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Heart Murmurs

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Celiba Publishing

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Heart Murmurs

By the same author

Snow Moon

After Blossom Viewing

Pillars of Fire

Ginkgo Leaves

Chrysanthemum Garden

Interiors

The Distances

Leaves and Angels

Ekphrasis

River Mist

Invisible Rivers

The Sound of Purple

The Distances of Sleep

City of Shaded Light

Heart Murmurs

A Potpourri

Steven Carter

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*It does not have to fit together. Like the pieces of a
totally unfinished jigsaw puzzle my grandmother left in
the bedroom when she died in the living room. The
pieces of this poetry or of this love—*

—Jack Spicer

For my cadre
—who made the last five classroom years
even more fun

Book I

Nowhere man

["Nowhere man" is a sequel to my chapbook
The Hidden Berkeley, published in 2012 by
Cyber-wit Publishers]

Isn't he a bit like you and me?

Lennon/McCartney

AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THE READER

When people ask why I made the decision to leave Berkeley in February, 1967, I tell them the truth: I was burnt out.

Of course they assume I'm talking about drugs, but that wasn't it. Aside from dropping a horse tab of meth which caused me to jabber like Hubert Humphrey for twelve straight hours, I didn't do drugs when I lived in Berkeley (alcohol was a different matter).

I left because of too many emotions reciprocated and unreciprocated; because I was traumatized, having witnessed the death of my mother which left my younger brother and me parentless; and because, knocking down a six-pack of Hamm's Draft in a clearing off the Jordan Trail in the Berkeley hills, I felt the hot whips of panic: *You just turned twenty-three; when are you going to get off your ass and do something with your life?*

In spite of campus protests in 1963 against an ill-timed visit of the "Dragon Lady," wife of South Vietnam's U.S. puppet leader; in spite of the Free Speech Movement unrest of a year later—Berkeley in the early sixties was a relatively peaceful place. Then came the Days of Rage and in 1968 People's Park, which resulted in serious injuries and one death.

By that time, too, hard drugs had caught up to Stanley Owsley's innocent acid-soaked sugar cubes. Telegraph Avenue was devolving into the pathetic skid

row it remains today.

Even before the summer of love (for love read sex), and while Big Brother and the Holding Company, Jefferson Airplane, and Quicksilver Messenger Service were in their prime at the Fillmore and Avalon auditoriums across the Bay, I was gone, homeless in Tucson, living from hand to mouth.

From 1962-1965, I lived off and on in West Berkeley on the Bay side of Sacramento Street, four miles off-campus, far from the protests which, after an exhausting day of attending classes and working, I checked out on the six o'clock news.

Like me, 95 percent of the kids at Cal in those days were too tangled up in their own private lives, part-time jobs, and studies to pay much attention to history bubbling and swirling around us.

The town of Berkeley had been on California's cultural radar for decades, beginning in the thirties, when my father transferred up from San Jose State Teacher's College to find himself in a maelstrom of Left-wing activity: communist-inspired student radicalism without the riots. (My father, neither communist nor fellow traveler, had nonetheless been contacted by the FBI concerning "certain acquaintances of interest.") By the late nineteen-fifties, the town of Berkeley itself, having boldly pioneered desegregation in the public schools, was voted the third most liberal community in America. In the mid-sixties, it became the only American city to send its mayor to the Havana Conference for Non-Aligned Nations!

Berkeley was in my blood. Maternal Grandma Bessie and Step-Grandfather Cecil Coleman bought the “Berkeley box” house at 2111 Grant Street before I was born, and I spent parts of most summers with them until graduating from high school in 1961 and enrolling at Cal. Growing up across the Bay near Mill Valley, and then in Palo Alto, for me Berkeley before the Deluge was Darling’s Flower Shop on the corner of Grove¹ and University, just down from the UC Theater; Louis Ambrose’s grocery at Addison and Grant; Castro’s Books on University (later it moved to Addison)²; Hugh’s Diner; the U-Save supermarket, scene of Allen Ginsberg’s 1955 poem “A Supermarket in California”; Wilkinson’s Coffee Shop on Shattuck; Mel’s Drive-in; the United Artists Theater (where my mother and I saw “The Red Shoes” when I was a boy); Kress; the creaky wooden floors, smell of popcorn, and toasted American cheese sandwiches of Woolworth’s; and a dilapidated school bus in a weedy lot on the southeast corner of Grant and University (every year I checked the flattened tin can I’d placed under one tire to see if anyone had moved the bus).

