She smiled.

"We should all quit," he said, reminding me that I'd had that thought this afternoon. What if no one drank? What anarchy. What explosive times that could be.

Then, walking out the door, thinking of the bus, the standing on the corner, the waiting, the transferring, along comes the quirky little bus, the 33 Ashbury, which is, right now, even as we speak, taking me halfway cross town, right to my front door. I'm experiencing another curious drug/booze phenomenon. Just as I begin again to feel free, happy, and strong, I feel like taking a hit, a slug, a draft. When I have achieved the very state of mind, body, and being that the drug has failed to produce, I think of the drug. Peculiar. Born of habitual substitution. In utero, I think of false pregnancy. Born free, I think of the bottled in bondage. And so, goodnight.

My Mission

My imagination loves to play in the traffic. I feel sexy tonight. A dreamy-eyed woman comes over to the couch where I'm just sitting down, and she drops, serene and languid, into the armchair. Her eyes drift lazily, intently, across my eyes. I drop my Copenhagen down my shirtfront and forget my Mission on Earth. Then she leaves in a huff. Or was it a minute and a huff? It was fast. Bye. There's a young Chicana nearby who is truly, almost, if not perfectly, beautiful, with a sweet, mobile face, naturally intelligent. Ah, truth and beauty and absurdity and foolishness. It's a wonderful feeling to look at such beauty and feel no obligation, no possessiveness, to simply see and enjoy.

Josh wants me to join him in his Westwind Productions, but I've been reluctant. His offer and his ideas have been working their magic on me, nonetheless. It's having the effect of helping transform me into a fulfilled oral poet, a performance poet, where it becomes the poem that is performed and not the poeticizing of the performer. I've done characters and voices on stage. It was great, I've written and read poems. That was great. Now comes the amalgamation, in the form of poems. I want to let all the voices and

energies loose. I've thrown off the way I used to read. It never was satisfying. It was an attempt to fit into the general rules of reading, and I tried the best I could to read well, inside the tried and true good delivery manner and voice. I was called one of the two best readers in the Bay Area and still... I'm going 90 miles an hour down a detour, burning up the road, flying over bridges that haven't been built yet.

The Church of the Hip and Cool

Two thousand years later, I'm sitting in the Grand Piano on Haight, after all the hippies died. Wearing jeans, boots, a fancy belt buckle and a suede jacket, reading poetry, listening to people with parts of their brains removed and babbling semi-coherently about any goddamn thing they want like Johnny-One-Note On Drugs. This place has become a shrine, a museum, before it's had its consciousness razed, and it's become genteel. Street gents act like gentlemen. *This is where it all happened*, they seem to be thinking. Actually, the Grand Piano came in on the tail end of the hip scene and spent ten years playing nurse-maid to the stragglers. Lee gave me this suede coat, and it's definitely hip garb. I think I'd rather be on the street in the sun than paying my penance in the back room of *The Church of the Hip and Cool*. I have a big spirit today, and I get quiet and sad. The sadness is curious.

Another Dead Cat

At 2:30, this afternoon, my life suddenly felt mundane, and I wanted to blow it out my ass. I went home and watched the Playboy Channel. Look, but don't touch. Someone wrote Dear Abby, "In olden days, when a woman wanted to meet a man, she'd drop her handkerchief. Nowadays, if a man wants to meet a woman, what should he drop?" And she replied, "His wallet." Stephen Spender says, in his introduction to *Under the Volcano* that the saintly drunk is seeking and receives "...translucent clairvoyance, perfected expression. The price to be paid for being fully aware is isolation." My sobriety makes me sociable, and it's frustrating when, after the experience of awareness, which continues, in the mind, I can't find someone to share it with.

Playboy sucks. The bodies look terrific. It's like bottled booze, across the bar, tempting in memory and appearance, but empty of heart and knowledge. My reactions to everything are the same as when I was drunk, but I'm healthy, happy, and sociable, so

I keep my thoughts to myself. I'm still in contact with perception, but it evolves at a distance. At this stage, I must trick revelations to the surface by poetic technique. Sober, I'm certain I write poems more readily accessible to the reader, who still must be able to recognize deeper senses, because they're in us all, but at a distance. Those poems are easily appreciated for titillating hints, obscure references, convoluted absurdities, all the junky nomenclature of mass consciousness.

I'm inundated with socially acceptable and socially praised ignorance. Ignorance is that state of human thinking dictated by fear of human thinking, by a lack of courage to explore and know human thinking, and even more pervasive simple stupidity which is the vast range of human thinking from the imbecile to the highly intelligent, which exists not from lack of courage but from lack of imagination. My god, Martha, there's another dead cat under the house. Let us pray.

If you haven't slipped at the edge and caught your heart at arms length, you don't know what the edge is. Otherwise, the edge is only a roller-coaster ride at Great America. Josh hasn't caught his heart at the edge. Otherwise, he wouldn't be jerking himself off so much. He knows he's not ready for any kind of deeper awareness. He's been close many times, but he's still looking for some sort of reasonable resolution to life's dilemmas. He's trying to decide whether or not to go up to Reno and somehow survive the bad audiences, the chorus girls, and the drugs. He says Marja is not in love with him. He's full of good advice and good intentions and the bad idea that he's really a sonofabitch at heart. It won't wash. Josh has been through the mill. "I've been everywhere, man, I've been everywhere," but he can't make peace, because he's still making war. Making do. Trying to make it. He's still on the make. It's outmoded for him, but he doesn't know how to go beyond it. I see these friends in struggle, and I care for them. It's impossible to offer the next level, and it's ludicrous to condemn, even that which harms and impedes them.

The Buddha Ghost

Peter used to sit with me in his kitchen and describe a man who thought the way I do. He'd wonder out loud why he could never find such a man. I felt like a Buddha ghost sitting there in my playful mind. This feels great. I've gone ahead and felt and talked, on the page, as I would have hoped to, if I'd gotten drunk. P.S. I haven't gotten laid yet. I'm still in carry-over isolation.

A *carryover* is like a *hangover*, when you wake up still drunk from the night before. I'm sure it's how Hemingway wrote every morning, standing at his typewriter, still pumping from the night before. In the *Land of Drink*, there's a half-hour, in my experience, on waking, of absolute clarity, that's either extended by more drinking or fades quickly into regret, remorse, guilt, and all the other emotional goodies that come along with the wasting away of the physical storehouse. I'm still in a state of isolation, carried over from my previous night, the dark night of the last years. Lacking the arrival of a final woman, I'm still attracted to women much younger than I am. Their youth is still vital and it's only recently attached to the big bad bear of the adult world. End of chapter. Time to run the bars.

