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DIALOUGUE

The following dialogue was edited down from an exchange of letters between Sean Thomas Dougherty of Manchester, NH and Lee Rossi of Santa Monica, CA in the spring of 1991:

5-2-91
Dear Lee:
Hello friend ... Congrads on your contributions to Onthebus 6/7. Your “Chain” poem is strong, as are most of your reviews. Actually, I liked all of the reviews except the Arthur Vogelsang — where you speak of a “Malais of male energy” in American society. This I do not understand. Every day more women are murdered and raped by mind-skewed males. And didn’t we just have a war? Not much malais there. And Charles Webb’s essay (which Lee quotes in his review. See Pearl 1990) is simply more of that Robert Bly male bonding bullshit. American poetry is overflowing with “male energy.” This is the generation that wants to be Bukowski. It’s everywhere, and it’s ugly — because not everyone can do what the Buk does. My friend Lou McKee had a great essay on this “Ugly Poetry” last year in Swamp Root. It was basically written in response to Webb’s essay.

5-13-91
Dear Sean Thomas:
Thanks for the letter. It just got my blood boiling. Nothing like a good challenge. Say, did you happen to see the latest issue of Poetry Flash? It had an article in it that reminded me a lot of the Webb article. The author talks about “sword energy” and “harp energy” in poetry (or something like that). The point is that male poets are getting tired of this sensitive guy of the 90’s stuff, which until recently has been the only alternative to the “ugly” stuff that Lou McKee is talking about.

I think what I like about the Webb article is how he puts the skewer to the way a lot of academic poets write. Webb is right. All that “warrior energy” is getting sublimated into a sort of showoff aesthetics ... it’s flowery, it’s sexy, it’s sweet, it’s forgiving and exquisite and soft, it slumps in its chair with a sort of comatose joy. But McKee is right too. All those would-be Bukowskis are no more integrated, emotionally and spiritually, than the latter-day pre-Raphaelites.

Point is: it’s hard being a male, hard being a male poet. But that’s the job, as I see it. Not perfection of the life or (read vs.) perfection of the work (Yeats, I think), but perfection of both. Not that anybody’s ever going to arrive at perfection, but who wants to live the same way one’s whole adult life, struggling with survival and misery. in the grip of emotions/wounds that he doesn’t understand or acknowledge? Self-knowledge, here we come.

6-8-91
Dear Lee:
Sorry for taking so long to write again ... So where were we? Robert Bly, Charles Webb, and male energy. I guess it’s the language of the essayists that really bothers me the most. “Sword energy” might as well be “Nuclear Warhead
Energy.” Isn’t “warrior energy” what is wrong with the world? Everywhere I look I see meaningless ritual, life reduced to ritual, and a world far too male if anything. I’m a deep believer in the matriarchal images of life, of living, of love. In men there is a darkness, a primeval manifestation of all that is atrocity. It waits, spear carrying, wearing war paint. As James Earl Jones said in a recent episode of his television series (talking about a serial murderer), “It’s there inside all of us (men). Waiting.” I do not want to cultivate anything called “sword energy,” especially in my poetry. I want to dissipate it into the dark night, the dark primitive place from where it came.

As far as academic poetry goes ... Poetry and The Antioch Review will always be what they are. But even within their pages you'll find a Kinnell, a Levine, or Forche to blow you away. And the alternative will always be there, too. And as you say, it is the cultivation of the work and life that matter, and yes, it is very difficult to be a male, but even more so to be a woman in a male-dominated world, especially if you happen to be poor.

“Male energy etc.” in relation to poetics carries much more weight coming from you, Lee. As you can tell, I'm not a great fan of Webb's poetry. What I fear from all this can be found in his poetry, which — from what I've seen in the small press — is rather chauvinist, or more appropriately, downright mean (check recent issues of Slipstream, Chiron Review, and Four I's for example).

6-15-91
Dear Sean Thomas:

I think you're right on about Webb. While being a charming person (personally) and a cogent, persuasive essayist, he is also in his poetry just a bit mean. That makes me uneasy with his work too. As for Bly, like you I’m also uneasy with some of the terminology he uses. I’m not sure whether “sword energy” and “warrior energy” are all that useful in a country and at a time when such concepts are so easily misunderstood and debased. Rather than tricking the concepts out in mythopoetic form which has all those militaristic overtones, I prefer to keep it individual/communitarian. Strength and purpose are equivalent concepts, seems to me, but they don’t have the same mystery and marketing glitz of the others. What we need are concepts that hearken back to earlier forms of community life, where men and women could develop the necessary strength and self-assurance to fulfill a variety of social and personal purposes. Beats me if I know what those forms might be, but it would be worthwhile to start exploring the historical (and prehistorical) record and beginning the discourse. Whatever we come up with though should acknowledge a specifically male energy. The feminists have taught us a lot about the importance of female energy in social life. We need to explore the ways in which male energy can make a positive contribution: “ploughman’s energy,” “herdsman’s energy,” for example, not so glamorous as “warrior energy” but equally important in the history of the species.
Out The Window

Class, I have read to you a poem about nuclear destruction, about my own sense of fragility in the face of such a power. Perhaps I should have said, students, glaze your eyes like Onika’s on the back row

and stare out the window at the green of maple, the dark confluence of bark, the flutter of wrens and sparrows, the circle of pigeons choreographing

a living arc across the blue yoke of our planet. Imagine that suddenly the empty space within the hollow bones of birds is freed.
Dis Dance

*(apologies to Monk)*

Babe this summer you needn’t
ask if our clothes clash,
as blinding sunlight

bleaches out all
colors and at
this latitude!

like going around in
a grass skirt in
Greenland.

Upstart Apollo
pushes his beachball
across the ceiling,

(in this heat his horses
stay in their stable)
while Persephone’s Husband

condenses a haze of passion
over convex horizons:
mute tears

freeze over
paired skaters.
Callisto Alone

All I wanted was to rinse the silk in the river,  
the wild fish stroking my ankles  
on their way downstream. Once a boy  
said men could steer ships by me, I  
was that beautiful, a boy half-lidded with  
love and breathlessness.

Somewhere the boy makes pots now, or sows  
a field, his shoulders strong and bolted,  
having by now taken another woman, entered her  
like a room with one door and its windows locked,  
forgetting me the day I disappeared and didn’t,  
alone in the forest cave with thoughts of honey.  
Was that me? Could I have ever moved  
my great legs toward the man sleeping  
under the cypress, could I have thought to  
both straddle him and then open him like a goat?

I can see myself in the sea far below tonight,  
my waving, living light, and wish  
I was of it and not night,  
so I could open for the ships like a woman,  
and every so often wreck them on my rocks.  
I’d be moving, the throb of water  
in its hunger to be done  
with now and flowing east too soon,

and whether I be starlight or bear-heart or  
the girl my mother bore, her curls  
falling fatally down her lake-smooth back,  
I have still lost my bowls, my clay, my silk,  
my feet in the grass, my eyes on  
the shell-breaking gull. I could say  
I’ve come close to knowing everything  
from where I’ve been, I know
about having breasts kissed, I know
tree-felling strength and the taste for rabbit blood,
I know the heavens as a dying woman knows her bed-quilt,
every stitch and corner and weave-flaw.
If I could be all I’ve been at once,
I could lure men to shore with my light-waverings
and my eyes, and tear them into red flags
I’d hang by the shipmasts,
claiming a nation of sea kelp and crabs
running sideways, their one good claw saluting.

But now, as before, men trace me with their fingers.
Now, it is not my legs, my nipples,
it is my back, my snout, the points of my claws
anchored so completely they aim perfectly
north, and I’m looked to by men
for that alone.
The Ex-Wife Attends The Wedding Wearing White

Cherries wiggle in their jellied ecstasy.
We stripe the white cake with raspberry jam,
dip strawberries in melted imported chocolate,
creating bodily chemical reaction similar to
spasms, contractions—diminishing pulses—guilty smiles.
We relax on pillows in the presence of guests. Our fat
 cushions us from the bony ride we’d otherwise have
on the sunny days of evening when fiction stretches
across cities, hours—a newly writ book bound
in such a way that juice is contained. The transparent
swan-neck lifts: who blesses? A one-eyed judge—
his black patch representing accidental bad luck.
We optimistically box our gifts on certain occasions.
The blue baby no more in her white eyelet bonnet.
Lids: remove them. Shake the ineffable till coconuts
fall at our fallen feet, hairy with promised milk,
sweet natural nourishment in the dry land of drought.
I Resist Haircuts With The Feeling Of One Descended

I resist haircuts with the feeling of one descended from a people with expressive hair. My mother’s curls went limp in an English fog when news came of her father’s death. My Uncle Saul’s own raven hair and beard crackled into white the very day his mother died, and he with doctor’s hands could not prevent it. I was born, I’m told, with hair descending to my shoulders. I think, in all those months inside the womb, that I heard music, folklore, poetry, and this made the hair grow, month after month uncoiling in the water like lethargic smoke. But at my birth, the world’s hand, backed by garish lights and starched white shapes and woven masks and birds that dipped beyond the glass and whispers like the wind that moves through flutes and humming steel and ticking clocks, struck my head and caused me to forget the lessons, all, but let me keep the hair, the long and damp correlative strands of thought in unremembering black.
The Same Road

Where the house blurred into the windbreak of half-grown trees, we turned back to wave, certain she'd still be there. My sister and I let go our brother's hand; we laid our books in the cold gravel of Poison Spider Road, packed stones to keep the wind from rustling the homework into barbed wire hours west of us, our arms flapping with a keen knowledge of the mother.

She waited at the window, I believed, solely for us, her breath a white knot where it touched the glass, a sweater slung over her shoulder. I willed we'd find her in the window when we turned, but in truth, wind and the slur of stones had pushed us too far down that road to see her, or her us: the house small as a latch on the sage flats and getting smaller.

I was her daughter: into dry snow-scatter I drifted and the seeds of her longing settled deep in the reddened folds of my ears. That's how I've come to believe the end of winter is the longest wait, a weight that kills the calves, snaps hope from the limbs and keeps the cottonwood creaking in the yard. When finally it comes, spring is a parting, a slow journey begun in the dark bud-hard ground, unseen, accomplished in its own time.

Meanwhile, it pressed her face to the window, furrowed and torn as if she were also following the migration of something far beyond us on the same road.
Turbulence

Hold the little things tightly,
turn them in your fingers
like your mother would a rosary,
a pin cushion or pickled fruit.

Thirteen and shabby, you want to cry
but don’t, fidget instead
and reach for the best safety you can find.
“It’s raining down there,” you say
to nothing particular, fixing
your eyes below the flaps.

Nothing can touch the accuracy of a child.
You are so right, I smile and forget
the constant ring of engines,
the parade of clouds, even the altitude
opening suggestive possibilities for both of us.

Below us, Texas is bigger than its name.
The clouds are pockets
neither of us can reach through.
The sun is basting on the wing.
I could tell you it is promise,
security—but that would not do
for either of us, descending as we are,
aware for the first time
how thick the play of all colors,
the unforgiving weather of white.

No. We want the little things held before us
in the palms of large hands,
or safe among our keys, our tickets home,
damp with sweat and turbulence,
a close place for nervous fingers.
Packerton

Pain is not the river sliding black and gold below Packerton mountain’s dark back. Pain lingers in blue snow backwaters, where the deeper, permanent cold of ground stings back the open hands of ice. The township’s last black bear, oiled fur chewed by parasites, crouches in terror of daylight in an ash can under the Conrail trestle. White rails ring hunger and rabies prowls the Long Run dump in packs of stray white dogs. Dump trucks rumble on broken springs down sandy state roads, too heavy to brake for deer. Their partial carcasses, frozen, remind us of doomed stone fences Iroquois abandoned. It is a pain of slate blue hills, their forests of stone.

Snow won’t stick to the white tin backs of our houses. They withstand each evening’s slap of cold, like faces of teenage daughters, indifferent, eyes open. I nail a strand of colored lights in coils of barbed wire around my parents’ doors. Their faded faces stare from a brown room, convinced I’m not the enemy, good inside. Moored in salted driveways, Chryslers’ lacquered hoods endure, polished and hard as each father’s sense of his own guiltlessness. I stand in my parents’ front yard, hammer in hand.
Backyard beagles curled into springs of bone
die in their coops another night. In their dreams,
tremendous snapping turtles crawl, driven
by hunger, up from thawed river banks.
Christmas lights stop blinking, bouyed in wind.
Tonight the deer, who live a thousand years,
come down from their country to watch us.
In fields behind factory parking lots
they turn to stone, eyes wicked opals.
Only the river still moves, bright through black
land bared to a golden sky: cold and slow
as our gestures toward any neighbor.
Golden and wide as the feeling we’re
sure we’ve offered, sure we deserve.
The Cleansing Nature Of Crisis

I was on the back porch, just about to rough out the pizzle, when Smith came barreling around the side of the house in an aged hearse that was green as mold, and fat like some science fiction hippopotamus. He knocked over a wheelbarrow full of geraniums in the corner of the yard and kept going. For a minute I thought I had imagined the whole thing, but he came scooting by again.