The inner terrain of my Berkeley lay outside the boundaries of what people today recognize as “Berkeley”: The sit-ins; handcuffed Jack Weinberg in the back seat of a police car foolishly parked next to Ludwig’s Fountain (an angry crowd soon commenced to rock it); Oakland cops roaring four abreast down Bancroft (knowing their reputation for brutality, California Attorney General Ed Meese ordered them, not the better-trained Berkeley police, to rid Sproul

Hall of dissidents); Mario Savio snatching a microphone from Clark Kerr onstage at the Greek Theater; Kathleen Soliah haranguing the crowd at People's Park; James Rector's bleeding body sprawled on the roof of Grandma's Book Store on Telegraph; and all the rest of it.

Bottom line: Readers interested in an undercurrent of narrative, especially of historical narrative, will be disappointed. These pictures at an exhibition simply feature one American Baby Boomer's coming-of-age from adolescence to early adulthood—in a famous town with an alter ego.

¹—Now Martin Luther King Way.

²Paradise for me from the age of nine or ten onward was bookstores. Visiting my grandmother in Berkeley in the fifties, I'd walk over to University Avenue and head for Castro's Books, where I'd pore over their wonderful collection of used comics, two for a nickel, and return with as many rumpled copies of *Archie*, *Little Lulu*, *Superman*, *The Green Lantern*, and *Captain Marvel* as I could carry. Then I'd plop down on the bed in an upstairs bedroom of 2111 Grant and read until dinnertime.

OVERCAST WEDNESDAY

*See the dead years leaning
From the balconies of the sky in faded robes
—And Regret, rising from deep waters, grinning.
The dying sun sleeps in the archway,
And, like a long shroud drawn out of the East,
Hear, my darling, O hear the sweet Night's tread.
—Baudelaire*

“Hey there—”

I look up. Wearing a low-cut purple sundress, she's leaning out of a third-floor window of Davidson Hall.

“Are you going to the freshman mixer tonight?”

I tell her I didn't know there was a freshman mixer.

“In the Student Union at 8:00,” she pulls back.

“I'll see you there!”

Kay will become my girlfriend that fall until I screw things up in a moment of silly despair by telling her, “I need you,” as we lay side-by-side in my Parker Street basement apartment. After that, my social life consists of watching ABC's Friday Night Movies, eating stale popcorn, and drinking Coke.

Cut to dream sequence.

Under a feral day moon, walking up the hill from Sather Gate he sees a pretty girl glide down the steps of California Hall, heading in his direction.

—A dialogue betwixt self and soul:

Self: OK, damn it! You're going to meet this girl

and ask her for coffee in the Bear's Lair.

Soul: Really? Out of the blue?

Self: I'll ask her the time.

Soul: —With the second highest clock tower in the world looming over your right shoulder? Idiot!

This goes on for a few moments until he sees the color of her eyes, the curve of her cheekbones, even the barely visible lines of her toes (she's wearing flats).

Their eyes meet.

And, blushing with shame, he looks away and continues on.

Casting a look back—like Orpheus at Eurydice!—he hopes she'll return his glance. She does not.

Cut to—

Purple star

—Breathing

Underwater

. . . UNDERWATER

Depressed, walking south on Bowditch St., I glance in on middle-class yards: birdbaths, hoses and sprinklers, honeysuckle hedges framing handlebars of bicycles that gleam in the moonlight.

The full moon dogs my steps, winking and blinking through emaciated branches of winter trees. My legs feel heavy, as if I'm wearing a diving suit, trudging through an ocean.

I think of my dad, who lived somewhere in this neighborhood in 1936, the year he graduated from Cal. Twenty-five years ago he would've been one of these invisible presences I'm walking past, dreaming like them as the sea of moonlight laps against the windowpanes.

Suddenly elated—indulging in what Baudelaire called a divine prostitution of the soul—I want to enter the lives of strangers—no, to become them. My eyes fill with tears.

Embarrassed even though no one is there, I blink the tears away and return to my Parker Street apartment, falling into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Others have experienced such a wonderful, manic, irrational affection for everything—the frame of mind I started out with turned inside out like a sock.

Killing my evil mood, I know now, would've killed the epiphany it mysteriously produced.