A Solitary

I'm a solitary. Such is my plight. Born into it as a kid in Nebraska, nurtured by an independent spirit, honed on poetry and alcohol, brought to the essentials by age and experience. I'm still handsome, witty, friendly, appreciative, sympathetic, and understanding, but I'm a solitary. My best company is with other solitaires. All the partying, fucking, living with, intense raps, performing, etc., have not made me bitter, regretful, miserable, or addicted. I'm fine. Never better. I love the pretty ladies, and I'm horny in my imagination. But in my reality, I'm a solitary. It has an inevitability about it.

If someone comes along, she will be someone. I'm not easy anymore, like I was when I hadn't had enough experience to know all about it. I can imagine a future in which women, knowing my mind, come to me for mutual caring and leave it at that. I have nothing to offer any woman who needs an offer in order to be interested. Norman and I shared this perspective, last night, in *The Little Shamrock*.

Jack took his car and six Punk friends to Sausalito, last night. I noticed, in his papers, a *précis* of all the characters he's hanging out with. Perhaps we have a young Punk Kerouac on our hands.

Whenever I see a particularly attractive woman, I make a quick movie of the two of us in some situation and test it for silver screen magic. Generally, it looks like two people who bump into each other for absolutely no karmic reason. I watch the movie I make, and I'm in the movie. There's no point in it if I don't get along with my costar. San Francisco is re-populated, in waves, by wandering Momma's boys and Daddy's girls with some very strange Mommies and Daddies, the honored sons and daughters of some very intense

people, half-crazy, quarter-brilliant, quarter-normal, everyone's dream of *lucky you*. The Gays and Lesbians are only the extremes in one direction. There are many extremes.

Norman supplied the missing link, giving me an idea. I told him about watching Richard Pryor on HBO in concert in New Orleans, talking about anybody he pleases, granted the position of his blackness, and I felt disallowed by my whiteness from doing anything similar. I said something about white people, and Norman jumped on it. "White People! Do a show about White People." He said I should do it as if I'm not white, but of course, I'm as white as they come. The White Emperor has no clothes. So, there goes another idea onto the side burner. If I put it on the back burner, it may fall behind the refrigerator.

I went to the de Young Museum in the park and did the place in about twenty minutes. I kept imagining I would come on the better paintings in a real room somewhere. Real stuff is in real rooms. I went by the Painted Room, (Italian Medieval) which I always like. Jack wants to do a room painted up entirely in drawings and poetry. Great. All we need is a place. Sweetheart, if you want me, you're going to have to come and get me. I'm done ingratiating myself to anyone just because I'm capable and willing to pump their moans. In the meantime, in-between time, ain't we got love, going to waste. It's Saturday night, and I just got paid, less than I'm worth. I should that dread word, map out some agenda for sexual survival. Use it, or it loses you. I'm rambling. Nasty.

I've become residential in La Bohème. OK. That's good. That calms women down. Women want to be kept from hysteria like men want to be kept from violence. A woman, alone too long, gets crazy, and a man, alone too long, gets violent, the perfect rape lovers. Jerry just made up the word to describe such an attitude: *Failosophy*.

Criminal Sobriety

"I'm so criminal in my sobriety, it would take a court order to get me drunk."

I wrote that, in the dark, last night, as I was going to sleep. I suppose it's also criminal for someone to enjoy writing as much as I do, but I do, your honor. I'm ten days from two months sober and two months has been my limit, so far. It's my third time. I intend on a year, as an effective plateau, but in the past, after two months, the freshness of sobriety wore off. I feel bold and adventurous, newly sober, and I'd like it to become a constant condition, but there's one good reason to drink. The world is

fucked, and there's precious little reason to please the world. Which brings me to my topic. Remember *topics*? "Our topic for today, children, is oral hygiene."

Parental approval is the topic. I have unconsciously sought the approval of my parents all my life, most obviously my mother's, but also my father's. I suspect he approves, always has, and will never show it. She doesn't, never has, never will, and shows it. Last summer, she closed the book on my long-held foolish notion-that I might somehow garner her approval. She told me that not only was it a bad idea for me to be a poet, but I was a bad poet.

Never had I seen so clearly the disparity between my reality and her denial. I called my brother, Mark, who was in Arizona at the time, and he said, "Steve, get away from there. Now." He was right. I did. It was stunning to hear my mother condemn me. But it clears the decks. There's absolutely no way to win the acceptance and approval of one's art from a blind woman. I've always thought there were two camps, normal people and outlaw artists. I saw them either from a neutral vantage point or from my Midwestern All-American, normal, background. Now I'm coming to accept the non-creative normal from the advantage point of the true borderwalker. No longer is it a position I fear or aspire to. I am a borderwalker. It is what I am. Case closed. Let's celebrate.

A Self Larger Than Myself

I'm coming out of isolation. I think all of us are. A woman just said to me, "You have a nice face, you're really alive, it's nice to meet someone who's really alive." That, after a two-hour conversation, quite by luck, in La Bohème. I'm beginning to get the recognition I've been missing, and it's coming from my life and not from acclaim. To a degree, those of us who have been in seclusion for years are recognizing each other. A working agreement is being struck. It should prove the beginning of a productive period. This is closer to my sense of *la vie bohème*, than anything I've seen. I searched for it, for years, thinking from time to time, in different places, that it was taking place, when I was being misled by superficials. I've become quieter, more secure, more open, more willing. My time of hibernation is over.

I'm saying these things with a boldness that runs ahead of the transformation. My writing always precedes action. Writing is codification of thought and intention, of the process from *being* through *doing* to *being*. Those who are very good at something, or at many things, are often resented, if not deified just as foolishly. They are a maligned

and misunderstood minority, riding around in wheelchairs of ability and awareness, when they have strong limbs with which to leap from their limits and lead. I remember a line I wrote eighteen years ago. "Tell them I'm hiding, planting myself, kicking out a root, in the cool mind."

In both previous journals, I anticipated the arrival of a woman. And, look who finally arrives. Me. Myself. And I believe it. Thanks to Mick Jagger, my refrain was always, "I am waiting, I am waiting, I am waiting, for someone to come out of somewhere," and my own aphorism, "I have tried to become something built on something missing," and now that something has arrived. Ten years ago, I wrote, "I will put myself inside a self larger than myself, and watch it fit." It's time for no more waiting.