"Hello Deloris. It's me, Smith," he screamed out the window. "I still love you." I let him go around a few more times before I replied. The most delicate area is between the legs, so I can't stop to talk. They're so fragile there. Besides, I haven't seen Smith since I was fifteen.

* * *

"Deloris honey, would you run down to the market and get me a pound of liver. They're running a special on it today," Mama said. "Hurry up, now. They'll be closing soon."

I got there as the lights were going out, those huge florescent bulbs that suck the light back inside themselves when they're turned off.

I rushed to the back of the store and found him there, working on a piece of cow. I stood until he noticed me.

"Hey there, little lady," he said. "What's your name?"

"Deloris, but my boyfriends call me Dee Dee."

"As pretty as you are, I'll bet you have lots of them."

"Boys? A woman can only stand so many of them." I was talking too much. Not thinking.

"Yeah, a woman can, can't she? You know with eyes as clearblue as yours you need a fancy name. Sapphire, maybe."

I asked him his name. He said Smith. His grandmother had given him a last name first because his mother died after having him, making him the last man she would ever have.

"So, what can I do for you, Sapphire?"

"Mama sent me to get something, but I don't remember what it was."

"We have just about any kind of meat you could want. Steak, maybe or roast?"

"Yes, it's meat that I want. The special meat." I was reaching.
I had this feeling, like when I was really little, and playing too close to the edge of our freshly dug septic tank. The hole was full of thick, brown water, and so deep that I couldn’t see the bottom. But I bent closer, trying.

I liked this man. The way his muscles were, big and jumpy through his uniform. And those knives flashing all steely in his hands.

“How much of the special meat do you want?”
“All you’ve got.”

He took me on the butcher block, belly down. The cool animal blood was sticky to my naked breasts, blushing my pale white skin. He cut into me with expertise, holding me with hands that knew meat. Overhead the smoked hams and strings of sausages hung quiet. I dove head first into the hole.

*  *  *

In the distance I heard sirens. Smith sped by again. I’ve lost count of the times. He slid into a small chicken pen I had bought recently, along with two hens. I wanted to do for myself. Providing breakfast was a step. Smith killed one of the chickens.

“Sorry about the bird,” he said, and I knew he was. I had never blamed Smith.

The grass had given way to ruts of chewed clay. Each time Smith passed he stuck his face as far out the window as he could. Sometimes he spoke, others not. But he kept driving.

*  *  *

There I was. The thick smell of flesh all around me. Smith was going to town behind me, and I was making weird animal noises I never knew could come from my mouth. Neither one of us heard my mother come in. I guess she was worried because I’d been gone so long.

Right off she started screaming and slobbering. Her head shook so hard her jaw couldn’t keep up. She’d seen me naked before. She’d seen a naked man before. She’d never seen a naked man in me before.

She was foaming at the mouth by the time she picked up the meat cleaver. She went after Smith, screaming that she was going to press his balls through the sausage grinder. My mother said these things! But Smith was pretty limber, shuffling around with
his pants in a knot at his ankles.

She finally gave up chasing and got smart. In the corner was a fat water hose used to wash the blood from the floors at the end of the day. Mama unfurled it from its spindle and pinned Smith to the wall with a burst of lathery water.

The police came, as if Mama willed them there. I don't remember anyone calling.

They took charge of the water canon, and eventually washed a confession of rape out of Smith. He kept looking at me, his eyebrows hooked like questions. Still naked on the butcher block, I traced my finger over the purple stamp on a flat hunk of beef loin laying cold against my thigh. USDA Prime. As the day's collected fats softened then gelled under my rocking butt, I decided that it wasn't my place to stand in the way of another person's fate.

The Police Chief approached me, a lumpy man with a weak Italian mustache. He looked tired of chasing bad guys, and the questions he asked, I couldn't answer. When Mama's eyes were on Smith, and her back was turned, the Chief slid close to me and slipped in a concerned finger.

"Just checking for damage," he said with a wink.

* * *

"How'd you get out of prison, Smith," I asked. I had just finished etching out the scrotum and could relax for a minute.

"Pretended I was dead, then stole the hearse."

Next time around a Highway Patrol car joined his orbit, its light burping circular overhead.

"Afternoon, Ma'am," he said, tipping his wide brim as they disappeared around the house. And around. One would jut his head out the window and yell at the other, or me. Then the other. Like rabid turtles.

* * *

"My sweet little violated child. My poor, poor baby. Was it horrible?" Mama questioned my state, seeming much more tarnished by the episode than I was. The way she carried on, I was afraid she'd die right there.

"Torture! Him and his nasty thing." She sucked breath through her nose. Her eyes rolled back in her head.
“Take a good look, Deloris. That’s the Devil’s serpent hanging between his legs.” Her eyes cut holes through Smith, and I forced myself to look, too. He looked far from evil. Waterlogged, weak, and shrunken, but not evil. I almost spoke as they led him away, but what was there to say.

Then Mama put me against the wall and hosed me, too.

* * *

The two of them took exactly forty seconds to circle the house. For a while I pretended I had them on strings, like great big june bugs.

* * *

Summerville Girls’ Haven. It sounded luscious. Like a sun smothered plantation, with flocks of giggling girls darting from one huge oak to the next. Complete with a stone studded brook and a swimming hole full of dark, imported boys. A place where days, entire days are spent trying out a new curl here, or there.

My roommate was hanging in the closet when I arrived there. She had made a thin rope from a pair of old panty hose. Her lips were blue, and her tongue hung out, thick and dry. And so I had a dilemma. Cutting her down would definitely be altering her future, and I didn’t know what would happen if I just closed the door and left her for a while.

As it turned out the nylons were weak, and she fell at my feet. She lived, and after the initial awkwardness we became friends.

There were no trees. No swimming hole, no dark boys. It was a place where they tilled away the seeds of your past. And, supposedly, fertilized the furrows with moral and healthy ideas. That’s what we were told anyway.

Our days were spent doing laundry for the county workers. Afternoons we did chores, and there was nothing to do at night, which led to many variations on the theme of boredom. There were three copies of Family Circle that went around. I eventually memorized them from cover to cover.

About every other week a woman came from town to give an hour long talk on caring for and cleansing some random part of our bodies. Soon enough she hit all the high spots, then started over. On Sundays we had an old man assuring us that our bodies were wicked, and that we should show no interest in them at all.
And God help us if we showed interest in someone else's body.

I got into fights occasionally, for not going along with some of the bigger girls. But I learned to adapt. Mama didn't send me here as punishment. She really thought she was doing the right thing. After we left the market that day I had stopped talking. I needed some time to think, so I just didn't say anything, to anybody. Mama thought I could think a little clearer in a place like Summerville. She was right, but not for her reasons. I was learning for myself. To give way, to not resist, but to hold on to the inside me regardless of what was going on around me.

* * *

The backups arrived. Three units with guns drawn. Smith gave no indication of slowing. If anything the cars circled my house faster than ever. Beneath the porch my dogs tried to match the rhythms of the sirens. The rushing engines filled the air with noise, and spinning wheels shot tall rooster tails of earth and grass sky high.

I was having trouble concentrating. I had just began detailing the trunk and tusks. I've found that a bent paper clip is the perfect tool for such close work.

The Police Chief pulled out of the parade and stopped in front of me. He came close. I could smell age and cigars. I felt the stagnation leaking from his weak, Italian mustache. When he slipped in his finger, a little arthritic but still concerned, I was sure.

"Evenin' Ma'am. Don't mean to offend. I'm just collecting evidence."

I kept my focus on the fine edge of my X-acto knife. I gave him nothing extra, nothing of myself. He talked as he went about his business.

"There was a time when I could have stopped this single-handed," he said. I didn't reply. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you for some refreshments. The men are wearing down."

I stepped him out of me and went inside to make some lemonade and cucumber sandwiches. I had grown the vegetables myself. To garnish the serving tray I selected a small fish, its scales perfectly random diamonds. By the time I returned to the porch two fire trucks and an ambulance had joined the chase.

"What do you want, Smith," I screamed over the blaring bull horns and the cyclone of sirens. The question had just occurred to me.
“Just to know that you haven’t forgotten...” his plea took some bent geometric shape around the house and into a dripping sun.

* * *

There was one bookshelf at Summerville. It sat hidden and dusty in a room so dank and lifeless that no one went there intentionally. It was the time-out room, where we were sent for punishment. And I was there, not for trouble present, but for trouble coming. I was least likely to be looked for there.

The resident Counselor, P.E. Coach, and Dining Hall Monitor had been on my case from day one about not talking. To her expressing yourself was the key to life. She never said what kind of life, and the trick was that she only understood one form of self expression. Talking. Mindless babbling. She bribed me with promises of meeting her nephew at the movies one Saturday afternoon. I had no interest. She begged, professionally. I stayed silent. She wouldn’t understand that my quiet was OK. I could talk, but I didn’t want to. Then she told me that if I didn’t show some sign of life she was going to recommend that I be sent to the State Facility, where they shave your head and experiment with the various orifices of your drugged body. She left me alone in her office, I guess to think up some talk.

I sat with my knees drawn to my chin and tried to make up a story for her. I broke the lead off her pencils for spite, then I noticed her shoes peeking out from under her desk. They looked so small. I imagined her pinched toes, wrapped in nylon, shuffling down the waxed wood floors in the corridors, and I knew. I had identified the emotion I wanted to express. I pulled her shoes into the middle of the floor, slipped my underwear down, and peed on them.

As I stood at the bookshelf tracing my fingers along the spines of several unused bibles, some teen-girl-meets-boy-never-even-kisses novelettes, and a book of etiquette, I thought about how childish my action was. I even considered apologizing, until my finger stopped on a book I hadn’t noticed before. Just touching its thin back gave me chills.

When I pulled it from the shelf the title jumped, white and clear, into my eyes. It bore in and hung tight. *Soap Sculptrure Made Easy.* Yes with a simple kitchen paring knife even I could create decorative works of art. Potential thrill. Artistic possibilities. All promised to be found between the thin cardboard covers that I held.
Flipping the pages I became aware of the solidness of the book, and in turn, of the realness of what it had to offer. Self expression! In a touchable, undeniable way. My path lay in forty pages and fifteen photographs.

* * *

By nightfall there were helicopters overhead. Their bright lights fell on the yard and raced around like spastic moons. Smith was undaunted, even though the chasing trail had lengthened so that he was directly behind the last vehicle.

He was making do. Like a giant drill the cars and trucks dug into the earth, my yard halfway up their doors. My small house an island. I didn’t love Smith anymore, but I had to admire his drive.

* * *

My first piece was a small heart, rough and uneven, but pure as snow. In the beginning I stole the soap from the showers. Some of us had to forgo bathing, until I was caught, but it was worth it. When I put the knife to a sweet white cake I stepped into a different world. A place quiet in my mind, that I could control. I made incredible progress.

So much that my counselor forgave the urination episode and shortened my stay by three months. I was home before my eighteenth birthday. At the going home party they gave me a shoe box full of Ivory soap.

I got a job as a cashier at the grocery. It wasn’t much, but it kept me in soap. Soon I had saved enough to rent a little house a few miles from town. Neighbors would come by to talk and watch me work. I had one man offer to pose nude for me, but he only had one leg. Eventually I began giving away little carvings. Then people began expecting them, and I had to change.

My first subjects were simple. Featureless angels, with thick wings. Anemic swans. Scottish Terriers. When I traced out my first elephant, a bull, I knew I had found my calling. What I carved was sort of a mutant, having the rounded back of the Asian, as well as huge African ears.

As I sat in my studio studying my small collection of finished works, I began to feel that something was missing, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. I headed to the library for ideas. I searched
all the National Geographics, checked out all the books, and watched
the nature films. I learned about the musth glands that drain from
small holes behind the ears, and stain their faces tar black. The
musth cycle created several thousand pounds of sex hungry animal.
I learned that tusks can weigh as much as two hundred pounds.
But I still felt a loss. The sense began to grow, and show up in
other areas of my life. I was losing my focus.

*   *   *

From out of a helicopter, high above, a fat cord came down.
A thin man, with too much hair slid to the ground, his feet landing
softly in the center of the circle. He approached the Chief, who
sat on the porch sucking lemon piths out of his teeth.
“Sir,” he said. “There is a way.”
“A way to what,” the Chief asked.
“A way to peace.”
“Let’s just hear your answers to the world’s problems, boy.”
The Chief stood and did his best to look intimidating.
The man looked skyward as he spoke.
“Someone needs to alter the path. Someone needs to drive
in the opposite direction. Sir, I’m willing to drive the vehicle myself.
It will be my sacrifice.”
“Listen! We are doing just fine down here. You can take your
college-boy ideas back up your rope. We don’t need you. And
get a haircut!”
The thin man ascended and wasn’t seen again.

*   *   *

It hit me in bed. As sure and solid as a stampeding rogue. I
knew what was missing. The dick! The pizzle! The member, the
organ, the penis. The rod, and the wad. My elephants were sexless.
They had no meaning, no identity. I went to work right away.

But how? I had never seen an elephant’s penis. How could I
create what I did not know? So I went back to the library, but
all the pizzles had been slyly edited out. I watched all the Tarzan
movies, and still I didn’t know the elephant’s sex. I had one last
hope.