Would I have done so—annihilate the one by annihilating the other? Yes.

Broken gnomon
Early moon
The sundial—more beautiful

CHRISTINE

Her wiener schnitzel having proved a disaster, we
tumble into bed.

An unconscionable few moments later, she asks,
“Was this your first time?”

A thirty-year-old folk singer at the Bear’s Lair
Cabaret on campus, she adds kindly,
“. . . You’ll learn to make it last longer.”
She could’ve destroyed me, but she didn’t.

Full—

My hot hands
Cold November moon

SUMMER AND SMOKE

My brother Allan and I sit on the porch of our house at 1420 Hearst Street, puffing on Alpine cigarettes. He asks me what I want to do with my life.

“I want to be the greatest writer of my generation,” I tell him.

Forty-six years and a zillion rejections later, I’m still glad I said those words.

Feral moon

11/23/2012

So fluent in a world of saguaro and ocotillo, tonight's moonlight has nothing to say to me.

Starlight: equally incommunicado—except with memories of Berkeley, half a century ago:

Dressed in beatnik attire—a ragged gray sweatshirt, torn jeans, and sandals—Roger looks miserable. He confesses that halfway through fall semester at UC he's thinking about chucking it all and joining the Bohemian scene in North Beach.

As he talks, gesturing as always with both hands, I remember three things. In seventh grade, when I was in a foster home in Los Altos, I invited him to a Halloween bonfire party, and he came all the way from Palo Alto. In ninth grade, after I'd returned to Palo Alto, Roger and I came out to the bicycle rack following a Friday night meeting of our YMCA club to find my bike stolen. He walked his bike beside me so that I wouldn't have to trudge the three miles home alone with a cloud over my head. And, on the eve of our sophomore year in high school, he offered to give me a ride to school every morning on his motor scooter.

I walked from my house on Emerson Street five blocks east to South Court, where Roger lived.

As I waited for him that first September morning, Roger's mom asked me if I'd had breakfast.

"No, Ma'am."

"Well, come and sit down. We're having blueberry pancakes."

The next day she asked again. Again I said no.

"Don't you eat breakfast, Steve?"

So they fed me breakfast that entire school year.

In my senior yearbook Roger wrote the following:

There are many friendships in this world, but even the most fleeting and transitory leave a deep impression. Ours was long enough for understanding and that is long enough.

Sitting now with Roger on the edge of Ludwig's Fountain across from the Student Union, I tear a page from my history 4A notebook and write down my phone number and address. "If you feel like talking about things," I say, handing him the paper, "call me or drop by any evening; I mean it."

On my way up toward Wheeler Hall, I turn and look back; he turns too, holds up his hand in farewell, and for the first time I see him smile. When I salute him he bows, clasping his hands to his chest in the Buddhist gesture of respect. I never see Roger again.

Saguaro spines

Soft song

A cactus wren

SHADOWS OF SATHER GATE

This campus was a beast, its teeth and claws sharpened on the rigor of curricula which, in Berkeley's heyday, landed thirty of thirty-two undergraduate programs on *U.S. News and World Report's* list of top ten in the world.

The beast could kill. On a campus visit a year ago, in the spring of 1961, I walked up the hill that parallels Strawberry Creek to the 307-foot-tall Campanile where, a few days earlier, a sophomore named John Patterson had jumped 200 feet from the observation deck to the paving stones below. (There'd been another suicide three years before, but he wasn't a student.)

—As I stood on the exact spot Patterson landed, the hourly carillon of bells in the tower began. I wondered what in such a beautiful spot, and on such a beautiful campus, would put suicidal thoughts in the head of a kid a year or two older than me.

Seven months later, a lonely freshman living on Parker Street two miles from campus, I would have the answer to that question.

White sky
—Donne's bell

TWO A.M.

On a 21st-century evening of coyotes yipping and a great horned owl questioning who-who (Not me, I reply), this:

“You will NOT major in journalism! You will major in comparative literature!” Alain Renoir hisses at me, cheeks aflame with a Gallic flush, black cheroot bobbing up and down in the corner of his mouth.

Renoir, chair of the UC Comp Lit department, is my undergrad advisor freshman year. Son of the movie director Jean and grandson of the great Impressionist, he’s every bit as much an artist in the classroom as his forebears were in film and on canvas.