Honoring the Pope

I just gave Bob Kaufman a cigarette. He came through the open door of La Bohème at 4:10, this Wednesday afternoon, stepped lightly up to my table, and whispered, "Cigarette?" I looked up, saw who it was, and went for the Marlboros as if the Pope had just asked for my crucifix. I imagine people who have had to deal with the drunken Bob Kaufman for years, not knowing who he is, have no such reaction. To me, it's an honor. I haven't read everything he's written, but I think he's a true American genius, and he ought to be treated like a national treasure. He moves in that saintly isolation that comes to a few, through whatever means, in a life set for it. It's a kind of clairvoyant, pure expression. The poems don't do a song and dance for the reader's entertainment. The poems, like Hesse's magic café, are an unassuming, unmarked door on a side street, unlit and unadvertised, but once inside, as Kerouac might say, "Zowie!"

I finally spent the night with a woman, last night, and it showed me another lesson. Audrey is as thin as an anorexic, but attractive and wonderfully physical in her touching and holding, gentle and strong. She has no chest to speak of, so I'll speak of it. Skin over ribs, with pretty nipples only slightly more fleshy than the rest. In order to come, I imagined full breasts above my reclining body. I noticed, on recollection, that during the evening we spent talking, listening to music, dancing, and making out, I kept forgetting to be physical. The moment after I first slid my hand up her shirt from her back to her chest, and realized how flat and smooth her chest was, I began to lose physical interest. I tended, after that, to stay in my intellect, and that was fun, too, but whenever we began kissing again, it was a pleasant surprise to be back in the physical. It was a happy night.

"You're a fun guy," she said.

"You're a fun girl," I said.

"We're a fun couple." I added.

She laughed at that syllogism of superficiality. In truth, it was better than fun. Still, it seems to me that the obvious attributes of great beauty and larger breasts have always served to draw me out of my mind. Sometimes, completely out of my mind. But without the compulsive desire to fuck that kind of woman, I'd just as soon be bowling for matchsticks. A curious metaphor. Which reminds me that what I fear most from poetry is what attracts me most. It was and is the fear of saying something revealing of my true nature. It's the risk of looking foolish, insane, evil, stupid, or self-deluded. Well, if anybody is going to delude me, I'd like to be the one to do it.

I shaved off my mustache and beard yesterday, in anticipation of playing kissy-face last night. A Brilliant Move. It was also instructive to sit with Audrey all night while she drank Jim Beam. It was my training ground, twenty years ago - a woman, cigarettes, music, and a bottle of Jim Beam. Once, when she left the room, I considered taking a sip, but I laughed instead. No thanks. I took great pleasure in having all my fun without getting bitten by the bottle. No Beam hickies on me. Shit, I knew all these unadulterated thrills before I met Jim Beam. That's the most fortunate part of all this, that I know how to truly enjoy my life without assistance from a nerve deadening or nerve activating agent.

The advantage to making love to someone who doesn't provoke compulsive desires, is that the impulse to kiss, touch, and hold come gently and clearly, without possessiveness and without fear. Success, as a lover, poet, performer, or as a great human, my version of the American success story, has been my bugaboo. In other terms, I've done almost everything in my power to turn away from the pursuit. At first, I thought it was fear of success, but I've had success. I'm not a failure, and I don't feel like one. I never understood the notion of success. Success always seemed like someone else's idea of what I was good at. Whenever I tried to live out others' ideas, it never felt right. This feels good. I'm at peace in myself, with myself, and with its manifestations.

My second thought was that the isolation of alcoholism was responsible for my retreat from the rat race. Wrong again. These are my true beliefs. Whatever success is, from now on, it will be an experience done from peace. I'm not aggressive by nature. I'm being shown that lesson by Josh. He's all aggression and assertion and quick to promote the attitude. He's not happy, he's driven. I was driven to the brink, and the

brink can kill you. Brinking and Driving Kills. *Start slowly. Slow down. Stop. Now, you're getting somewhere.*

Eyes send, as well as receive. If looks can kill, can they conceive? OK, I got off on a word-play tangent. I'd like to be a tan gent. The beard wouldn't have survived the sun anyway. All the impulses of the last ten years to disengage from the success treadmill are paying off. I don't know what the next level is, but I'm game for it. We conquer others because it's a damn site easier than conquering ourselves. By no longer explaining who or what I am, or apologizing for it, I see and hear the inadequate approximations of intelligence in others.

Having broken out of the time-honored bullshit of Western society, it's fascinating to see how tethered to it most people are, if they're not completely bound and gagged. It's a terrible awakening for intelligent humans to discover the deep and abiding lack of reward in attempting to adjust to any maladjusted social order. I'm still in the early stages of this *Final Man* completion cycle. I'm only beginning to practice these developments in the wider world. I look forward to more and more events, not of confrontation, but of clear delineation. I'm in the Edible Complex in Rockridge, and it's time to stop all this semi-linear exposition and write a goddamn motherfucking *poem*! Yes! Go! And so I did. From others, here is one.

An American Poem

*From where I sit, everything I see is American, American walls,
American paint, American people, a couple of American cops
drinking American coffee. How does a man with a gun appreciate
cheese cake, with keys, a badge, a radio, and a billy club on his belt?*

*American music, American chairs, American talk, what does it mean
to an American to be an American? A light American rain is falling
on the American street. The lights of the American cars are shining
in the American night. An American is holding an American umbrella,
as she waits for the American light to change to American green.*

Does one become American when one is already American?

*The American cafe is nearly empty, as the American patrons
head for their American homes to eat their American dinners.
Everything is American. This is an American poem.*

Desire and Dispute

I've tried to be a macho poet. Lord, I've tried. I've seen poets in all shapes and sizes, as big as houses and tiny as a grasshopper's mortgage. I've seen prison poets and demitasse poets with polished pinkies, but I've been trying one way or another, all my adult life, to be a regular guy with a solid gold chip on his broad shoulders. I'm a big guy, but that's not the point. Some people are afraid of me, but that's not the point. At base, I'm quiet, pensive, gentle, sensitive, and reserved. I tried to drink myself into a kick-ass, nut-busting, chest-cracking, listen-to-this-or-go-fuck-yourself kind of poet, but my roots are in the heart, and my best manner is reserved. I come out of my reserve when something or someone draws me out. When I drank, I broke down the barriers of my reserve. Now I like it. I can tell when I'm drawn out, and I can tell when nothing is going to do it. What emerges can be an idea, an attitude, a poem, a look, a moment of the day or night, whatever, but when it's real, the doors fly open. Steve's Private Reserve. 100 proof. Finest stock. Aged 43 years. Sweet on the tongue. Mellow in the throat. With a kick like a Georgia mule. A True Macho Brew.