I worked double shifts. I borrowed from friends. Soon I had
enough money for a bus ticket to Atlanta. My mother had taken
me there as a child, and there I knew I could find, and experience,
a live elephant organ.
“Deloris? It’s me, Smith. I don’t know how much longer I can hold out. I’m hungry, and weak. The others had take-out, I saw them eating.” Traffic had slowed to a steady crawl. Conversation was easy, although no one spoke but Smith and me.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Smith. I’m worried one of the officers said they were calling in the National Guard.” The house trembled at the weight of coming tanks.

“Tell me I was right to come. Tell me it was worth it.”

“Soap by Sapphire,” I called out as he rounded the corner. The others, too, seemed to listen more intently.

“What?” It was all he said, though he had time for more. His eyes still held the question as he came around again.

“I’m a sculptress, now. I carve anatomically correct bull elephants from soap. I’m saving to buy a small pick-up, then I’ll travel the arts fair circuit, eating natural foods and wearing loose cotton clothing, without underwear. It’s what I have to do, Smith.”

“Elephants? With everything?”

“By Sapphire. I’m already making waves in the local art community. The manager of Stuckey’s will let me display some of my work in the gift shop. All I have to do is sleep with him once a month. You know? Stuckey’s, by the Interstate.”

I sat on the bench, at the Atlanta Zoo, in front of the elephant’s cage for hours. I sat through two shift changes. I studied. I consumed. I was mesmerized by those great grey sacs. I sat until I could close my eyes and still see every fold and ridge of flesh. Finally I was asked to leave, and when I stood my knees trembled.

When those black, unfamiliar hours of morning came around, everything slowed even more. It was like some God of fatigue had poured syrup over all the cars, and trucks and people. An end was wanted, if not near. The Chief sent one of his men to the pharmacy for motion sickness pills. I asked him if he would pick up some feminine products for me.

He seemed gone only moments. In his dazed state he misjudged the time needed to dodge the traffic. We were all too weary to
warn him. Smith hit him first. Sent him careening in slow motion over the hood of the hearse, and beneath the wheels of a catering truck that had joined only minutes before. Everyone leapt. I leapt up in a shower of white shavings, decided I couldn’t do anything, and sat back down. The medical people leapt to the aid of the injured officer, as did Smith, leaping even before the body had stopped rolling, to practice the first aid he had learned in prison. The policemen, and the military mistook this for an act of aggression, and leapt to their weapons.

They killed Smith. The police killed him with their riot guns and .45’s. The Army killed him with their tanks and strategies. The firemen swung their axes. They shot and cut and killed Smith, and little bits and pieces flew off until there was nothing left.

When it was over I walked among the remains. Smith was a puddle. Smith was a shard of red skin, the shape of a bird. Smith was small steaming piles, with jagged frames. It was strangely satisfying to know him this intimately. I had never seen a dead man before. Nor had I ever felt so close to another person. And that’s counting the few minutes Smith spent inside of me several years ago on that forgotten butcher’s table.

It was over. The crowd was dispersing. As I stood there it struck me that this was a genuine case of being blown to smithereens. My soft laugh was followed by a pang of sadness, not for the death necessarily, but because our paths had separated.

Some men brought shovels and began scooping Smith into the hearse. I didn’t want him to go alone on his journey. I had to give him something of myself. Quickly I searched the house, until I found it.

I asked the Chief for a few minutes alone with Smith. He obliged. The men turned their backs. Even the cars seemed to look away. I was in the center of a still circle. A slit yellow moon led me to the largest piece of Smith left. His rib cage lay, shattered and hollow in the black grass. I knelt and nestled between the bare, but still protecting ribs, my first soap carving. A heart, worn and polished, just big enough to cup in your palms. And yellow with age, like bone, or ivory.
Прикосновшему сердцем к незнакомой,  
Благодатной и нежной земле.  
Я скажу: "Вот страницы листаем мы,  
На которых написаны все."
Даже вздох, исторгующий пение,  
В глубине, как любимой слова,  
Даже дождь, там идущий - знамение,  
Если память возросших жива.
Ну а здесь - эта живая ласковость  
Потраченных детдомовских мест,  
Не воспета еще, но истаскана,  
Потому что родителей - нет.  
Только ноги свои я измучал,  
Сердце выжму, глаза утомлю.  
Если нянечку эту планкую  
Я любовью своей утолю.  
Этот нельзя не пройти незамеченной,  
У меня на руках дубликат,  
В нем рождения дата отмечена,  
А год смерти вопросом взят.  
"Кто последний?" - скажу я пристроившись,  
За желающим ласки, с хвостом.  
А последнего нет - и условившись  
За собой оставляют места.
(untitled)

Bound by the heart to the ignorant,
beneficial and tender earth,
I say, "Here we leaf through pages
where everything is already written."
Even a sigh, expelling a song
from deep down, like a favorite word—
even the falling rain is a sign there,
like a reminder of resurrections.

But over here, there is this lying sympathy
of private orphanages,
unsung and worn to the bone
because there are no parents.
It's just that I wear out my feet,
I wring out my heart, I weary my eyes,
whenever I soothe this beloved,
weeping little nanny of mine.
Here, it's impossible to pass unnoticed,
documents in hand, birthday recorded
(the year of my death still blank).

"Who's next?" I say, having found my place
at the tail-end of the line
of those in the market
for a gesture of kindness.
But there is no next: they've agreed
among themselves,
all the places are reserved.

translated by J. Kates
А у него жена - самоубийца.
Он с "беломором" на кровать садится.
Он говорит: "По-моему, я понял..."
Он одевает комбат рукою.

Потом встает и открывает двери.
Спускаясь в снег, уходит по ступеням.
Он, раздеваясь, с ним вступает в сговор,
на голом - белый, и на белом - голый.

Уходит в снег и отдаётся снегу.
Упав, лежит, лицо подставив небу.
Одну мечту в притихшем мозге грея:
"Отрезать память напрочь. Поскорее..."

И ручку стиснут жесткою рукою.
Какой простор откроется и воля.
Простор для мыслей, звёзд и несбыточных.

Открыто поле. Ночь и снег - открыты.
Открыто небо. . . - черная бумага.
Дышать - с трудом
от мглы и чистоты.
(untitled)

His wife is a suicide.
He sits on the bed and rolls a cigarette.
He says, “I thought I understood.”
He crumples a handful of blanket.

Then he stands up and opens the door.
He steps out into the snow.
Stripping down, he makes a deal:
white for naked, naked for white.

He wades in, arrays himself in snow,
falls into snow, lies down, face to the sky,
the warmth of a single dream
in the hushing of his brain:

“Get rid of the memory. All of it. Hurry...”

Clench the pen in a calloused hand.
What a wide space opens up, what freedom.
Room for unsatisfied thought,
sensitive to the cold.

A field has opened, night and snow have opened up.
The open sky... is a black page.
Breathing is difficult in the gloom
and all this open space.

translated by J. Kates
The Existence Of God

The other day I was in a store
and I heard a woman complaining
because the trash can she was buying
had dirt in it.
Archangel with extraordinary wings
standing over
luminescent plums.
This is the arrangement of the world.
Cars on roofs.
This is the arrangement the world
has with the world.
I cross the street.
The cab honks at me,
lonely geese.
*Hey, lick my cat,*
I bleat back.
I am a man,
as you can see,
who can think
halfway decently
on his feet.
Plumstain
moon now.
The lies the light tells us
are different than the lies we tell ourselves.
The light rustles the trees.
The light, slow and lovely.
Moon, slow and lonely.
Pond, plumstain dusk now.
I am reaching for a light-switch
on a ten-thousand-foot cliff.
I am sitting on a plane
between a woman who uses
*self-actualization* in every other sentence,
and a man who named his cat
Dostoevsky, so he could call it Dusty.
Why didn’t you just name him Dusty?
I didn’t think of it.
I am what light is available.
It’s beginning to rain
and it’s getting dark.
There is peace in this land.
The wind is running with red banners like a river.
A thousand leaves. Ten thousand trees.
Many jays.
Silver lures flicker in the center
of perfect moments.
Now moon.
I want what I have.
The Pillow Book Of Leonard Gontarek

Things That Are Obvious

I was riding on a train and the woman next to me said, “You know, if you keep making that face, God’s going to freeze it like — oh.”

When Death Comes

Can you buy more time by pointing out you cooked with instant rice? Then there is, too, all that daylight we saved.

Reading The Classics

The Hunchback of Notre Dame. The story of the poor bell-ringer Quasimodo, whose only dream in life was to be a real modo like everyone else.
Frightening Things

Is there anything scarier than a group of art students descending on a park in late afternoon, in autumn, with cameras?

Things That Are Quiet

It’s nice to see that all those kids who raised their hands and talked in class have become mimes.

Things That Resemble Other Things

Hey, I know you. A man stops me on the street. I know you, you’re that star, that musician guy. Uh-oh, the John Lennon stuff. You know that guy on tv. Uh-oh, the Paul Schaeffer stuff. You know who I mean, you know who I mean, that’s it, that’s it, The Jetsons, you’re on The Jetsons, right? By which time, to get rid of him, I’d say anything, and admitted he was right, of course, yes, I was on The Jetsons.
Things That Recall Your Childhood

It wasn’t that I played with my food, but that I made things out of it: pietas, mt. rushmores, brancusis, out of peas, carrots, brussels sprouts, mashed potatoes, miniature landscapes you could imagine model railroads hurtling through.

Things That Are Entertaining To Me

This morning I saw a female security guard wrestle another woman, who was stealing jello, to the floor of a supermarket.

Things That Are Small And Often Furry

There are silverfish and centipedes and spider-mites, but I saw a really strange bug the other day. It was kind of cockroach-like with the tiny front end of a rolls royce.
Real Things

Walking to the library, I stopped at a red light and a man cleaned my glasses with the edge of his jacket, put his hand out to me and said change, and I knew I was here, in Philadelphia, Planet Earth, home.

Things That Make Sense

I’ve never told this to anyone before, but when I was in high school, while other schools had names like: The Vultures, The Destroyers, Hung-Over Huns, The Trash-Compacters, our football team was called The Look-Out-Crickets-We’re-Rolling-Over, The Immaculate Heart of Mary’s Look-Out-Crickets-We’re-Rolling Over.
A Sunny Afternoon Is A Good Time To Visit Those Who Are Gone

I think I'm the only one who has any respect for the graves in front of The Academy Of Music. I know I'm the only one who ever places a flower there. Just the other day I was putting a little American flag on Mario Lanza's marker, and when I got up from kissing it, a crowd had gathered around me. If people have no respect for their lost heroes, fine, but why give me a hard time?

Things That Are Not Easy To Understand

My brother. Goes into a bar called The Isle Of Lesbos. Goes on and on about "all the women there." My brother. I'm related to him.
Smart Things

"I'm reading Kafka so I'll know what people are talking about when they say Kafkaesque." That's the best reason I've ever heard for reading him. By the way, that's a very Kafkaesque dress you're wearing.

One More Thing

Something funny happened to me in a restaurant the other night. There was a man and a woman across the room from me. The man must have said something funny because I heard the woman laughing, and when I looked up there was a cartoon balloon over her head, filled with ha-ha-ha's. Then the balloon began to float around the restaurant, coming to a stop over my head. It was a cloud with a silver lining. It opened up: colored confetti of h's and o's and a's poured down. And the laugh was on me.
from the novel Certain Women

They were going to hunt morels, and though it was summer and the afternoon sun was hot, she'd brought him one of her father's long sleeved shirts, a worn and heavy sail cloth, which he'd joked about. But she'd met his laughter with serious eyes, saying they'd probably be in thick brush at times and that he'd need it. He'd gotten more serious too then, seeing that her eyes held other things as well, something about the coming venture and what it meant, not so much to her, but out in this world that he had so recently entered. His first trip to the farm, meeting her parents, who had gone out on the land somewhere, leaving the house to the two of them.

She walked right out the door in front of him, the bag stuffed in her jeans pocket, and once they'd rounded the house and started down into the first field of high grasses she'd looked back once, making sure that he was close enough and following. Then she'd not looked back again for a long time, though he thought she kept her pace a little slow for him. Alone, she'd go quicker.

He watched the way her jeans held her buttocks and the backs of her long muscular thighs, but soon he was watching her legs and feet and the way she used her hands and arms. She wore heavy work shoes, laced up above her ankles, and her movements accommodated to them in a practiced way, no longer that spring in her step that he was used to, but only a slight lifting of her feet, a swinging motion, getting the shoes' weight to pull her, then placing each foot just where her eyes told her was the proper purchase, no crack of fallen twig, suction of stream side mud when they reached woods and low ground.

Brush pulled at his shirt buttons, and once a dead branch poked a stiff finger, a scratch at his wrist. But her arms had a way of turning, hands reaching into some leafy gnarl, quickly separating, opening a space in front of her. Though he could not see her face, movements of her head made clear that she saw both just where she was and where she was going. Slick rocks in a stream, no need for her to touch the fallen tree, as he did, as they crossed, though he saw her look to the side, tracing the lovely, rotting bark, smelling it before the scent reached him.