In telling me not to major in journalism—“a whore’s occupation, my boy”—Renoir plants the seeds for what became my real major—not comparative lit, whose doctoral requirement in those days was five languages—but English.

It’s the charismatic Renoir who lights the fires of literature underneath me, encouraging me to color outside the lines of conventional hermeneutics by adding personal touches to works like the *Odyssey*.

Penelope at her loom

Don’t you think

she’s rather cold, my boy?

MIDNIGHT

Sitting on my bed, staring straight ahead, I struggle against the depression I know will come knocking like the Fuller Brush man.

Somewhere—somewhere
Northern Lights
Eucalyptus shadows

Palpable as a person, gathering its forces against me, depression stitches every thought and feeling with memories of a year ago, when I hit a crazy game-winning hook shot from the top of the key with three thousand spectators and my mother looking on.

Not now. Six hours before I've been cut from the UC freshman basketball team, deep-sixing my athletic career.

—Next day I'm halfway up the hill to Wheeler Hall before I remember to remember the little death of the day before.

BETWEEN CLASSES

A fairy city of the heart—

From the top step of the Campanile—a killer view of San Francisco Bay.

Moving my eye from right to left, I spot the ragged green pyramid of Mt. Tam in Marin County, where I once got lost as a child; Wolf-back Ridge above the touristy town of Sausalito, which I can't see; the Golden Gate Bridge; the City; and, turning my gaze to the south, Daly City (settled in 1906 by survivors of the great earthquake); China Basin; Candlestick Park; Hillsborough and San Mateo.

Except for Palo Alto, which I also can't see, like an astronomer viewing stars I'm looking into the past: early childhood in Alto, Mill Valley's suburb of a suburb, where my parents spent the best years of their lives before my father's death; San Francisco, where he co-founded a private non-profit Social Welfare agency; the Peninsula, site of three foster homes my brother Allan and I partly grew up in.

Directly below me, as more classes let out, students lugging green book bags stream up and down campus hills (the story goes that you can tell if a UC girl is a senior by checking out the musculature of her calves).

They are accompanied by the ghosts of Frank Norris and Jack London and, though I don't know it at the time, poets of the ongoing Berkeley

Renaissance, including Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan.

—Training my gaze beyond the roofs of California and Wheeler Halls, I'm swept away by the clarity of light on the Bay, the SF-Oakland Bay Bridge, and the city itself, shimmering in morning fog.

Cold shadows the first thing coming

[The head-link is from Lord Byron's description of Venice]

DAYS OF HEAVEN

1.

“Excuse me, officer,” Pete Cooper says to the Berkeley cop who pulls us over as we head west on Ashby toward the freeway. “Your badge needs polishing.” Things go downhill from there.

2.

“Excuse me, officer,” Pete Cooper says to the CHP tracker who pulls us over just off the Bay Bridge. “Are you a rookie?” Things go downhill from there.

Siren-songs of spring
Sirens

NORTH STAR

Not a bad gig, really—living in my car, I mean—though I came close to suggesting that we drive to Reno and get married, which would've been a disaster.

The year I dropped out of Cal to work at the Berkeley library, we'd been thrown out of our respective houses, and my foam-green '57 Plymouth was our only alternative. We ate "Mt. Everest" burgers at Woody's on Shattuck near the Oakland line, and cleaned up at the gas station at Grove and University, where I knew the manager.

After dark we'd take walks, surveying our share of the local heavens. Ginny was afraid to go too near her house in the Elmwood district ("Dad has a shotgun").

He did indeed, turning it against himself two years later.

Fifty years afterward, I'm still haunted by Sirensongs of Purgatory or Elysium—all the girls I never knew; all the words, loves—the songs of Ginny, too, who I never really knew.

Wan pinks of dawn—
Catching first light
My rear-view mirror

THE SECRET LIFE

Sweet oblivion of dust and shadows!

His home library was an island, a fortress, an existential way to be—you name it. Shy and curmudgeonly, afraid of life, he was also afraid to send his “dumb-born books,” as he put it, into the world.

On returning home from work as a clerk at the electric company in El Cerrito, he retired after dinner to the book-filled den to cram hundreds of ledgers with poems, short stories, essays, and brief memoirs. One story was about a visit by the Prince of Wales to their home, so convincing that I thought it happened until he set me straight.