I'm out of work again, for two weeks, unless something happens. And something always does. It feels good to drift through the days. I went to a poetry reading at the Community Blend Café on Haight and Fillmore. Three generations; beat, hippie, and punk. Sloganeering poetry. I left at the break. I couldn't imagine reading anything that anyone would hear, unless it could be chanted back at me. Paranoid, angry, lonely, self-righteous cries of indignation. The same old shit. Jim Wilson came up to me and stuck his palm up and said, "Air", after Cocteau's *Blood of the Poet*. An eye in the palm, crying, *AIR*. I took the air, and the air took me out of another airless room of alternating desire and dispute.

God Bless the Poets

When I woke up this morning, I had no idea who I was or what I was doing. Then I felt stupid, clumsy, illiterate, and missing the boat. I felt false and misled. The feeling

went away. You start the day, and one way or another, it gets going. Jack and I hung out together, and by dinnertime, I felt fine, rounded out, shaped up, filled out, and back in time. All self-transformation is taking yourself out of routines of thought and action, reinventing yourself. It takes time and effort, and eventually you end up back very close to who you've always been, but refreshed.

I went to hear Tom Raworth read, and it almost put me to sleep. Sara Menefee said, "Oh, isn't he wonderful?" and I thought, maybe he is and I've lost the ability to listen, but all I heard was a guy staying alive, like weightlifting in prison or memorizing the Bible in Chinese. It did get me writing, to hear the English language read well. It was a good bunch of great words. I saw Leslie Scalapino and Ted Pearson. I noticed we poets are all of a type. We dress well, if comfortably. We're fairly nice looking people, with good voices and decent manners, with a strong willingness to see and hear anything. Anything. These people have been around the block with their eyes open, and they're alive, mostly well, and still kicking. We expect each other to take on a great deal, suffer from it, survive it, and produce from it. It's a good feeling to be in a room with such characters. There's compassionate appreciation, no condescension, and no games. Poetics Anonymous. It's a great support group stretching across many, many centuries. God Bless the Poets. I love them.

Long Lists of Lesser Blame

I feel like a drink. Today makes two months sober. That's been my record. I'm itching to push forward. On the other hand, it's interesting to explore the thoughts that broke my sobriety at this juncture, the other times. I spent the weekend in a condo on Russian Hill, in the home of the vice-president of a giant real estate company. He and his pretty, busty, blond wife were off at Squaw Valley drawing geologic surveys of the finer slopes and restaurants, I imagine. It was enjoyable hanging out with Audrey in the lap of someone else's luxury. However, today I'm pissed off and depressed. For no apparent reason. I like Audrey, but I'm not in love. Again. We had good talk, good sex, good food, good movies on cable, and I read my poems.

After each poem, she told me she wanted to hear more. They had a cumulative effect, something I've thought about my poems, for years. It's the career-long, life-long pastime of a poet to try to define his poetics, that is, the manner, form, and content of his writing. I told Audrey about my fear that sobriety would rob me of the deeper levels

of my thinking and writing. Twenty years of poems and experience have taught me the availability of all levels of being to each of us, particularly those of us who have sought out the proverbial mule trail down the Grand Canyon wall of our collective and individual subconscious.

Audrey has reopened one of my own particular cans of worms. When I make love for an hour and don't come, it means I'm holding back. I want her for a friend. Many of my ex-lovers are friends, but I've never been upfront about it. It evolves. I don't see any great moral imperative in saying I just want to be friends. It's not that simple. Part of my holding back is the fearfulness of letting go. I'm drawn to Audrey. Her awareness, self-possession, and maturity are terrific, for want of a more original and mellifluous judgment, but they're the characteristics I have comfortably reserved for friends. In other words, she's the sort of woman I'm always looking for, but here's the catch; she's not stunningly beautiful, and she's not voluptuous. She's good looking, and her skin is soft, and her skinny body is artistically, visually attractive, but goddamn it, I don't want to fuck her. Then, as Norman says, "She probably has a long list of things about you she doesn't like."

So I feel stupid today. I'm not working. I don't think Josh wants me in his place anymore. It's been a month, and it feels like a week. I'm so fucking transient again, right now, always. It occurs to me to go buy new clothes. I feel as if I'm too old to be dressed as young as I do. It's time for an older look. I've had the urge for a few years. Ever since I first contemplated being forty. I'm wearing the same outfit I've been wearing for 25 years. Boots, jeans, nice shirt, and a nice jacket. I still don't look 43, but I am 43. All this is manifestation of a continuing self-perception and self-critique. It has more to do with my work and my attitudes than with fashion. It's been three weeks since I felt any emotional need to get drunk. Perhaps it's only a cycle, but I felt, this morning, like giving up. I'm so relentlessly full of positive spirits that it gets a bit much.

"Fuck this," I think. It's time to flake off, hit the skids, take a dive, get stupid. I was pleasantly surprised to recognize this reason to drink. Because I often catch myself being extremely positive, in a mixed situation, like being with miserable others. I think I must appear shallow and superficial. This is a stupid concern. I know my friends see me and know me as well as I see and know them. My anger is at those who don't have the depth of awareness in their own lives, to appreciate what have become, for me, obvious absurdities.

Watching *Garry Shandling Live in Las Vegas* with Audrey, I said that one of the causes of my disaffection with performing came when I realized the sort of people who went to make up a typical performer's audience. "Their love I don't need," I said.

The needle in this haystack may be in the analogy of teaching, which Audrey and I have both done. Among the hundreds of people I've taught who used to be kids are a few who have profited from it and remember the influence, the same way I remember Barbara Garst, may she rest in peace, who showed me, in her love of the language, my own love. I'm thinking now, every day, of performing.