She seemed to hold a speed and direction that took them always face into the almost imperceptible breeze, to keep her efficient, short blond hair blown gently back from her face. Strands of his own hair, wet with perspiration, touched his lashes from time to time, and he had to raise his now resin coated fingers to his brow. Country girl genetics, he had
thought, and just then she had looked back again, after twenty minutes of working along the edge of a cultivated field, after which they would move down into a dark and lower forest. She'd smiled, gesturing ahead with her arm. He'd seen that crystal clear focus in her eyes that he knew so well. The same as when she moved on unfamiliar ground, through beach roses and dusty miller, her tennis shoes as sure in sand as her heavy boots were here. That mind and body that he loved, still so pleasantly shocked by the recognition, that the two were one in her, what he had but kept on wanting as if he didn't, because in him they were not the same.

A deer trail through berry vines and scrub oak, meandering, then stepping steeply down to the forest brink, really the remnant of a forest only, a few acres of low bog, slightly spongy underfoot and holding a group of massive boulders, smooth, weather and time worn, sucked half into the earth, the whole invisible from the cultivated fields above, only tree tops to be seen there. Another kind of open space once they'd entered it, the trees well apart, and sunlight softened now and filtering down through the branches. She had paused, poised, and when he reached her side, she'd touched his elbow, looked in his eyes. She was tall, and they were almost the same size, and he could see a touch of wetness on her upper lip. She pressed him, then stepped away, but slower now, and he stayed close behind her.

Down under some dead limbs then, but not touching them, and very careful as she separated leafy twigs. To be very quiet, she'd told him, not ownership or that the morel was sacred, none of that. But only that places searched for and found could be discovered by other hunters. They could be hunting as she joked, to relieve his possible tension, but it hadn't really been a joke at all; he'd gotten that, and now walked in her actual steps, and with considerable care.

Some feathery weathered board through the trees to his right. A ruined storage shed, some farm type thing? Maybe even a house at one time. He didn't know. Just a part of a wall now, though a shingle or two near the top he thought. Around that then, and the ground falling steeply away again, deeper and darker, the lower tree trunks almost bare, limbs opening out high above where the sun could reach them, a thick gnarl of ground cover, slick vines with ridged needles and orange edged leaves he thought were poison oak.

She paused at what seemed an impenetrable wall of growth, then moved slowly and with clear intention along it, until she found a place for opening, then squatted down, her hands reaching in up to her elbows, feeling, then pressing to the sides, even briefly weaving, and when she moved
back and came again to her feet he saw she’d made an opening, a low arched tunnel they could fit through. She looked back again and smiled, then got down on her knees and crawled in. He waited a moment, then saw her hand and arm only coming back through the arch way, her fingers moving toward her open palm, beckoning. Then he was low on his knees and in among the viney growth. He crawled on for a few feet, then saw her boots, the neat lacing, no scuff marks at all.

He rose to his feet and stood beside her. He could smell her, a distant tang of moth balls in this clothing she’d not worn since living here, but her sweet sweat as well, faint also, and something of her noon breath, the homemade country liverwurst her mother had served, with fresh crusty bread and cider. In a small, dim clearing now, the trees a kind of canopy, moss in the ground cover, lichen on the stones. The old forest floor was at its lowest point here, and he could see the last trees ahead and through them the hill rising steeply to where the cultivated fields began and there would be bright sun.

She took his arm and they moved that way, and after only a few yards she pressed his shoulder, then reached out and pushed a heavy branch to the side, squatted down, and not looking back motioned for him to do the same, and there they were.

The morels started near the base of the tree’s trunk, a line of five or six, then opened out in profusion. Light filtered down over them from above, a diffused glow, mottled shadows on them and on the spongy ground. They were like a small city seen from the aerial view of a plane coming in for its landing, but a strangely organic city. Gaudi, he thought, that sense of a melting architecture, brain flowers, as if brains themselves were buildings, but had melted down to hide shoulders, even arms, and only the erect stalk of the body remained below them, holding them up. The brain was the whole of the human head now, the face too melted, back into the brain, or they were brain caps pulled down over the head to the neck. No city then, but a gathering of pure mind, ancient in some Platonic way, certainly not of the future.

Meet the morels, she’d said, or something like that, then had moved on her haunches to the edge of that community and begun to pick, not to pull them up by their roots, but to break them off near the surface, to let them seed and come up again. She made no sound, and only when she looked back over her shoulder at him did he realize that he was transfixed. Then he too began to pick, feeling the spongy dryness of those brains against his wrists.

Now they were in her father’s station wagon, out on a two lane country road beyond Madison. She’d mentioned that she’d gone out for morels
and that they'd have them for dinner. Her loveliness had been instantly fresh to him again when he'd first seen her at the airport, something brighter in her cheeks, and in only these few days her hair had come to a straw color from time in the bright sun. She wore jeans, those same boots he thought he remembered, and a loose white shirt, unironed, but without wrinkles. He guessed it had been dried on a line in the breeze, something she had talked about in the past, remembering her childhood with her usual, physical pleasure in such things. As if her mind could do that, be her body in remembering. In fact, he thought it could. No makeup or jewelry, her nails pared straight across and only their natural shine.

"But I thought it was Madison," he said, watching her hands as they moved on the wheel.

"Oh, no," she said. "Didn't I say? She's back at the farm now. We fixed up the guest room, downstairs. In bed of course, but there's that small bathroom, you remember?"

"When was this?"

"Well, the day before yesterday. I think then. It's hard, you know, keeping track of things. I've been so busy, Peter. You can imagine."

He could, but only now. He'd been busy too, and he realized he'd had no clear sense of her difficulties as the thing developed. Surely, there had been many arrangements, and then her father to deal with as well.

"How's Walter?"

"Fine. Fine, as a matter of fact. He's somehow rallied, cleared up. He was very confused for the first few days, but now that she's home, well, almost no problems. A focus for him, I guess. And her presence."

Soon, Peter thought, he could tell her about his own circumstance. He'd held it all back. She'd had enough on her mind. But seeing her, how centered and healthy she seemed, he felt relief. Soon he could lose his burdens, at least share them, get them out of his head.

She sautéed the morels in butter and oil, then mixed them into a thin pasta. For her mother, she baked a few, keeping them moist with a light tomato sauce. Anna came to the table, and as far as Peter could tell she was fine. Weak of course; she needed to lean on Sara's arm, rest a little halfway to the kitchen. But there was color in her cheeks and she'd fixed her own hair, gone completely grey now and more brittle because of that, but she'd found some way of softening it. It had Sara's texture still and was cut to a similar, efficient length.

And she was very pleased to see him, as was Walter, though he remained a little stiff and reserved. He'd always been that way. He'd not wanted to lose Sara to another place, and while he in no way blamed Peter for
taking her, he seemed to feel it almost as an ethical thing. No one at fault, but still wrong, at least distasteful. He was always civil, even friendly, but he seldom told tales, not unless Sara prodded him to it. Then he would speak of past days on the farm as if he were telling some story, not sharing their life with Peter as an intimacy.

Peter watched him closely as they sat at the table in the large country kitchen, eating the delicious morels. He knew Walter's way could cover confusion, but even through close attention he could find none. He, too, seemed weaker than he had last Christmas, but that was only reasonable. Sara had come to them late, their only child, when they were both in their forties. They were old now, over eighty.

"Martha comes every day, for the afternoon," Anna said, the light flooding the kitchen brightening her knife and fork as she cut and lifted a dark, elongated brain to her lips. The old table's surface was porcelain, and Sara had put out a flowered placemat for each of them. A carafe of spring water and one of white wine, for her and Peter, rested near the center. It was five o'clock, still full day.

"And who is she, exactly?"
"A neighbor," Sara said.
"Well, really much more than that," Anna said. "We've lived here all these years together. Down the road, I mean. Otto died six years ago. Isn't it, Walter? They've leased their land out, as we have. She's enough to live on. But no children, you know, not close by at least. And she gets lonely. We've enjoyed these days together."
"Well, she's helped a lot too," Sara said.
"Oh, my, yes! A devil of a time without her."

How many days has it been, Peter thought. He'd lost track, and when he tried briefly to reconstruct things he kept getting lost in events, the shooting of Hale, the boat incident, isolate images of Beth Charters that he quickly turned away from.

They finished eating, and while Sara helped her mother back to bed, he cleared the table, touching Walter on the shoulder when he rose to do so, telling him he'd take care of it. Walter nodded and smiled a little vacantly, and Peter was momentarily alert to him. Then he saw the matter, the slight sheepishness. He was waiting for his wife to leave the room, and when the two women were gone, he rose and went to one of the wall cabinets and fished out his pipe from a high shelf. He smiled again, then went out to the back porch. Peter saw the wooden match flair in the sun.

He was standing outside the living room door, on the deck, a modern alteration Sara's parents, at her insistence, had allowed themselves. It
had been a good choice. He'd showered and shaved, rested a little while Sara tended to her mother and made some calls. Now the sun was sinking, a light breeze had come up, strong enough to keep the mosquitoes away.

The farmhouse rested on the side of a gradual hill, and the deck hung out just a little in air. Looking out from it, he saw across broad open fields, uncultivated, allowed to return to prairie, and beyond them the gentle rise of other hills, fields of crops on land Sara's parents had leased to other farmers. There were a few old outbuildings in the distance, weathered grey, sturdy, but clearly no longer in use. He wondered if her archery target still hung to the side of one of them. She'd taken him out there once, sent arrows from her bow for him as he'd watched her. She'd been a hunter, deer, and even rabbits with a smaller bow. She'd wounded a doe, and that had put an end to it. Her eyes, she'd said, so alive and focused, understanding me and what I'd done, at least seeing me.

He could see narrow animal trails here and there and thought one was familiar, that they had walked on it, either when they'd hunted the morels that time or just for a stroll one evening. He could have seen the sea in the movement of long grasses in the breeze, but he would have had to work for the metaphor. He felt totally away from Provincetown, the ocean, in a very different place, more wholesome and settled than that other. About his life of course, but real too. No tourists here, no visible commerce, but for farming, something that couldn't be pushed in those other ways, though he knew if he went deep enough he might find the same thing, a desperation caused by a vision of possibilities. Still, nothing brash or strident, nothing immediately visible. She was at his side then, holding out a glass of wine.

"A very nice dessert wine, Malvasia Bianca," she said. "Very cheap too, considering."

He laughed and she moved her head toward his shoulder, but didn't touch him.

"It is lovely, isn't it." She was looking out to where broad shadows now covered large portions of the extending fields. There was a breeze still, but softer now, close to that familiar pause as day gave way to night.

"It's a good thing I've forgotten it. I mean seeing it in my mind while I've been gone. I might not have been able to stand having it that way and not really having it. You know?"

"I can imagine," he said, though he knew he couldn't do that, not in the way that she could.

"Well, now," she said, and started he thought to say something else, but then they heard the screen door behind them, and when they turned Walter, her father, was standing in the frame. A thick curl of smoke rose
up along his arm as he lowered the pipe to his side. That somewhat vacant smile again.

“Come out, Dad. Join us. Another perfect Mt. Horeb night.”

“Your mother’s reading,” he said, clearly a preparation for something else. “I thought a hay ride might be in order?”

Sara laughed and nudged Peter. “When I was a child.”

“The tractor’s hitched. We can head down and along the pond. I’ve got the Cutters, but I doubt we’ll need it.”

The breeze stayed up and they didn’t need it. Even the tractor’s exhaust couldn’t reach them, only the dull, hollow thump of its engine close to an idle. The hitch bar was long, ten feet or more, and he’d mounted old car tires to the large rectangle. The wagon’s sides were slats, like a low picket fence around a yard full of hay. The tires were soft, and they moved on drifts like ocean swells, rather than bumps. Not touching, but beside each other on their backs, a pillow of hay covered by the denim jacket she’d taken from a hallway hook as they’d gone out. He’d seen her bow and quiver there, in the corner, hung up on wooden pegs.

Night darkened and stars appeared, no moon, but enough light so they could see the stiff shape of her father’s form in his high seat ahead, like a rock as a beacon seen approaching a shore they would never reach. They heard a whippoorwill, sharp whoop of a crane in the distance at last light, saw the shadow of something silent, an owl maybe, for a long moment, crossing beneath the stars.

Nothing to say. But in her childhood with her somehow, and she seemed to have no weight, the hay unlike a bed, so that when she shifted he felt nothing. But he could see her profile, and he fancied her pupils dilated like his were, together in their passive acceptance of this haunting world, though surely she looked through something to the stars, a life lens that was not his, nothing like this that he had ever had, though his mind moved back at times to recall something, his mother, his own father, some thing remembered purely to become an image. But there was nothing to say, and he knew that was his only way, to speak out in his mind, otherwise no world, and that and this world only a borrowed one, and so he let his gaze open to its periphery, just the stars, coming into their colors then and variety of intensity and size. Then she turned toward him, reached out and ran her finger along his forehead beside his eye. He could see her teeth, her own blue eye, black in the night.

“Ah, sweet nostalgia,” she whispered, seriously.