When I stayed with Charles and wife Eddy after the end of freshman year (my boarding house had burned down), he invited me to look at some of his other stuff; what I read was unabashedly sexual (he wrote about being tied up in bed while Eddy played with him in unusual and creative ways). A revelation to an eighteen-year-old kid who'd just begun to jot things down—

One morning, when they were at work, I sneaked a peek at Charles' journal. In it he'd written:

It does my old heart good to have a young lion like Steven prowling the premises—

Winter branches scrape the window
I too am in Arcadia

THE HOUSE ON HEARST STREET

Odd—I remember elm-reflections in the living room windows, never the elms themselves.

Why?

—Age twenty, trying to teach myself how to write, I start a journal, pledging 1000 words a night for a year. I lie on my belly in front of our stone-cold fireplace and enter the daily allotment in long, yellow legal ledgers.

Exhausted and bored with the project, eight months on I give it up, having scribbled nearly 200,000 words. I schlep the ledgers from place to place, finally throwing them in the trash thirty years later—but not before revisiting the worn pages one last time, curious to know what a twenty-year-old kid had to say to a fifty-year-old man.

Answer: not a lot. But it was then that I understood E.M. Forster's remark that he never looked on his juvenilia without rage and shame.

Summer fog
song on the transistor
I Remember You

UNDER GRIZZLY PEAK, JUNE 1966

Naked, she flops over on her belly, offering her
exquisite bottom to the moon.

“I have to work hard at being happy,” she
murmurs.

Bless her heart, it shows.

Moon-colored
Soft shoulder

STEVE, YOU'RE PART OF MY HEART

I would've married her at the drop of a hat; but she invoked her mother who, like all mothers in those days, feared and loathed me: with good reason.

Entombed
In starlight
—Glass-wing

Pointing my '57 Plymouth north toward Berkeley, I tromp the accelerator. The first three lights are green; four through eight—red.

Past Dwight Way a CHP tracker, or so I think, lights me up; actually it's a Berkeley cop, thank God.

"I could take you to jail," he says, leaning in to sniff the interior for alcohol. "*What were you thinking?*"

"My girlfriend just dumped me."

It sounds silly when I said it. I wish I'd kept my mouth shut.

". . . Today's your birthday," he notes, studying my driver's license.

I stare at the traffic light in my rear-view mirror: green, yellow, red; green, yellow, red. . . .

"OK," he shrugs, returning my license and putting his notepad away. "I'm going to follow you home, every inch of the way. Do us both a favor and cool your jets."

I tool back up College to where it ends at

Bancroft, hang a left, then a right on Shattuck, left on University, right on Sacramento, left on Hearst, the Berkeley cruiser smack on my tail until I pull into my driveway.

I wave as he clicks off his interior light and does a U-turn up Hearst. He doesn't wave back.

Ashes

To diamonds to

DAUGHTERS OF MEMORY

"I'm a girl who takes risks."

Well, yes.

And yet, this beautiful Oriental girl (I picked her up at the Main Library) balks at visiting me in my third-floor room at the fleabag Berkeley Hotel.

Being one acquainted with the night, I don't blame her.

LIQUORS sign blurry in the rain
Lift out of order

SEA-CHANGE

Fifty-three years old, at the moment my mother looks eighty.

1954

Taped to my thermos
Inspirational sayings

I sit down on the bed and put my arm around her, but I have the feeling that she's oblivious to my presence: almost—this is the odd thing—*resentful*.

Then she speaks her last words:

"I have to go to the hospital."

—She seems to be talking to a fifth presence, someone or something in the room we (the doctor, my brother and I) can't see. I have the impression that she's waiting to get permission to leave for the hospital from whomever or whatever she'd just spoken to. Permission wasn't forthcoming, because suddenly she falls back on the bed, stiffening and emitting a faint moan. A thin gray film of spittle appears on her lips.

"Coronary!" the doctor exclaims and, roughly shoving me out of the way, jumps on top of my mother, pounding her chest repeatedly. Allan takes a step toward her, but I touch his shoulder and shake my head. Then I look at my mother for the last time, remembering the expression on her face as she falls backward, into the abyss.

The rest of that evening is a blur—I remember my

brother and I standing in the other bedroom with the light off, Allan lying on her bed, crying. And I recall walking the doctor down the front stairs of our home after the coroner showed up. At the foot of the stairs he shrugs and looks at me.

“Well, that’s the way the cookie crumbles.”