The key to performing, it seems, is always in the attitude of the performer. The comic says, "Imagine everyone in the audience is naked." The tragic flaw of my performing is that I've always imagined the audience is smarter than I am. It's led me through a life of disappointment and disillusionment. The stupidity and illusion of human lives has led me to withdraw from involvement, but the accompanying attitude of scorn, mockery, and arrogant superiority, sucks, just as much, if not more.

Teachers get to have a professional posture of feeding the swine and occasionally finding a pearl. I can't see people as swine, except when they grunt and shit in my face, but it actually hurts when the pearls are so few and so far between. I don't want to acquire a professional attitude toward my fellow humans. I seem not to want to have any posture at all. I watch poets reading, to see what their relationship to the audience is, I resist, to the point of despising, any poet who assumes a posture, simply because the posture takes over and begins to direct the writing. The poet ends up pontificating. Or the poet italicizes his or her life.

I want to see the true, and convey it in such a way that it's receivable. It's tempting to, and it often feels like a failing not to, get a posture, an attitude, a role, a position, from which to hand down the tablets of poetry. Militaries, religions, social orders, academia, and the arts are not reluctant to cast their members in robes and uniforms, offices, and degrees. I haven't been trained to the way of thinking I've come to. I'm East Indian, native American, tribal, primitive, whatever. I don't know how I came to not be of the Western Judeo-Christian Capitalist Imperialist Materialist ethic, but what I feel is an ethic of mature innocence.

Truth is, I wouldn't mind going into another alcohol period, if I could end it as quickly as I could begin it, but I know better. I miss the alternative state, seeing the world without the rose-colored glasses of my own sanguine nature. *OK, Steve, let it happen. Go for it. Be pissed off.* I've always wondered at, disliked, and secretly admired people

who, when their dog dies, proceed to shit on everything and everybody in sight for days at a time. Then, when it's over, they say, "Hello, everybody. I feel great now. Sorry I was such a pig, yesterday. Ha. Ha." And for good reason I don't like it. My mother was a master at working people over just because *she* was in a rotten mood. And she's only a point runner, in my experience, for a great many self-blinded people who think nothing of imposing their misery-soaked personalities on everybody else.

There, that feels better. I may be warming for a major blow-out. I remember lifting a beer and having my personality change before I got the bottle to my lips. It was often a cool, malevolent feeling of "Fuck it. Fuck everybody." I don't cherish the feeling. I didn't like it when it came, but when it came, it carried its own volition. I haven't been swallowing enough shit lately to have to spit it out. What's underlying this anger? I've been doing everything fucking right for two months. And what have I got to show for it? No money. No place to live, no job. I might as well be drunk on my fucking ass. *Hello. Steve. Surprise. Life is exactly the same sober as it is drunk.* Of course, I have always known this, and there's no one to blame. No one. If I blamed God, I'd have to start making long lists of lesser blame. I choose not to. I choose to feel shitty just because I feel shitty. I choose not to get drunk. Instead, I choose to leave the Grand Piano, right now, and take some sun.

Blind Date

So, I jumped up and did something. I went by Dave's house and left a note.

Dave, I have just solved all your problems. Make me a partner and take me along on the bids. Old women love me. Not to mention others. Steve

I'm a little goosey right now, because a woman I've seen off and on in North Beach has sat down nearby in La Bohème. She has a wry glint in her eye and looks like Natalie Wood, and I don't mean *dead*. That's the kind of face I could stare at and be stirred, I think. Hers in reality, not Natalie's in fantasy. So I imagine I'll dwell on this little swelling of the glands until it passes. In the meanwhile, I will quote Denise Levertov to the effect that to be a poet is to do more than transcribe inspiration. Transcribing inspiration isn't doing anything.

All this recent thinking is apropos. I'm defining myself as a poet in a way I haven't managed until now. At least, I've set myself that task. A poet is not a person telling the details of one particular life. That's narcissism, self-celebrity. It's not the skill of operating the spot-light on one's own personal dramalog. It's more like an operating room light, a laser, or a candle in the darkness. OK, so, I'm not seeking public office as a poet, and I'm not seeking personal stardom. The teacher's job is to focus on the subject at hand, to facilitate the engagement of the student. The poem must ultimately belong to the reader. The poet, in his or her function, other than as a writer, is a facilitator. He must be an invisible lion.

The woman nearby has, already, the attention of four men around her. My god, she's a lefty, and she's Portuguese. I love Portuguese. She's reading the want ads with a pen in her hand. She's looking for a flat. We could live together. It boggles the mind. Will I do anything about it? Highly unlikely. Jesus, the back of her hands even look good to me, and the kind of clothing she's wearing.

Last night, Norman and I were talking about our male sexual hearts. Neither of us has lost his heart to a woman, for years. It seems to be an accident of experience. Women experience it accelerated; the sensory overload of too much of the opposite sex. That sensory overload becomes a hesitancy to and a realization of getting involved. Anyone involved in life becomes involved in the lives of those nearby. There's a wake-up point when you begin to realize what actually happens when you get to know anybody.

I'm going to close my notebook and sit quietly, thinking of no purpose. It occurs to me that my relationship to the audience as a poet is the same as my relationship to that beautiful woman. I don't pursue unless I am overwhelmed or inspired. I wait for the occasion of confrontation. I only trust the relationship when it's mutual and without guile. It's a romantic affair, but it's rooted in genuine communication. A performance, a reading, is a blind date that may lead anywhere. Anywhere. Nowhere. Everywhere.

The First Real Day of Spring

Sami did the trick. I was sitting in the Shamrock, around midnight, drinking soda with a squeeze, reading *Golden Sardines* by Bob Kaufman, when I felt an arm around my shoulder, heard my name, and turned to see a face I could barely recognize. It was Sami Farhat, also known as *Ankido*, many months off booze and drugs, working in a restaurant in San Mateo, he looked great, if unrecognizable. I knew the voice. It's always in the

voice, the eyes, the heart. We had compatriot talk. Sami, poet, "illiterate from the desert" and Steve, poet, "dumbfuck from the plains," re-engaged a long-standing bond. The good, strong men of my knowledge are showing up, good and strong. It's refreshing and renewing to see these guys. We are alive and well. Sami gave me \$40. I had forgotten the \$40 I gave him, two years ago, when he was down, embroiled in his own poetic angst, so to speak. Many had given him up for lost. I knew better. No one knows the self-discipline that goes to make a creative life. Sami laughed and said he wants to give a wine reading, to lift a gallon to his lips and toss the bottle at the audience of his detractors. Too much fertile land is plowed under by detractors.