And later, upstairs in bed with her, above her mother’s room, he made love to her, thinking of it in just that way, for a while at least.
She was on her back, under him, starlight through the window, and he could see the smooth hard flesh of her body, blond as her hair was, planes and shifting shapes, vibrancy of youth still at forty-three. But could see her face as well, whole and more clearly, as a night light brightened it, a shell fixture brought from the Cape as gift, to diffuse and soften that light, keep it white to find a bed by. Her mouth was moving now, her hands gripped at his biceps — urging? guiding? — he couldn't tell, but thought of the properness of her position, the way a woman's face could come into some repose, relaxation of age and the care and wisdom that went with that, gravity's pull, so that even an old woman could be young again in sex, expression lines fall back to a kind of innocence, at least a proper wonder, for a man? Who needed that? No matter of submission, though surely of the old story, but more the way a tiller was mechanism of a boat, the real steering, in that a broken or fouled one would render the hand that moved it impotent.

She moved again, looked up at him, called out quietly, and he wondered about his own face, the opposite, so that his effort must appear in extremity, an exaggeration, and were he older, some pathetic gathering of minimal forces, so that to find the one expression that he might still call love would appear more difficult, a concentration properly urged to focus by the sight of her, but now, in his failing, a pulling back into himself to get there, she a different kind of catalyst, to call up memory in him, earlier times or places of enactment (other women?) where he was not this working self, but another, dead and gone now, hence the deepest sadness he could think of, under that surface mask he now constructed and proposed.

He thought she saw right through it all and was flooded more in the seeing, wet and gripping him, and that her juices were tears really, a kind of crying for his lost capability, though he almost dimly knew that it was not lost, but never found, and that she wept not for loss but something that had never been, but only for him, her weeping then no empathy, but a purer thing, the sympathy of a grown woman.

It was then he came into her, drawn out by this weeping, and he even thought for a moment that she was actually crying. She was shaking. Her eyes were blue again in the shell glow, blinking. But it was sweat at their corners and not tears, and she shook in light and relieved laughter, that of a kind of achievement or completion. He fell down then, closing. He had not really opened. Her hands moved to his back. His face was against her wet cheek and damp hair, and she was digging her fingers in along his spine.

She massaged his shoulders, his ribs, then flattened her hands and moved them down to the backs of his thighs, then up to grip his buttocks,
squeeze and milk, then skimmed her fingertip over his anus, and he distantly came again, the last of his semen lurching out of him, draining once, then once again. She nuzzled his ear, still kneading him, and in a while she spoke quietly and not out of frustration, no longer disappointment.

“Oh, Peter, it’s so hard for you. So very hard.”

The next morning, and it was raining, a light August rain under high cloud cover throughout the entire sky. There were birds in drizzle at the kitchen window feeder, two startling blue birds among them, bright even without sun. Sara’s mother slept on late into the morning, and her father was somewhere outside, in the barn possibly, working with the old machinery that was now his hobby. Peter was sipping his third cup of strong coffee, watching the birds, the stationary clouds, aware of Sara’s presence behind him at the table, the scratch of pen on paper.

Difficult to turn to her; he’d dreamed, and in his waking and forgetfulness of what he’d dreamed he felt uncertain of his feelings, how the new day might go now after the rich variety of the preceding one. He’d almost just arrived, and yet he felt he’d been here for weeks at least, the events of his recent past in Provincetown far off in the past, behind him almost as a history. I can be here, he thought, gather myself, but first to tell her about it all, especially about Hale. Still he lingered, watching birds in rain, and couldn’t quite yet turn to her. The scratching stopped, and it was she then who spoke.

“Don’t turn. Peter, I’m going to stay here.”

“Is he better at it than I am?” This he said to her later, regretting his words immediately. Not because they hurt her, though he’d struck out with them involuntarily to do so, but because they hadn’t. She’d accepted their sudden anger, and he’d thought that were she cruel she would have said yes.

He’d misunderstood at first, said of course, as long as you need to. He’d turned from the window then to face her and found that she meant something else, but then mistook her meaning once again, shocked at what he thought it was, a separation, time apart from one another, something made easier because of her mother and that need to stay here for a while.

Slowly, but too quickly, she had gotten to it then. Her being back again, only a few days — it was true! — but coming to herself, that she belonged here. Not on the farm or with her parents; she didn’t mean that so much. But the people, a way of life. Then she’d come to the one person, but not before she’d established herself separately for him. He could see it in her bearing, just sitting there at the table, even better when she rose and filled her cup again. Always, there had been that attunement
in her, mind and body in the same place, but it was even clearer now, almost animal in its insouciance. Then that was set and hardened for him. It had nothing to do with argument. There it was, its presence so actual that it could be approached only through assent.

Only then the other. He was one of her mother’s doctors. They had been lovers in the past, years ago, had hunted deer together, with bows in that silent way of hers. His wife had died, leaving him with two small children. Maybe it would become something. Maybe not. But she was staying here.

Maybe not? Only later at the airport did the one small lie, that gentle avoidance, begin to take shape for him, and only when he was seated on the plane itself did it become a marker, a kind of signpost, reading: this is the past.

He’d quickly made a reservation, said goodbye to her mother and father, seeing they both had an inkling, though no real information yet. She’d tell them when the time seemed right, soon he knew, and though he thought her mother might have some sadness about it, not her father, he knew too that both of them would welcome it and what would result from it as right and proper. He’d become in time an aberration only, just some interlude, before life got truly started.

She hugged him at the gate, even kissed him, but felt his withdrawal and released him prematurely. The recent self he held back was actual, the information withdrawn without vindictiveness. Even on their long silent drive from the farm to Madison, he’d been unable to speak of his killing of Hale, his suspension, all the details. It would have been inappropriate, really that. How odd, he’d thought, to come to such a state. Then, before he’d turned to go, she’d handed him the envelope.

She’d spoken about the Spice Shop, her belongings at the house, on their way in, said she’d made a list. But once the plane was in the sky and at altitude and he’d opened the envelope and read her notes, that signpost appeared. Each thing was spelled out in detail in her careful hand. Where he could find the store’s lease, who to call about inventory and fixtures, severance pay for Shawna, her clothing, even photographs, even the will they’d drawn up together.

The plane climbed above the cloud cover and into the sun. It shone bright on her writing through the small window. He pulled down the shade. Everything was there.
Reminiscence

A suite
for
piano & voice

“You felt as though you could put your trust in him.”
Jess Williams in 1968, sixty years
after meeting Scott Joplin
in Lincoln, Nebraska
in 1908.

THE EASY WINNERS, Section D

You been asking if I knowed him. I knowed him.
I talked to him maybe fifteen, twenty times
before he passed. Used to reach out a match,
help him light his cigar. His hands shook
so bad he couldn’t play no more. Come in
every day to get them cigars. Always bought
three for a quarter. Had this jackknife
inlaid with mother-of-pearl; it was old,
somebody give it to him years ago, maybe
his daddy. He’d lay out them three cigars,
cut each one in half. They’d last longer
that way. We didn’t know much about him
at first, ’cept he was a sick man, shouldn’t
have been out on the street. Had this shuffle
when he walked, like he was trying to push
a broomstick with his toes.
ROSE LEAF RAG, Section A

A sick man,
fixing to die. Had a studio somewhere
on West 133rd, they say he gave lessons,
worked on his opera, but when I saw him
he was past all that. His wife rented rooms
out of this basement apartment. Some days
he didn’t have no place to go. He’d come
down to my uncle’s tavern, ’bout a block
off Fifth Avenue, on East Hundred-Thirty.
You know the sort of place it was. Today
they call them neighborhood bars. People
stopped in for this and that, but mostly
just to talk. There was a war going on
over in France. Everybody had opinions —
the ones that stayed home — about what
ought to be done. Seems like people always
talk more during a war. You ever notice?

THE CASCADES, Section B

It was a club. The piano was up on a stage;
at night a man played for dancing. Drinks,
women, cards. It ain’t changed much, that day
to this. Afternoons he’d come in and sit
at the bar. Wouldn’t drink nothing. Word
got around, who he was. Nobody said much. He'd talk to the bartender sometimes, maybe read the *Daily News*. His wife would come in 'long about five or six o'clock, take him by the hand, lead him on home. He'd been a handsome man in his prime. Not too tall. Not more than fifty years old, even then. Been through some hard times. After I met him he didn't have but five or six more months.

FIG LEAF RAG, Section D

I was seventeen years old. Come all the way from Birmingham by myself, on the flyer, a week before my tenth birthday. My daddy got himself killed, working on the railroad, my mama couldn't keep me. She handed me up to the conductor with a one-way ticket and her sister's address wired to my coat. Gave me a sack of cornbread to eat on the way. Lived with her folks up north. Quit school. First good job I ever had, working there. Emptied the slops and spittoons, helped out. In those days I was trying to learn piano.
They let me practice during the day, come in during the evenings, spell the regular man. Fancier places was starting to get machines that made the music. You put in a nickel and they went like crazy for five minutes, never got tired. Never got drunk or asked for more money. People had Victrolas, too, they could make music that way. Never thought much about it. I wanted to be a professor in some fancy place down in Atlantic City, have all the women fight over me. Figured I had to break in somewhere. I was just a kid. Never occurred to me how he started it all — being able to write down what he heard, what other folks didn’t even know was there.

Some days he’d be sitting at the bar and I’d be up on the stage, fooling around on my own. Like I said, he was too sick to play much anymore. He’d call out things, try to help me get different chords right. Used to talk to me about how to put in “the walking bass.” That’s what he called it.
First time I ever heard about it. That was ten, twelve years 'fore anybody else started playing that way, out in Chicago, down in Washington, D.C. Eubie Blake, he claims he heard it there in Baltimore when he was a boy, but I don't believe him. Anyway, I picked it up from this man, I been working it in my stuff ever since.

MAGNETIC RAG, Section C

Sometimes he'd be clear, you understand? Sometimes he'd not be there at all, he'd be off in some other place. Nothing to say.
I remember there was a clock on the wall, an old Seth Thomas, been up there forever. Bartender wound it first thing every morning. One day he sat there chewing on his cigar — half the time he never even had it lit — and he pointed at that clock. "Young man," he said, "the way you play ragtime music is just the same as what it takes to make that clock go.

STOPTIME RAG, Section A

When it's stopped, nothing's happening. To make it run, you got to know
the numbers — just like you got to know the notes and all the chords. You need a key to wind it — not too hard, not too soft. Put your strength into it, but don’t turn it too tight. Next, you got to start the pendulum. It goes steady of its own accord, it’s what moves the hands. Last of all, you got to set the hands. Clock ain’t worth nothing at all if it don’t give the right time. So you got to know what time it is in the first place. Won’t do no good to wind it up or start the motion, lessen you know that. Won’t do you no good at all.” That’s what I remember most of what he said.

WALL STREET RAG, Section D

He only played once or twice. It didn’t come over good. His hands wouldn’t be still, even to light them cigars. Wasn’t long before she took him to Ward’s Island. He died there; it was in the papers. I didn’t go to the funeral. Never saw his wife again, either. Right then, I was fixing to join up. My uncle took me down to Fort Dix, and they made me a fry cook in the Rainbow Division. I went to Paris, sat in with the boys in Jim Europe’s band. Kept on making music, one way or another, the rest of my life. Must have been forty years ’fore somebody asked about him again. You ain’t the first. But there ain’t been all that many come in here asking about him, if I knowed him?
GLADIOLUS RAG, Section D

Like I been saying, I knowed him fairly well at the end of his life and the start of mine. And I had plenty of time to think about what he meant that day he tried to explain — that it really wouldn’t work unless you had the right time. I think he wasn’t talking only about music — stride piano, ragtime, whatever you want to call it. Same way I think he wasn’t talking only about clock time, what most folks run their life by, the kind of time that comes over the radio. I think he wanted to tell me about something else and this was the only way he could say it — how you have to know the time you live in, how it carries you along.

SCOTT JOPLIN’S NEW RAG, Section A

It must have been something in the music when he first heard it back before he learned how to write it down — something that had already come a long way to reach out to him, something he understood would keep on going even after him and me and everybody else who made that kind of music was gone. That’s what he knew. Something that drew him on, that held him. When you got
that pendulum going steady in the left hand
and the right hand’s working off the beat —
when you shoveled in that last scoop of coal
and you’re headin’ straight on down the track —
then there’s still something else, something
he didn’t have no words for, but he wanted me
to know about, to be ready — the way a stranger
asks you for the right time, you don’t lie to him.

MAPLE LEAF RAG, Section D

Fine
Thirteen Ways of Looking at Bukowski

I.