I have no reply. He didn’t mean to be flippant or unkind, merely fatalistic, and yet his choice of words was less than adroit. Maybe he regretted it, driving home that cold November night in Berkeley; maybe he wondered what had moved him to say such a thing to someone who’d just watched his mother die.

Fog

The sounds

An empty house makes

NOVEMBER 21, 1965

One rainy afternoon a few days after the funeral, I return to the house on Hearst to take a look around and gather up some family items.

(Allan, who'd been taken in by a friend's family, dropped by the house every day after school to tend to his dog Taffy until the family invited him to bring the dog up to their home in the Berkeley hills.)

The house is silent. I wander from the living room to the kitchen to my mother's room, pausing at the dresser to look at her jewelry: an imitation jade ring, a bead necklace, a purple brooch, and four sets of earrings.

Amethyst star

Kitchen odors of cabbage

Sitting on the bed I flip through my mother's little red address book, reading the Biblical quotes in the margins. Naturally they depress me, but I put the book in my pocket (it's the only one of my mother's possessions I still have).

Then I go into the bathroom and check the medicine cabinet.

Sensing a strong odor, I open the shower curtain and look in the bathtub where, unbeknownst to my brother, Taffy had pooped days ago.

I clean up the mess, run water in the tub, then return to my mother's room and sit down again on the

bed. Her Bible and copy of *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* lay on the bed stand. She was a Christian Scientist, but in the end the religion proved to be of no use to her (“I have to go to the hospital.”)

I knew very little of her childhood and adolescence. In high school she aspired to the theater; this always intrigued me because my mother was so taciturn and shy (I don’t believe that she had a single date, not one, after my father passed away). Still, I’ve known extremely shy people who gravitated to the stage, probably because they could submerge their fears in the alter ego of a dramatic role. One of her childhood friends in Mill Valley was Eve Arden, the actress who starred in TV’s *Our Miss Brooks* in the 1950s. And she once met and had dinner with Bette Davis in Hollywood.

Outtakes of a lost life: hidden from my brother and me.

In another country
leaves poems stars

As I put the *Science and Health* back on the bed stand, an old black and white photograph falls to the floor at my feet. The photo is of a pilot sitting in the cockpit of a U.S. Navy biplane, looking very serious and very young. On the back I read: To my darling Dot—6/17/31.

Dot was one of my mother Dorothy’s nicknames. I’ve never seen the photograph before, but I know

who the pilot was. A year or two before her death, my mother shocked me by revealing that the great love of her life wasn't my father. She was only eighteen or nineteen when the handsome pilot in the wrinkled photo proposed to her, and she accepted his ring. She told me a little about him. He'd grown up in orphanages, always dreaming of becoming an aviator and finally accomplishing his goal despite much difficulty and discouragement. He was tall, with the bluest eyes my mother ever saw (my father, too, was tall with blue eyes).

A month before the wedding he crashed his plane on the deck of the U.S.S. Langley, the first American pilot ever to die in an aircraft carrier mishap. My mother never confessed the depth of her passion to my father; maybe she never told him about the pilot at all. Instead, she'd hidden this photo in her *Science and Health* and kept it there through the years.

At first I feel jealous and resentful of this upstart rival my mother had tucked away in the nooks and crannies of her heart; I'd assumed, as children always do, that my father was the only man in her life.

Still, when I slip the photo back in the book that dark afternoon, the vicarious jealousy I feel on behalf of my father begins to dissolve into a strange, friendly pity for my mother and her lover—two fortuitous ghosts who are now, quite literally, parts of an eternal triangle.

Purple-threaded blouse
... Things she loved

UNTO THIS LAST

“You seemed so troubled and unhappy when you brought down your laundry last week,” my mother had written me at the Berkeley Hotel. “I wanted to know if you’d like to take a break and join your old mom for *The Magnificent Seven* on TV next Saturday night. There would be snacks, popcorn, hot cocoa. . .”

I debated this. For two months I’d kept to my fanatical twelve-hour-a-day homework regimen. Initially I decided to call her and say no; but something intervened, telling me to accept the invitation.

When I think of my mother in the last few years of her life, these lines of T.S. Eliot always run through my mind:

*I am moved by fancies that are curled
Around these images, and cling:
The notion of some infinitely gentle
Infinitely suffering thing—*

That Saturday night we did have good snacks, a good visit, a good evening watching Steve McQueen, Robert Vaughn, and James Coburn in *The Magnificent Seven*. Seventy-two hours later she was dead.