Sami gave me an idea for getting my book of aphorisms published. Today, I Xeroxed five pages from the book, included a short introductory letter and a request for an advance, and mailed it off to New York. I have four more letters planned. Putting his money (my money) to that use was a wonderful feeling. I bought stamps and a new notebook. I'm off and running. Dropping the manuscript excerpt in the mail slot at the post office was a deeply satisfying experience.

I bought Josh some shampoo, toilet paper, and dish soap. Last night, sitting with him and his friend Vaughn, a mime, and a new friend of Vaughn's, Brian, a magician, I realized I'm not one of them. They are performers. I'm a poet. I could see and feel the camaraderie of their instincts and experiences, but I didn't share it. I do, with Sami and other poets. Josh gave me advice, and it's good to hear how his world works, but it's different from mine. I told Sami of my sense that the artists who have been in hiding for the last few years are coming out and recognizing each other. This is a process one cannot legislate, for or against. Then Josh told me of an apartment opening up on McAllister in a couple of weeks at an affordable rate. It's still shaking.

Release (Sigfried Sassoon)

*One winter's end I much bemused my head
In tasked attempts to drive it up to date
With what the undelighted moderns said
Forecasting human fate.*

*And then, with nothing unforeseen to say
And no belief or unbelief to bring,*

*Came, in its old unintellectual way,
The first real day of spring.*

I went by Paul's hotel on Van Ness in the Mission and found him. *Accident is the only plan*, said my friend, lying on his bed, watching the bronze gleam of his hanging pans. He's stopped drinking, and another one bites the dust. Another one is born anew. We talked as we always have, for hours, ranging many topics without topic. He told me several wonderful, hilarious, poignant, serious stories, but I leave them for his books. We talked about everything you and I talk about, dear reader. I'll bet you do talk, too. It's a pity I can't record your thoughts, responses, ideas, harangues, discourses, disavowals, confessions, anecdotes and wisecracks. I'll leave that to you and your book.

I sat down, a half hour ago, at the table of the woman I described yesterday. I said nothing. She packed up and left, without so much as a howdy-do. I was glad to have presented her the opportunity, and me the same, to let a conversation begin, and when it didn't, I took it as just as well. Then, Mack, the housepainter chess player, odd-ball character, sat down and started advising me to take up roofing.

"Mack," I said, "forgive me, I'm not being a housepainter, right now. Right now, I'm reading," and I went back to Siegfried Sassoon, who wasn't nearly as good as that first poem. Paul has cleared the way for Jack and me to take a room in his hotel. I'm glad. I'm ready. Now I'm trying to find Jack. Haven't seen him in four days.

I'm beginning to reflect on the stages of sobriety I have evinced and evoked in the writing of this book, from drunken to crazed to reserved. I'm in a period of grace, luck, serendipity, karma, and good feelings, a calm acceptance of chance life. *Accident is no plan*, and courage is quiet. I ran into Hilton Obenzinger, yesterday. He's finished a book on the fires that have leveled the city of New York over the years. New York was founded because a boat that was anchored there, burned to the water. I congratulated him on doing the book, and he shook his head, "It's like watching *The Towering Inferno*, over and over and over again." I'm going to the Broadway Arms, where Jack lives, and find him.

A Sunday Grin

My fear, as I watch, with great joy, all my crazy poet friends clean out, is that it's merely an extension of the social plot engineered by the pendulum and Ronald Reagan,

the military, and the way it goes, to socialize everyone to a fare thee well, It's the invasion of the Freedom Snatchers and the end to benign insanity. However, the street crazies are everywhere, like a boil on the body politic. They rant and rave, they spout insane babble, they show how repressed we are as a people.

America is not Amerika, a fascist state, but A-*merry*-ca, the land of the mindless, with cookie and ice cream stores on every corner. I trust that we poets are cleaning out, gearing up for the dark age of happy smiles, a president who wipes out minor foes with his Sunday-go-to-meeting grin and handshake. It's time for us to exert our independence, to write out of the awareness that independent thinking is becoming a relic of a more enlightened past. It's time for concentrated action, when all aberrant action is under attack by the actor in the White House. Paul and I were talking about the time we *terrorized* (that was the owner's word) the Owl and the Monkey Café. We regret the way we tried to force perception and action on others in such a crude way, but it felt like a last gasp defense against a bleak outlook. The survivors of this time survive, go underground, and plot their revenge. That's cute, but there's truth in the analogy. Poets are good for the soul of man.

I just came into the Blue Danube and ran into Peter, who looks a lot better than a rain-wet cat scrounging for food in the gutter. He was in good spirits, as that goes, with him. I saw a glimpse of a twinkle in his eye. I smelled the fragrance that triggers the unfailing memory of the ability to love. The Blue Danube has the attraction of being a café for beautiful women, yuppies mostly, or yuppie girlfriends, seekers after the Golden Grail of Material Security. Josh spent the morning trying to track down a woman named Eve who runs a city tour service, a strikingly beautiful blond he and Vaughn met in a posh café.

The pursuit of beautiful women is, at least, a sign of life. It's also a desperate transference of energy. There are 80,000 good-looking women in San Francisco, and most of them are preoccupied with the 79,000 socially desirable walking crypts of the soul. Ah, hyperbole, I know it well. I have, of course, reserved one woman, above and beyond the scheme, for myself. Let's talk about the weather. It's raining. It's a good rain that comes in bursts, heavy, then slack. There's a full moon, last night and tonight.

The Order of Disorder

Dave made me a partner today. I'm helping him finish a difficult job for no pay. It's the least I can do to put into the partnership. He's got all the equipment, the truck, and he put in the effort to get it started. I'm just glad to be working. Of course, the sooner it pays off, the better. I think that'll happen within two weeks. Then, it's an apartment, or a hotel, until I can find an apartment. It's a gamble, going into business. It may take too much mental time, but Dave has the same concern. He's contemplating joining an order and becoming a monk. He says that if he does, he'll pass on all his painting equipment and his truck to me. Josh says that if he dies or goes to jail for any reason, he'll leave me his apartment and recording equipment. Dave says that if all that happened, no one would want to be my friend, something would happen to them. Anyway, I simply can't work for someone else and be at their will and whim. It was a good idea, for a time that's passed. Now this ambition is an interesting sign of change.