Neeli Cherkovski is a friend of Charles Bukowski's. An old, and it would seem, dear, friend. That is part of the problem. Neeli's parents, Sam and Clare Cherry, were bookstore and gallery owners who befriended Buk back in the old days, sometime in the hazy early 60's, around the time of Buk's first books. Neeli was an eager disciple, and by '69 the two were co-editing their own poetry magazine, *Laugh Literary and Man the Humping Guns*. While they have not always been bosom buddies, and there have been long periods of separation, they have remained good friends, have at least rekindled enough of their friendship, to make one wonder how much truth you can expect to find in a biography of Bukowski that's been penned by Cherkovski. (*HANK: The Life of Charles Bukowski* by Neeli Cherkovski. Random House, 1991 337pp. $21.95)

What might be even more a problem is the poor writing. I don't mean the many lapses of grammar and syntax — there are many — but the book is often boring. Even a white-washed life of Bukowski should never get boring. Cherkovski repackages autobiographical elements from Buk's poems and prose, but has left out the charged language and sweet-assed rhythms that Buk had used. The poet's occasional ventures into public are reported competently by Neeli-the-reporter. And then, there is the friend; one can almost see him mining their every conversation for background, perspective, insight.

What might be the biggest reward of the book — and don't get me wrong; for the reader who knows what he's getting into, and who wants to get into it, there are a lot of rewards — is the early chapters, what Buk's friend and fellow-poet, John Thomas, refers to as "the unvarifiable years." Episodes of a sad youth, of parental pain, of weak mothers and world-weary fathers who beat down what they can after having been beaten on all day themselves, of adolescent angst and awkward encounters with girls, of cliques, parties and proms seen through a window from the outside. Now those scenes, so sharp and haunting in the fictions, are pulled from the collage and laid out in an orderly fashion. A lot of the humor is lost, the wry perspective, but a new sense and understanding may come of it. This sad and troubled boy, cursed with terrible skin and all the usual flaws of youth, found exile and comfort in the library, in the world of books. Apparently
a voracious reader, taken especially by Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street*
and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, by D. H. Lawrence and Ernest
Hemingway, it came to him early to be a writer.

II.

It seems that President Hoover was scheduled to speak at the
Coliseum in Exposition Park. Buk was in the fifth grade. "This is
a once in a lifetime opportunity," his teacher told the class. "You
and your parents should attend this event as a civic duty." Then
she assigned them each to write an essay about the momentous occa-
sion. Well, Buk didn't go; but that didn't stop him from doing the
assignment. In fact, he wrote numerous and vivid details, how Hoover
stood ramrod-straight, how he waved to the crowd and how his
voice boomed from the sound system while what seemed like most
of L.A. cheered.

When the teacher returned the papers to her class, she told the
students, "There is one bit of writing here ...." Yeah, you know the
rest. "It is so beautiful and I want to read it to you."

After class the teacher asked Buk if he'd really gone to see the
President. Caught, he admitted that he had not been there. Instead
of being angry, though, the teacher said that this made the essay
all the more remarkable. According to Bukowski, he realized then,
as young as he was, that "people wanted beautiful lies, not the truth.
That's what they needed. People were fools."

The rest, as they say, is literary history.

III.

I once had students of mine, young high schoolers, read a few
of Bukowski's poems. I'd gotten tired, I guess, of the stereotypical
idea that all my classes seemed to share. How could I — who could
I expose them to who would break that odd-duck-egg that they
thought poetry to be? I xeroxed about four poems from a recent
magazine I'd come across — I went with "lighter" stuff, though I
let some of the loud and earthy parts speak for themselves. I gave
them a little background, mentioned that much of his subject matter
is drawn from his own experiences.

They appeared to be impressed — at least a few of them, at least
for awhile. It certainly went over better than the lesson from the
day before, Robert Frost or whatever.

Still, I was surprised when, a couple of months later, a student mentioned him in class. He had apparently written the poet a letter, having tracked down one of his books and getting the Black Sparrow address. He’d asked Buk a few questions about the poems I’d given out, and — Good God! — sent along some of his own work for Buk to see. Now, here he was with a reply. I can only imagine what the young man asked, but he seemed quite satisfied with the response — a poem written just for him.

12-22-81

hello Richard:

  don’t worry about the
  poem:
  there are going to be
  things
  out there
  much worse
  than what
  you’ve read
  in class.

Charles Bukowski

IV.

A man and a woman
Are one.
A man and a woman and Bukowski
Are one.

V.

Buk has gotten a lot of mileage out of “ugliness.” Actually, he doesn’t look too bad. “Weathered,” they used to say of Auden. I once heard someone say that Bukowski had the map of Hell on his face. What he looks like, is a poet. His is a face you’d expect to find on the back cover of one of those French novels we used to see more of.

As a child young Hank would stand before the bathroom mirror
wondering how he must have looked to others. "I felt as if no woman would ever want to be with me. I saw myself as some kind of freak." Salves and pastes didn’t help, and neither did a legion of doctors. One told him that his was the worst case of *acne vulgaris* he had ever seen. "One doctor told of a girl who had just cried, saying that she would never get a man because she would be scarred for life. If she could only see this young man, he said, she would see that she had nothing to complain about."

Another ugliness was the booze. Buk started early, while still in school. He looked older than his age, and got served readily in the downtown L.A. bars. It would be easy listing all the negatives of alcohol. Too easy. But there was an upside, too. In these seedy bars Buk met people he would never have encountered otherwise. These are the characters, broken down sometimes, and rebuilt, that scar his fictions.

**VI.**

Bukowski whirled in the autumn winds.

He was a small part of the pantomime.

**VII.**

*Bukowski*: Philadelphia has a lot of soul, if I can use that dirty word .... The people are real natural .... You know, you come out of a bar or go to get a meal and take a short cut through the neighborhood. People will be sitting on their front porch stoops and they say, "Hi, how you doing?" At first you say, "Are these people nuts?" Then you say, "No, I’m the one that’s nuts because I’m uptight."

....I went to Philly during the war, and it was wilder than New York had ever been. The first bar I walked into was in the afternoon and I sat down to have a drink and all of a sudden a bottle came sailing through the air past my head. And the place was packed at 3 in the afternoon — there aren’t any seats. It was just a magic place, that bar .... So, I stayed in that bar for five years. Well, I took a little break and then I came back. But that was my bar, and that’s where “Barfly” takes place. And that’s where I became, you might say, a boxer.

*Interviewer*: Self defense?

*Bukowski*: No, just entertainment for the folks ....

—from an interview with Michael Andrews

*Published in ONTHEBUS #5 (Spring, ’90)*
VIII.

I know that the first Bukowski book I saw was **Crucifix in a Death Hand**, published in '65 by Loujon Press of New Orleans and Lyle Stuart of New York City. It had to be a few years later though. I remember thinking that the poetry was different than the other stuff I'd been seeing, it was brave and ugly and jolting — lightyears removed from what I thought of as The Edge, from Ginsburg and O'Hara and Ferlinghetti. Even more memorable was the book itself, a real showcase, an objet d'art, a product of the times, hip, colorful and striking.

At about that time, Buk was becoming a staple of the L.A. underground, "a local hero," Cherkovski calls him, writing a weekly column, "Notes of a Dirty Old Man," for **Open City**, an alternative newspaper. His first piece was about Hemingway, who

> lived on war and combat and when he forgot how to fight he quit. but he left us some early work that is perhaps immortal? but something with the cape movement there. some flaw. oh, who the hell cares? let's have a drink for him!

The next week he was writing about the two cops who had given him an on-site sobriety test. The "Notes" were pages of autobiography, musings and ruminations, as well as biopsies of the counterculture, freewheeling essays that laughed at pretense and turned over applecarts. Age was no barrier between the rebel journalist and his rebel readership. But he was not looking to get mired in the rhetoric of Vietnam, nor quick to lash out at the exposed fat buttocks of the politicians. He wrote about life — his own, as well as those being lived by the people he saw on the streets. Sure, war and politics affected him, but there was so much else.

Was this about the time that John Martin showed up at Buk's door? Martin was a fan, one of those Holden Caulfield types who just wanted to talk to the writer for a while. A couple drinks, and a couple hours later, after having seen the closet full of unpublished poems and stories, Martin's mind began spinning with the possibilities. Before too long, there were broadsides of Buk's work being printed, then in '68 **At Terror Street and Agony Way** was published, the first of many books to roll off the Black Sparrow presses. A classic quid pro quo. This giant among the world's small presses has fe-fi-foe-fammed very nicely in the house that Buk built, and Martin's good sense and remarkable energy have seen to it that Buk's work cannot easily be ignored.
IX.

In May of '78 Bukowski went to Germany. He had been born in Andernach — Andernach-am-Rhine — on August 16, 1920, but had come to America while he was quite young. Now, fifty-eight years later, Buk had a growing reputation in the old country; he had some family who had been in touch; and he had a good fan/friend in Carl Weissner.

Weissner had been a young German editor in the mid 60's with a keen eye for the new and outlandish. He'd come upon some magazines, English and American, and became enamoured of much of the writing he found, the Beat and Meat poets, especially Bukowski. A long and warm correspondence ensued — as well as a time in the States, during which he and the poet got together for some drinking and conversation.

Weissner had a plan: he wanted to make Buk as popular in Germany as he was in underground America. He believed that German readers were just waiting for someone like Buk to come along. In retrospect, it seems that he was right. The German people responded to Bukowski — to the Weissner translations — in a big way. The trip in '78 was inevitable.

Yet who would ever have expected it to be such a big deal! City Lights has published a book, Shakespeare Never Did This, that gives us a Buk-eye view of his German homecoming. It reads at places like a rock 'n' roll memoir, like the Beatles conquering America, like Jerry Lee Lewis storming London. Bukowski’s return was a blitzkrieg — he was an event.

The highlight of the trip, besides the reunion with Weissner and the visit with his family, was a reading that had been scheduled for Hamburg. (An appropriate place — the sin and gin Kraut city even Liverpudians went to to get down and dirty.) More than four hundred people packed into an old hall — they were not disappointed. The first and last stop on Buk's European reading tour was a rollicking good time.

X.

At the sight of Bukowski
Flying in a green light
Even the bawds of euphony
Would cry out sharply.
XI.

"Already life-worn" is how Hank describes himself-as-character in the screenplay for "Barfly." "Rather than enter the treadmill of society he had chosen the bottle and the bars."

As you would expect, the story comes out of life. Life as Bukowski's known it. In this case, it is from Philly, from the mid 40's, and about Eddie, a bartender with "muscles and anxiety." The kind of guy Buk despises. And Henry Chinaski? The antihero — "just a death symbol."

Wang, Chinaski's girlfriend in the film, is modeled on Jane Cooney, the great love/tragedy of his younger years.

The German film director, Barbet Schroeder, first confronted Buk with the idea of doing a screenplay back in '77. A couple years later they inked a contract, but even then not much actually happened. Not until '86 or so — when, with a hard-won script in hand, they began getting some attention. At one point in the early going, Sean Penn wanted to star in the project, and he was willing to work for a token $1.00 salary, if only his buddy, Dennis Hopper, were allowed to direct. It had been Hopper who brought the script to Penn's attention. Buk is a loyal friend, however. He and Schroeder had been through a lot. They had invested too much over the last nine years to let go now, and so they declined the actor's generous offer.

Of course, Mickey Rourke was a pretty good "fall back."

(You've got to wonder, though, about a Hopper/Penn version of "Barfly.")

Bukowski did not think the whole Hollywood thing was such a rewarding experience. The white stretch limousine and media attention might have corrupted a lesser man. The post-premiere party at "a champagne bistro on LaBrea," hob-nobbing with the likes of Rourke, Faye Dunaway and Frank Stallone, could not turn the head of Charles Bukowski.

XII.

It's a love/hate thing. Which I think is not so unusual. When I first found Buk's poems more than twenty years ago, I realized that there was nothing I'd ever seen like them. And there still isn't — if you eliminate the ragged-assed army of wannabes who appropriate the streets and bars, the track and the horses, the seedy sides of towns, the bums, the crazies, and the assorted bugaboos, that Bukowski has been chronicling in his work. Which means, too, that you would
eliminate the phony crap that Buk himself has been passing off from time to time, ersatz gems ("authentic faux diamonds . . .") with all the right trappings and hardline sentiments of the originals, but lacking the "touch," the sincerity, the truth. It's become a trite throw-away line — "he's become a parody of himself." You hear any number of writers (and others) discounted with the same words. Sometimes they are on the mark. Bukowski certainly runs the risk: he has been hoisted onto shoulders and carried through town, and finally set to rest on a pedestal. It is unbecoming. He knows it; he's forever trying to jump down, but the mob won't allow it. Finally, it seems he has learned to accept it — by ignoring it.

Reading Cherkovski's biography of Bukowski, I was reminded of books I read over and over again as a child, the one by Thomas Mallory, and the one by T. H. White. In the Morte D'Arthur and The Once and Future King, the fabulous folklore about Arthur, adventures from various other romances of the Middle Ages were gathered together, their rough edges rasped clean, and set in place as a flowing narrative. HANK seems to be that kind of book. A biography written by the subject's friend, and with the subject's cooperation, is at once suspect. Is it likely to be any more valid than autobiography, that revisionist game? Cherkovski's book is mostly a retelling of the stories we've all heard before, the Bukowski mythos, what has appeared in short snaps in articles and interviews, what has been gleaned from the tremendous wealth of Bukowski's poetry and prose, and what has delighted countless circles of gossip and rumor mongers.