—Strongbox with a broken lock
sprig of larkspur

DESTINIES

We called him the Dark Angel of Wheeler Hall.

He was dressed to kill, and I'm not talking fashion.

. . . He wasn't a Hells Angel but he was regaled in leathers, earrings, black boots and chains which, needless to say, stuck out like a sore thumb in my English 46B class.

Slouching sullenly in his desk in the back row, he never said a word. Professor Bentley was afraid of him.

I did a lot of talking in that class. When I piped up, Bentley kept looking over my shoulder at the dark figure casting a darker shadow on the back wall.

Then, one warm afternoon of cherry blossoms and breezes off the Bay, Bentley ended class early, announcing that he didn't feel well. As my cohorts began to file out into the sunshine, I said something to the girl sitting to my left, whom I'd asked out a couple of weeks earlier only to be politely rebuffed.

When I turned back there he was, looming; chains dangling; leather creaking.

I knew this was going to happen. Why did I know this was going to happen?

We stared at each other for a second or two.

"I just wanted to tell you," he said in a surprisingly mellow voice, "I think you're going to be a great writer."

Then he was gone. We never saw him again.

Strange sunsets —rare offshore flow

BEFORE THE DELUGE

Bob Dylan is seriously hurt in a motorcycle crash in upstate New York.

Everybody on and off campus talks about it; some appear to be in mourning, even though Dylan doesn't die.

Three years earlier, in the aftermath of President Kennedy's assassination, reaction around the Berkeley campus is less emotional, less intense.

Positively
Telegraph Ave.

MARCIA

“Oh, Steve, you won’t even talk to me!” she says tearfully as we pass each other.

Spinning on a high heel and walking away, disappearing down the Bay side of Shattuck, a minute passes before I realize who she is—Marcia, the green-eyed girl next door from three years earlier whom I seduced, carrying on the affair off-and-on before moving uptown to the Berkeley Hotel.

She’s an inch or two taller, her silky ash-blonde hair up in a way I’d never seen: I simply didn’t recognize her.

And she went away thinking—still thinks (if she remembers me at all) that I’d snubbed her.

Certainly I could be that callous and callow at age twenty-two, so there was rough justice in the unhappy encounter: a bird of prey coming home to roost, as it were, in a different tree.

Is it my ego that regrets never having the opportunity to set her straight?

Or is it the memory of the feelings I once had for Marcia—feelings interred in my ghostly heart for half a century?

Desolate dreams fecund moon

THE EYES HAVE IT

“Please don’t kiss that way!” my roommate Brian barks at Donnie, who’d thrust her tongue halfway down my throat during rehearsals.

—He’s directing his annual “play,” starring friends, girlfriends, roommate Dave, and me, presented in the living room of our College Avenue apartment.

Donnie (given name Donna) is a friend of Dave’s Russian girlfriend Suzie. I met her the evening before as we and three or four other “actors” struggled with our lines and costumes in my bedroom.

Donnie teaches me two lessons: Women are more jealous of alcohol than they are of other women; and women who talk the talk never walk the walk.

In her apartment a week after performing the farrago, we drink vodka and tonics all evening, my three or four to her one. She hasn’t bothered to put the flowers I’d brought her in a vase, which should tell me something.

It’s eleven-thirty before I realize that nothing’s going to happen. Stupid with booze and indignation I spring to my feet and grab my jacket.

“WELL, YOU DON’T HAVE TO GO AWAY MAD!” Donnie yells as I fling open what I think is the front door.

Instead I step into her clothes closet, trip over a pair of high heels, and take half of her dress shields with me to the floor.

—Darkness of irises

THE DEATH THAT YOUNG MEN HOPE FOR

The wildest kids I ever knew, or knew of, belonged to my brother's class at Berkeley High School, 1963-66. Then as now, BHS had fraternities: Athenians, Corinthians, etc.

Three of Allan's fifteen or sixteen Athenian frat brothers—including the grandson of a past president of UC Berkeley—committed suicide; two were killed in Vietnam.