Mark sent me a reproduced photograph of the two of us for my birthday. In the photo, we're maybe six and three, or seven and four, I can't tell. I look like I'm about to cry. About to be about to cry. Not really cry. Looking around at a bewildering world. I've never seen the photo before, and I've never seen the look in any other childhood photo, but I know the look. The way I'm sitting in the photo is familiar.

I imagine all that could be. Would it were so, but it isn't. We are who we are, where we are, when we are, and I'll take it. I won't waste my time, energy, or spirit, wishing I'd gotten a better roll of the dice. It is all as it should be. We need a few people trying to map out the life of the soul under our current circumstances. I noticed myself, today, as I watched Dave going nuts trying to deal with the client, a manipulative old fart trying to get his way by pretending he's absolutely wonderful. All he wants Dave to do is way too much, for far too little. He masquerades as guileless, used to getting his way in everything. In my glorious new position as partner, I felt more at ease telling Dave what I saw, than I did as his worker.

I'm becoming more explicit with Jack, as well. At first, I thought it was recognition of his maturity and his ability to receive and understand. That's true, but it's also my recognition of my own maturity and my ability to give. The best gift is one left on the doorstep. The attention must go to the idea, not to the giver or the receiver. *Look what I found, an idea. It's a good idea, I'll leave it right here. Who knows, someone else might find it and pick it up.*

Held Liable

The key here is an element of seriousness, long masked by lightheartedness. A heavy heart needs a few balloons tied to it. But seriously, rolling across the Bay Bridge, going to work, I listened to Dave use a word that I could have done tricks with, turning it to a series of puns. I let it go. Later, I began talking about his wish to quit the job we're on.

"There's no job worth having that isn't worth quitting," I said.

The implication is a major tenet of mine. It is to give up your life in order to save it. Life is a job worth having that's worth quitting, if one considers death a worthwhile price. *What may prohibit your long life may exhibit your best life.* It's a fearful prospect, and it's the only conclusion that one can put to a life of conscience and value. Always, when one has an ethic above expedience, there's risk and the necessity to accept it. And then there is the freedom it gives.

If you can walk up to whoever or whatever holds your life in his, her, or its hands, and say, "OK, put me in prison, cut off my head, kill me. Do your worst. I am doing my best." So we packed up and drove off the job. Dave has worked three weeks and made no money. I worked a day and a half for no money. But it was time to walk away. It's tough, when you've been trained to do a job, and you try to do the job well, to then quit that job. Quitting has a bad reputation, promoted by those who stand to lose if you didn't believe them.

I'm becoming more at ease with my seriousness. I used to reserve it for drunken pronouncements. Now, it is beginning to emerge from my own reserve, calmly and surely. I've always been afraid that my art would get me into trouble. I thought that the surest test of the fulfillment of my art would be the degree to which I'll be held liable for it. I don't seek to offend or outrage. I seek to be held liable, at the level to which I apply myself in the art. It seems if the truth hurts, there's an inclination to hurt the one who proclaims it. The truth is not my right. I don't own it. The truth is. I only seek it. It appeals to me. I don't deserve to feel self-righteous. The truth doesn't care, and it doesn't offer prizes or medals for those who approach it.

When Martin Luther King Jr. said he would like to enjoy the life of *longevity*, he was truly prepared to die. "I have been to the Mountain," he said, and I thought that was merely a beautiful spiritual metaphor. Now I see that he meant it. It was true. He had tasted the incredible freedom that comes when one has given up control over the cruel

unknown and allowed the felicitous unknown to occur. Dave gave me \$20, to get through the weekend. I told him, "Whenever I have \$20 in my pocket, I stop feeling like an endangered species for another day."

A New Friend

Vaughn, who looks suspiciously sleazy and self-centered, revealed himself to be anything but. He's done his mime show for kids and paraplegics, MD victims, and Vets. Among the kids, some were autistic. It was miraculous, according to the supervisors and nurses, the way they would respond. One kid, while signing, dragged Vaughn all over the room, saying, "This is my new friend." One kid spotted him sometime later at a fair, recognized him in makeup as the same mime who had come to the hospital, became excited, and signed hello. The kid had shown no recognition or memory of anyone else.

After that, Vaughn says, when some guy from LA tells you all about your great future, it seems absurd and superfluous. I'm beginning to think this writing is going much too fast. I'd like a few events and revelations of an unexpected sort, but they're all new and unexpected.

Young Joy

Falling in booze is falling in love. The affair starts magically, with great expectations, and it ends badly. Getting over the bottle is the same as getting over a great love that was born in addiction. Whenever anything or anyone else becomes the fulfillment of one's life, there are three solutions. One solution is to continue the dependency forever. The second is to find a substitute dependency, another drug, another lover, and the final and the only true solution, is to find that fulfillment in yourself.

It takes time to survive a dependency. One remembers the good times and forgets the bad. And one drink is one more kiss. One more kiss, and the affair is on again. You kiss it off by not kissing it on again. My quarrel with AA, in part, is with the way they sit around and talk about booze. The affair is rejoined. All talk isn't cheap. Good talk is expensive and valuable. It's good to get it out. When you get your mind on it, you get it off your mind. Up to a point. But when one develops a dependency on a shadow relationship, one continues to build it up, by dwelling on it.

I went to see *Spinal Tap*, a satirical movie about the obsessive lives of mediocre artists. I caught myself identifying with the movie. I began to fear for my own mediocrity and my own obsessions. Finally, I felt relief in my desire to stay out of the limelight. Whether or not I'm worthy as a poet is a question for others to decide. I love to write. If I were ever to deal with the praise and condemnation that goes with celebrity, it could thwart the simple process of sitting down with paper and pen and love of language that comes from the heart.

I would take the risk, because I won't let fear stop my simple right to see and to tell. One day, Paul was describing the pitfalls of writing. Painting is freer, he contends, because you can hang your work on the wall and draw joy from it as an object. But language has a perpetual tentacle grip on one's heart and mind. Painters may disagree. I haven't pursued painting beyond my young joy in it. Young joy. How wonderful it is when one's faculties fall in love with any process. Early on, when I was being a painter, it was seemingly endless play of discovery and productivity, like falling in love and making babies.

Poetry is an addiction to some, I suppose, but it's an addiction like eating and breathing. It's life-giving. I've forsaken poetry a few times, but the bond never broke, and it continues to be a positive love. It always triggers a life-force that's positive, energizing, and calming. I have lows in my life, but they're always raised by poetry. It's an elevation of low spirit, not in the sense of cheering me up, but in engaging me, in spirit. It is uplifting, in a spiritual sense, by engaging me to rise above, not to abandon my earth-bound self, but to enact my heaven-bound self.