Any criticism or literary discussion you find in these pages is almost accidental. It should be noted, however, that it does not claim to be a critical biography. "This biography will hopefully answer questions Bukowski's readers have had about his personal life and the development of his writing talent. Aside from being informative, I hope that my efforts here will be entertaining and interesting to all who venture within." Cherkovski stays faithful to his purposes, the recounting of a life. Sifting through these tales for truth and fiction, for fantasy, embellishment and bullshit, would be a difficult task. It would also be pointless. For any true consideration of Buk's life would have to include the bullshit, the romantic gestures and heroic adventures, the self-deprecating madness and the hobo-jungle wisdom. This is the Man, a sum of his parts. And then some.
XIII.

Louis McKee
Cliff Hanger

Like a plangent river my life has unrolled this far, to a fraction of this place,
and I have commandeered motor launches, but it has all been in vain, this
celebration: listen
what do children think of you now?

—John Ashbery
*Flow Chart*, pp. 59-60

Recently, when the Naval Yard in Philadelphia, PA was about
to be shut down for good, there was an outcry from many local politi-
cians who claimed that such a decision would have devastating conse-
quences for the economy of the region. They also based their appeal
on the grounds that closing the naval yard would be detrimental to
the defense of this fine country of ours. That the former argument
was viewed as insufficient in the minds of our congressmen, I believe,
shows the second-class status afforded to any justification of an action
based on anything like selfishness or pleasure. Why did the many
men and women employed by the naval yard first take their jobs?
Because they wanted to be part of the team that “whipped” _________
(insert enemy here)'s ass? Because it paid well? Or because they
really enjoyed building gunboats more than, say, guitars?

The issue of money, of course, is practical. We all know everybody's
got to eat, so I won't take issue here with that point. But beyond
the issue of money, there may be another reason. I just don’t think
it need be patriotism. For some, I'm sure it is (I'm surer they *think*
it is). There are some who seem to want to go to war. It may be futile
to fight with them, all the more so if by doing so you get swept up
in it yourself. Perhaps the poet doesn’t mind so much that men go
off to war as he does them claiming the status of heroes for such
action...as if they wouldn’t have gone off to war if they could help
it, as if they weren’t just looking for some *excuse* to “see some action.”
But we live in an age of doublespeak. Had the congressmen appealed
to an *intrinsic* motive for wanting to save the naval yard (e.g., “Not
only will they be out of jobs, but they will get no pleasure out of life”),
conventional wisdom has it that that would not have been an effective
tactic.

Yet it is precisely that conventional wisdom most poets, either
directly or discreetly, can be said to subvert. There is no doubt in
my mind that intrinsic motivation, the id more selfish than the “urge”
to preserve the self, plays some crucial (if not sufficient) role in everyone.
Perhaps this is the unacknowledged legislator about which Shelley spoke. One of the first questions one is asked (implicitly, if not explicitly) when one applies for a grant (be it from a governmental agency or a private foundation) involves the *purpose* of the project. For many poets, bent on claiming that poetry cannot (and thus should not) have a purpose, this is especially problematic. How can one say that his purpose is to not have a purpose without either becoming a portion of that which he berates or burning a bridge before he crosses it? If a river asked for a grant, would it have to say it was a wall?
Anybody who's established himself as an artist is automatically establishment. Thus, the difference between publicly funded art and graffiti may be as negligible as the difference between a stance of harsh didacticism and the "art for art's sake" stance of an aesthete. Yet it seems more likely that one can be didactic without being artistic than for there to be art without some didactic element. "Art for art's sake" is itself a didactic statement, yet the aesthetic qualities of an illegally posted samisdap slogan are debatable (which doesn't necessarily detract from it, though this seems to assume that you can change someone's mind). But are those of you who feel that poetry is a neurotic activity more fucked up than those of you who feel it's an exalted activity? That's the question.

Some Facts

If I would have found a gig teaching poetry, I wouldn't have an office job. If I didn't have the job I have, I wouldn't regularly watch T.V. But if I didn't watch T.V. (for a living), Don Polec and Gerald Kolpan would not have made me aware of a unique form of public art commissioned by the Fairmount Park Art Commission. The piece, entitled "Sleeping Woman," is a collaboration between poet Stephen Berg and artist Tom Chimes. It is located on the flat stone surface of the Schuylkill River retaining wall between the river and the grass bank along Kelly Drive in Philadelphia, PA. It begins a little north of Boathouse Row near the statue of the Remington Cowboy and extends approximately 1200 feet ending near Milles' Playing Angels.

Berg intends this "long breath of speech" as a "choral voice rising out of the site—stone, water, earth...it is composed without punctuation...much like ancient Greek performance texts." The work is created specifically for this location in the park as a celebration of mankind in nature and nature in mankind. It is "monumental in scope but intimate in scale," according to the press release.

Now that I've given the facts, I'd like to offer some commentary on it as a literary artifact. "Sleeping Woman" is a line rather than a poem. It is illegal to quote it in its entirety. Actually, it's not only illegal it's also impossible to write it down without distorting its meaning. The meaning of the line is tied to the place, the ever-changing spirit of the place. The line's relationship to the place is part of what it's "about," or more accurately, is part of what it is. Thus, like life, it can't be defined. Berg suggests affinities with the Greeks, but this conception of art is also not incompatible with the self-reflexivity so often touted as a distinctly 20th century tendency in literature (Molly Bloom, etc.).
The line begins (or ends, if you’re reading it backwards while walking downstream):

HOW CAN YOU KNOW WHAT IT MEANS...

What is the “it”? The line itself? Life? The line approximating life? Life approximating the line?

...WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HERE...

Where? Where are you now? Can you really be anywhere if you don’t know what it means to be there? Can you really be anywhere if you do know what it means to be here? Is knowledge and meaning the good guy or the bad guy? Is the line provocative or merely wonderful? Is life wonderful or merely provocative? If I keep thinking this way will I get so dizzy I’ll fall into the river? Or is thinking what’s keeping me from falling into the river? And what about the bee buzzing around me? Maybe it would be better to jump in. Maybe I’m already in the river, or might as well be for all I know. Did I come here for a reason? Or was it an excuse? It must be an excuse because this line does not answer my questions. Maybe I’m asking the wrong questions. Is it a stream of consciousness? Or should I say river? Can one say this line is lazy because it’s not really discernably about anything concrete (though it’s painted ON concrete) or should it be applauded as beyond explication?

...PLACES CRY OUT FOR IMAGES OF YOU OF ME IF THEY HAD

(false line break)

TONGUES WHAT COULD THEY SAY TO EXPLAIN US...

The false line break the page necessitates is a flat map of the oblong spheroid of the earth. Should I (can I) excerpt this line without violating the flow? Is this a moral question? Is it because I’ve just read “we murder to dissect” that I ask “do I dare eat a peach?” Can I throw the pit in the Schuylkill sending ripples outward that will be erased by the river? Is there any set of circumstances under which these questions are irrelevant? No, but neither are there any under which they are necessary.

An Adequate Vice

Before I discuss why the above quoted excerpt fascinates me, I feel I must dwell on the disturbing but provocative notion of excerpting it. The line is limited. Those limits, however, are not necessarily synonymous with its physical limitations, the fact that it’s only 1200 feet long, for instance. Because it is hard to say where the signified starts and this chain of signifiers ends, it is hard to say exactly what the limitations are. But because the line does not deal with certain subject matter (for
instance, it includes no words more offensive than a G movie would and is universal enough to offend no particular political party), we can say it is limited despite the fact that on could get lost in it and not feel one's missing out on anything worthwhile. One could then say that an aphorism is no more limited than this stream of consciousness. Aphorisms, maxims, koans, slogans, though equally abstract, are tonally different from “Sleeping Woman.” Yet it might be very silly to say that aphorisms are islands in the stream of consciousness we glimpse through the attempted mimesis of “Sleeping Woman.”

Maybe aphorisms are the wall on which we stand to see the river. The sharp insight an aphorism expresses but cannot contain is more fragile than a more inclusive stream of consciousness. This does not mean it's less realistic or less truthful. Nor does it mean that a Mondrian or a Rothko is less realistic than a more stormy or flowing piece by a gestural Abstract Expressionist. The preference for one over the other is largely a matter of taste, sensibility, or mood. It is interesting to note that Berg has also recently translated the poem-like koans (or koan-like poems) of Ikkyu, 15th century Zen master, in the collection Crow With No Mouth (Copper Canyon Press, 1989). Despite the differences already hinted at, quoting some of these might actually shed some light on certain aspects of “Sleeping Woman”:

it's logical: if you're not going anywhere any road is the right one

(37)

And again:

if there's nowhere to rest at the end how can i get lost on the way?

(19)

These statements, I believe, are as consistent with the message of “Sleeping Woman” as they are an antidote to the thinking that must mask its self-interest or hedonism in the duty of extrinsic purpose. Yet there is much more (and, strangely, less) to both Berg and Ikkyu than the urge to question the tyranny of teleology that champions product and destinations at the expense of all else. However, it may be that levelling that enables both Berg and Ikkyu to incorporate pathos (and yes, “Sleeping Woman” has its share of emotionalized pathos: LOVE HAS SHAKE
ME LIKE A WIND RUSHING DOWN FROM THE HILLS HITTING A GROVE OF OAKS YOU BURN...) into more abstract musings without slipping into mere sentimentality, but embodying, rather, a pull towards immanence, if not intimacy itself. Perhaps this is what Bruce Campbell meant by the title of his piece, “An Adequate Vice to Limit
the Liquid of This Voice” in Poetics Journal 9.
In Berg’s forward to Crow With No Mouth he writes:

[Ikkyu] is always bent on crushing any ideal of self or conduct, any theory of belief. His core, his “real self” as it has been called, the “true man of no rank” is an anonymous force whose successive conditions are the same moment-by-moment states of fluid nameless identity we can sense in ourselves. Or say that Ikkyu’s nature and Nature are synonymous.

(15)

Yet if Ikkyu is always bent on crushing any ideal of self or conduct, wouldn’t that make the anonymous force into more than just his core? If a man were always at his core, would it still be called that? What would happen to words like “surface?” Aren’t there times when Ikkyu cuts a little deeper than other times? Ever catch him on an off day?

Nevertheless, I am now prepared to “tackle” PLACES CRY OUT FOR IMAGES OF YOU OF ME IF THEY HAD TONGUES WHAT COULD THEY SAY TO EXPLAIN TO US...

If this appeared as a poem in a book, would it be as powerful? The context allows (if not forces) me to wonder that if places didn’t have tongues, the only thing they couldn’t say would be exactly what they’re saying now in Berg’s piece. If places didn’t have tongues, they probably could explain more. They wouldn’t be crying out for images as much; by anthropomorphizing them, we make them (or find them) as confused as we are, opposite to the indifference from which the rage for order arises. Perhaps everything we say is reducible to “If I were a person, what would I say?” It reminds me of the time I crossed the bridge and you said “see how small that huge barge looks?” And I thought (but didn’t say) “why is its hugeness more real than its small appearance?”

Yet I still wonder if “Sleeping Woman” is, as Berg claims, “a celebration of mankind in nature and nature in mankind.” It sounds good on paper, but it’s a tough bill to fill. It seems to me that this line is actually more of a celebration of mankind in nature than of nature in mankind. Of course, I may have a different sense of the mutuality of this statement than that which Berg intended.

Carl Rakosi’s “Experiment with a Rat” (which I became aware of as public art: it appeared on one of those “Street Fare Journals” the Philadelphia public transit system, SEPTA, too rarely puts on its buses and subways) and Gary Snyder’s “Long Hair” come a little closer to my sense of “nature in mankind.” Let me excerpt from the Snyder poem:
Once every year, the Deer catch human beings. They do various things which irresistibly draw men near them: each one selects a certain man. The Deer shoots the man, who is then compelled to skin it and carry its meat home and eat it. Then the Deer is inside the man. He waits and hides in there, but the man doesn’t know it. When enough Deer have occupied enough men, they will strike all at once. The men who don’t have Deer in them will also be taken by surprise, and everything will change some. This is called “takeover from inside.”  

(65)

This drama has infiltrated pop culture. There are songs with lines like “the hunter gets captured by the game” and “you find your servant is your master.” Ikkyu, naturally, deals with it. A particularly suggestive example is:

we’re lost born in delusions deeper than any mind
if you could escape awakening you’d ripen like a pear all by itself.

(52)

Perhaps Berg comes close to it when the “anonymous stone” bespeaks a “mind not yours,” yet it seems to me that if this work was really as much about nature in mankind as mankind in nature, perhaps it would accommodate words like “cars” or “frisbees” or “barbecue pits” or “dunce caps” or the relationship of a magnet to a compass. That “pants” is more musical than “hypnotic geese,” however, is debatable.

When we look at ourselves (and what isn’t a mirror?) and try to separate the real from the fake, the natural from the unnatural, what do we reject? Do we reject the city for the country? The forest for the trees? Thought for feeling? Ideas for things? If so, are we in danger of becoming like someone who thinks a Norman Rockwell painting is better thus (I mean “because”) more realistic than a Clifford Still, someone who likes Wyeth so much more than Guston that he won’t want to argue about it? If so, are we forgetting that just as a beehive is natural, so do some men best express their nature by intellectual activity...even if we are not among them?