Booze put me so at home in my earth-bound self that it seemed to be a release. The end result of the engagement was the enactment of my reptilian ancestry. One progresses deeper and deeper, inside the physical, to primate, reptile, amphibian, sea snake, ultimately to a watery grave. It's a kind of drowning, and I'm glad I made the journey, but flying is another journey. The spirit returns to the air, the wind. The trick is to keep this continuum intact from earth-bound to heaven-bound. Family ties in the human cycle. Body and Soul. I want a drink. I want a lover. I want to drink a lover instead of loving a drink. C'mon, baby, let's get reptilian. I want to return to the ocean. Put me back in the primordial ooze. As in myself, I look, in others, for heaven and earth. Not the perfection of it, but the life of it, earth in heaven, heaven on earth, with no separation between them.

A Nice Fall

"I can hear the music, all the lovers on parade. Open up.
I want to come in again. I thought you were my friend."

I was singing. You never know when life cracks open, and everything turns beautiful. I got off the bus at 18th and Mission and stood under a canopy, watching a bent old couple hobble up to the light, in the rain. He held onto her arm. Then he fell. As low to the ground as they were, it was almost like they fell into a love seat. He crumpled. She toppled onto him. I dropped my backpack and hurried to her and set myself to lift her. Her eyes were closed, and I looked to see if she was hurt, in shock, dead, or alive. I asked if she wanted to get up and out of the rain.

"Just a minute," she said.

Others came to the old man. We lifted them up and walked them under the canopy.

"He's blind," she said.

"I have a 19 year old son..." I thought she said, but the words trailed off.

"You took a nice fall," I said, meaning to compliment them on the success of it.

They were fine, and I stepped aside. The old man took off for the corner, and his wife started after. She turned.

"Thank you for helping," she said.

I gestured that it was no big deal. I saw a white plastic bag where they had stood, and I said to her, "Is that your bag?"

"No," she said, "that's somebody else's garbage."

I laughed a little, to have my moments of being helpful turn ludicrous, as if I was trying to force a bag of trash on her. My backpack was soaking wet. The rain stopped. I crossed the street and got on the bus. When you are feeling as good as I was, there is no tragedy, no unhappiness.

The last few days, I had been thinking it was time for a change. This book and I feel ready to open up. I joked with Norman that I'd probably get drunk at the end of it. I didn't mean it. I said I would get drunk if the entire community begged me to. Today, Jack said his sister thinks I'm still drinking. His mother's friend asked Jack about money. Jack said I'd given him some, but it was tough, because I hadn't been working much.

"Well, he's got a habit to support," the friend said sarcastically.

"Yeah. Eating," Jack said.

I told him not to feel bad, people don't get what's happening.

"It's my problem. I have to deal with it. You shouldn't have to deal with it, too."

Most people have decided why people drink, and usually it's to escape. Drunks are weak. People seem to believe drinkers are helpless to deal with their weakness, and they condemn all drunkenness, usually as a cover for a greater condemnation.

I became angry and began thinking of what Christine said, on the phone from Minneapolis. She remembers my drunken escapades and thinks they were wonderful. Then she told me she was reading *Moon and Sixpence* by W. Somerset Maugham, about drunken poets and drunken painters in Paris before W.W.II, and she said, "It's the same, then as now."

She and Paul and I, and Sami and others, are still the same, drunken artists provoking the inherent condemnation, born of envy, in part, of the bourgeois sluts of the world. That's fun to say. Bourgeois Sluts. I'll graffiti spray in on a wall somewhere. None of this contumely inclines me to get drunk. Instead, it inclines me to watch the great, normal human foolishness in action, clearing the decks of the myopic, miasmic, moronic multitudes. Ah... it feels good to get a little righteous, like a refuge in the rain. My sobriety continues to be a wonderful place from which to observe the world.

I bought *The Moon and Sixpence*. I found it, with limited funds, for \$1.50. I came in Josh's singing, "I can hear the music . . ." and Josh said, "Who got laid?" Not me and not by anyone, but by everything. Thank you, Josh, Norman, Christine, Jack, W. Somerset. Fire up the engines. Let's kick some ass. Writing a book, even a book such as this, is an interior project. One must sit still, in some manner. The themes must be kept in close proximity to each other, even if one doesn't have a clue what those themes are.

I imagine that composing a symphony would require keeping the damn tune straight for a very long time. I'm beginning to anticipate my release from this unique bondage. Even as much as this form draws from the external moment, it remains contemplative and rational. Poems, on the other hand, are better suited to a life of action and emotion. They're also done in a state of disinterestedness, but the relative intensity and brevity of poetry doesn't require the extended rationality of prose. Jumping out of an airplane is different from hiking across India, even though both are born from the same spirit.

I won't remember how to do this for a long time, if experience serves. Other than the pages numbering by, rapidly, I sense an end. A poem is similar. One begins with one

true image, proceeds into the unknown, with lines, images, ideas, words, feelings, and then there's a surprising linkup of the parts to the whole. Toward the end, there's a sense of completion approaching. It's exciting and frightening. One does not know yet what it is that will do the trick. Then the poem is done, and once it's done, you move on.

This makes three books, unpublished and thoroughly satisfying. Any interest in this will come from some unexpected direction, prompted by some action of mine on some other front. I have ideas but no knowledge of how that may happen. I imagine putting myself, in a place or situation that might prompt a new creative direction. Tahiti, Managua. Or, what's her name might show up. Here is a poem of her coming.

The Eternal Ruse

*I want you to be mine, and I want to be yours,
and every time I say that, I want us to laugh
at our little ruse.*

*I want us to merge into one, and every time
I say that, I want us to laugh at our little ruse.*

*I want us to walk down Paris boulevards and forget
who we are and what we're doing and where we're going,
and then we can laugh together at our little ruse.*

*I want you to be here, because you're part of me,
and I am part of you, and the hardest laugh
is to laugh alone at our little ruse.*

*Being so far apart for so long a time, learning all we can
about the perfect and the imperfect in the world,
where learning to be without is a greater ruse
than any we could play together or on each other.*

*Knowing the ruse of life, and loving the ruse in its face,
the eternal ruse of realities, and the ruse of all the rest.*