Samuel Beckett’s Watt also deals with this arbitrary line that’s said to separate man from nature. Let me quote but one paragraph (which takes place immediately after a woman has just pelted Watt with a rock):

Beyond stopping, and laying down his bags, and picking up his hat, and setting it on his head, and picking up his bags, and setting himself, after one or two false starts, again in motion,
Watt, faithful to his rule, took no more notice of this aggression than if it had been an accident. This he found was the wisest attitude, to staunch, if necessary, inconspicuously, with the little red sudarium that he always carried in his pocket, the flow of blood, to pick up what had fallen, and to continue, as soon as possible, on his way, or in his station, like a victim of mere mischance. But he deserved no credit for this. For it was an attitude become, with frequent repetition, so part of his being, that there was no more room in his mind for resentment at a spit in the eye, to take a simple example, than if his braces had burst, or a bomb fallen on his bum.

(32)

This passage is an inspiring yet comic expression of stoic non-attachment, of seeing no point in dwelling on things that can’t be changed. Yet it raises other ethical and metaphysical questions. Some say man is distinguished from nature by his ability to reason. Non-human nature can’t be rational and thus shouldn’t be. On the other hand, human violence presumably can be stopped. That it continues (has there ever been a time without some man heaping injustice on his fellow man?) only serves to show either that men are not living up to their potential (and in this are worse than nature—or, as Lawrence would say: the mosquito may suck your blood but at least it doesn’t put it in the bank) or that, as a race, we are not as rational as we are led to believe. But perhaps nature, beyond good and evil, is both what’s best in man and what’s worst in man. And these, seeming opposites, are united by the intensity with which they appear to us. After all, Harold Bloom defines the sublime as heightened ambivalences, and John Lennon sings “the higher you fly is the deeper you go.” Yet, when these “heightened ambivalences” ebb, as is perhaps too often the case, it is then that we have the tranquility to reflect on them...as if separate, though not estranged, from nature.

In discussing Auden’s “Our Bias,” the poet Thomas Kinsella said the “us” of the poem was man and the “them” of the poem was nature. I didn’t buy it. The careful dialectic of the poem can, without too much stretch of the imagination, be applied to two different kinds of people too. Some men have more in common with some animals than they do with other men who have more in common with the sky. Even this can’t be set in stone; however, in a microscope a backbone looks like Swiss cheese.

Recently, the first “batch” of California Condors were released from a captive breeding program. The man who spearheaded the program
was interviewed on Philadelphia radio station WHYY-FM’s “Earthtalk” (8-24-91) and defended the program against the attack of those who objected that it would be better to let the Condor die with dignity. These people, he claimed, refuse to realize that the bird could no longer die with dignity because of what man had done to it. Since this is the case, only man could save it. Hence, the simulacrum. This can be applied to literature. Theodor Adorno writes (in his Notes To Literature, Columbia University Press, 1991):

 It is only through humanization that nature is to be restored the rights human domination took from it.

(41)

Speaking for nature is a dirty job, but someone (or something that’s in someone as well as outside of someone, though in a different form) has got to do it. I think Berg would agree. It is a very complex subject, and one I best leave for another day. For the point here is not to be bookish, but to GO DOWN TO THE RIVER to read the line as if you were just going down to the river to see the river. As I see it, Berg’s goal is to get people to read nature the way they have been trained to read a poem. The line could thus be seen as a kind of halfway house for word-junkies, book-junkies. It can be seen as much more than that as well. For the words you will find there, like Ikkyu’s often do, will turn you away from themselves so that you may appreciate a world words are only able to refer to; because they refer to themselves so much, you have to turn away from them (though part of you can’t).

* * * * *

Coda

and if

all comes to be eclipsed at some date in the not-too-near future, then why does it say I’m a salesman with a tie trying to interest you in this new product that can go out of control?

—John Ashbery

Flow Chart, p. 61

Shortly before this article went to press, a section of “Sleeping Woman” fell into the Schuylkill River. At the time of writing this, the line slopes into the river and abruptly resumes visibility to human eyes over 100 feet later beginning with the words “YOU COULD DIE HERE” (9-1-91).
If anything inspires me to write about “Sleeping Woman” now, it has more to do with what first kicked dirt onto it, and what later caused a whole section of it to tumble into the river than it does with the literary merits of the work itself. This would be sheer avoidance on my part if the work did not call attention directly to the place it not only imagines it belongs but is also inseparable from. Is it possible the stone wall would not have collapsed if the poem were not written on it?

It’s easy to sing praises to Shiva when you’re marginalized; perhaps it’s harder to love an earthquake once you’ve gotten your dreamhouse...even if the Joneses would call it a squat. Does one sing praises to the violent destructive powers of nature out of resentment because s/he has never been offered all the riches of Babylon? Or does one shun riches because all is Maya? Lamont Steptoe, whose photographs of “Sleeping Woman” are herein included, has recently written a poem (still in MS) in which “The Real Powers” of the earth are embodied in, for instance, the recent eruption of Mr. Pinatubo, which destroyed the U.S. Army Base as well as the lives of many who wouldn’t be called civilians were there no armies. Despite Steptoe’s attraction to the forces of eruption, he knows that these powers are not necessarily more just than the folly of men who think they’re in power. They may not even be more real for “even they dance in strings/ like marionettes/ pulled by invisible masters.” Exactly who these masters are is left up in the air.

It’s easy to suspect that others are more upset about destruction than you, that it’s the others who are more attached to a crutch they don’t know they can walk without until it’s pulled out from under them. Yet, this could be underestimating them or overestimating yourself. You could unwittingly become a parody of a visionary by believing you have once and for all fused yourself to that which has nothing to lose from the fire that burns your dreamhouse down. Yet one must beware this trope’s potential for becoming a cliché, a dead skin the snake (of life?) has already crawled out from. Shelley’s “untrammelled deep” can become another poem’s “too trammelled deep.” What’s great about Pound’s maxim “Poetry is news that stays news” is that it doesn’t say that one has to see oneself only as an Aeolian Harp to impart that news. One could be just as universal by writing, as James Tate does, “I can’t speak for the wind” (Selected Poems, 139). I much prefer this stance to that of a poem that claims to speak for the wind but can only achieve it in certain circumstances. Perhaps it is only by not claiming it that one can be it. Perhaps not. Anyway, what do
All photographs by Lamont Steptoe
we mean by wind?

In reference to Chateaubriand’s writings, Proust writes in *On Art and Literature 1896-1919*:

And yet there is something in it which...gives us the feeling of being something which, if not outlasting empires, in the sense of still retaining a personality, is at any rate so superior to time that even if one had known that the page was to be burned as soon as one had written it, one would have gone on writing in the same ecstasy, and relinquishing all else for it....

(369)

This can be applied to Berg’s poem. The river cannot truly swallow what was vital (if not merely human) in “Sleeping Woman” if there was anything vital in it. If it were to appear in a different form, that would be because energy is never gained nor lost, pain is an illusion, or the “lord” works in mysterious ways. Yet the specific form is sometimes used as a touchstone—as if we wouldn’t want to see anything unless we knew we could see it again. It’s as if Nature tells man “if you play with me, you play with fire.” But, no mightier than the sword, the pen that lives by the truth must die by the truth. The pen that lives by falsity also seems to die by the truth. Is death, then, the only definitive truth? Hardly, for even that, a peg to hang your coat on, must be questioned. The only way not to be a hypocrite is to constantly realize you harbor (if not embody) immense contradictions.

Old man river may incessantly flow, yet it’s not necessarily more honest to be attentive to this flow than to what it destroys before you get a chance to adequately (if not exhaustively) describe it. There aren’t many things I’d rather read than a beautiful description of something destroyed. Is that because everything must be lost to be written about? Does that mean that Berg’s line wasn’t about the wall it was written on until that wall became a victim of erosion? Now, the interest can lie neither solely in what’s written nor in what erases it. Now, it’s easier to see man in nature and nature in man. So, aside from the illusion of an other (otherness), is the only thing that prevents our actions from being nothing but futile the notion of the present? The cult of the present?

The present can be seen as an enormous lie, for it can’t be proven and doesn’t prove anything. It is the point of intersection (like character, virtu?) in which an “art for art’s sake” stance speaks of an intrinsic motivation that can be seen as “fighting fire with fire” or “having a duty to get rid of duty” only from outside. When Ashbery writes “We spend
so much time trying to convince ourselves we’re happy that we don’t recognize the real thing when it comes along" (April Galleons, 53), he is pointing to it. If the present is a point, it can only point to that which can never be defined or felt for more than a second, its second. Every moment has its meat and what worked in one instance may not work in the next—at least by that name.

But aiming for the moment can be seen as going out of your way, slipping off your center, to another who may “go with the flow.” It can be seen as a form of attachment to the present. Though of course it’s permissible for you to retort “I’d rather be attached to the present than to a person.” Let’s say there’s no stance without fear. You can fear destruction, but only if you also fear the lack of destruction. Do two negatives make a positive? We “might as well have” said there is no fear, but would it feel as good? Would we be as alive?

We could feel sorry for Steve Berg: after all the work he put into “Sleeping Woman” it collapsed under its own weight. Yet if what it said merely mimicked the river, Berg’s line wasn’t necessary. After all, do we only feel sorry for someone who died? The child of a restless imagination, twin to the thought that Reagan/Bush purposely kept the hostages in Iran to make themselves look better, is the thought that Berg and Chimes knew this was going to happen (despite precautions such as “anti-graffiti coating”). Yes, and maybe Alice B. Toklas really did write her autobiography! The mysterious ways of nature have not only created twice as much publicity about Berg’s and Chime’s piece, but have also fulfilled some element of its manifest statement (beyond punctuation) the line wore on its sleeve for all to see. Maybe Berg is ambivalent enough about his work to be no more upset than relieved that no longer one aberrant (in the sense that Stevens wrote “It’s not every day that the world arranges itself into a poem” or Dylan sang “The truth was too pure, too profound and obscure, to live it you had to explode”) inspired moment would be painted on stone to stick out like a sore thumb or a series of photographs of you in a place too expensive to visit as much as you claim you’d like to. And if this is true, if everything’s a truth, then the line, like Shelley, didn’t die before its time.
Bibliography


Contributors’ Notes

Bill Brown teaches creative writing in Nashville, TN. His poems and reviews have appeared in Zone Three, Passages North, Cumberland Poetry Review, Poem Kalliope, Visions, Negative Capability, and Pikesstaff Forum. He is the co-author of the new writing text, Important Words for Poets and Writers.

Jared Carter’s forthcoming book of poems, After the Rain, will be published by Cleveland State University Poetry Center in 1992.

David Cooper is pursuing an MA in creative writing at CUNY. He has been published in New Zealand Jewish Chronicle, Outer Bridge, Pleiades, and Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies. He has work forthcoming in Home Planet New, Mudfish, and Nebo.

Sean Thomas Dougherty is an American correspondent for Beat Scene and Zip Code of Coventry, England. His work has appeared in many publications including Potato Eyes, Swamp Root, The Signal, and the English publication, Slow Dancer.

Charlene Cohen Fix lives in Columbus, OH and teaches English at the Columbus College of Art and Design. Her poetry has appeared in several publications including The Antioch Review, Wind, and Plains Poetry Journal.


Wang Hui-Ming is an artist and retired professor. He has received several awards and honors for his artwork and calligraphy and has published extensively.

Muriel Karr of Mountain View, CA has poems in Calypso, Puerto del Sol, Santa Clara Review, and Bellowing Ark.

J. Kates is a poet, writer, and translator who lives in Fitzwilliam, NH. His translations from French and Russian have been published in England, Ireland, and New Zealand, as well as the U.S. With Stephen A. Sadow he translated We, the Generation in the Wilderness (Ford-Brown, 1989) by the Argentinean poet Ricardo Feierstein.

Laurie Kutchins has had work published in The Georgia Review, Ploughshares, and Denver Quarterly.

Louis McKee lives, teaches, and writes in Philadelphia, PA. Oranges (1989) is his most recent of five collections of poetry.

Toby Olson is currently at work on a new novel. Certain Women will be published by Simon & Shuster early in 1993.
Olga Popova is a Leningrad poet who is just beginning to be published both in Russian magazines (Vyestnik) and in English translation (Crab Creek Review). A former tour guide at the Peter-Paul Fortress, she lives in Leningrad with her husband and three children.

Lee Rossi is the editor and founder of Tsunami and contributing editor to Onthebus. He has been published in Wormwood Review, Poetry LA, Blue Window, and has work forthcoming in Poetry East, among many others.

Steven Sherrill is pursuing an MFA at Iowa University. He then plans to pursue a degree from the Culinary Institute and, eventually, attain a welding certification.

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Lamont Steptoe is a poet, publisher, photographer, and frequent contributor to PBQ. He is a Vietnam veteran and has written four books of poetry.

Chris Stroffolino has been published in Sufjar, New American Writing, Caliban, Green Zero, and 6ix. He lives in Philadelphia.

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**The Spoken Arts Series at the Painted Bride Art Center**

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