Ten minutes to live *I don't want to die*

CLAY

When I was young, like all kids I expected adults to walk the straight and narrow. Then, one by one, my idols crumbled: my grandmother's jolly grocer on the corner of Addison and Grant in Berkeley, who always sat me on his counter and sang a song in Italian, went to jail for tax evasion; the director of one of my foster homes, whom I'd begun to consider a second mother, was convicted of embezzlement; my grandmother herself played the ponies, financing her gambling habit by stealing from my step-grandfather.

Once upon a time these revelations were shattering but now I accept them, having learned in late middle age that forgiveness at a distance is a privilege, if not a duty.

Bathing
In its own muddy light
Midsummer moon

EPILOGUE

—At four this morning I wake up after yet another dream about my mom, circa autumn 1965.

In the dream a Siren-song:

Never mind Pascal's terrifying infinite. True existential dread descends when your mother gives up on you.

Fade to black.

Book II
Rain

Never telling how love veils,
Is veiled
By our silences:
Voices
Of Bridal Veil Falls

1.

Lazily
We invented the gods
Who work damned hard
To invent storm-clouds
Coming between us

2.

. . . Or between stars
Leaves
Autumn rains
Words of
The poem

3.

. . . And by *us*
I meant the gods and me
And you and me—
I mean goddesses make
Their own importance

The rain remembers
What I will not
—Winter afternoons

1.

In the middle of a rain-poem
I look out the window
Storm approaching!
I tear up the poem.

2.

I tear up
In spite of myself
Then too
It rained
—Death-day

3.

Ghost of a chance of rain 100%

For Christ's sake what is *It*
As in
It's raining
(Mr. Tolstoy
Christened death: *It*)

Dotting the I's of rain on sidewalks rain

1.

Songs of rain deaf ears of summer thunder

2.

The rain walks on stilts
Up and down the mountains.
On Swan's east shore it bends down,
Whispers a friendly reminder—
Steven, Keats sang of easeful death

1.

POTTERY SHARDS

So the Pueblos took to the trail—not a trail of tears; their inner and outer worlds were too dry for that!—which led to, what? The edge, I suppose. But still they had hope.

—The voices of shamans, chanting for rain in the dark: if not on the trail then at their destination, wherever that was.

But the Darkness followed them, caught up with them, and—

Not one postcard from the edge.

500 years later and 1500 miles from the desert these words cross my mind: *earth; air; fire; Chardonnay—*

And these:

Lift up your eyes unto the hills—

I do. And rain-clouds from last night's dream re-appear on the Mission ridge, murmuring:

Gods (the Lost Ones assuredly were apprentice gods) don't send postcards.

The clouds are accompanied by two Irish accents from down the lake.

Tis dark—

—Usually is at night.

Thirsty moon . . . *How have we offended?*

2.

STAR TREK

. . . Join me in a toast to the beauty of starlight?

This wouldn't have been a rhetorical question for the Pueblo Indians. After a point in a rainless season, they weren't interested in quenching parched esthetic sensibilities. Physical thirst and what would happen if the rains *never* came—that's what concerned them.

The rains did show up, but too late.

When the Hohokam and Anasazi left, I'll bet that at least one of them looked over his or her shoulder to see their ladders leaning against the cliff walls of Chaco Canyon. (They'd pull them up into their caves if enemies threatened.)

*Now the ladders remain, slowly crumbling in desert
suns, moons, and the beauty of starlight.*

Full moon

Empty

Big and Little Dippers

Desert monsoon
puma skull
full of rainwater

Carved
By the wings of ospreys—
Sculptures in the stone
Of Salish rainy skies

Shoshone

In the sound of the word
Distant thunder,
Slow drums
Of requiem

I hear the little sound of it

Raining in my heart—

The songs, Paul, the songs
Of the green fairy

[The green fairy: absinthe, the poet Paul Verlaine's poison of choice]

Grieving of rain did I say it or think it

As opposed to the woman
In the moon
The rain loves me back
Cold music, ah yes
—Cold comforter nonetheless

1.

Chardonnay moon
The glass half-empty
Half-empty

2.

Trapped in amber
Colored chardonnay
Rain-moon

Séance on a wet afternoon—
The child murdered
Buried deep in the woods
Protected from the cold
And the rain

[*Séance on a Wet Afternoon*: a novel about an unbalanced, childless middle-aged couple that kidnaps, then murders, a little girl. Although she's an accomplice the medium-wife tells the husband to prepare the grave carefully, not simply to hide the evidence, but to keep the child "safe and warm."]

Shortness of breath—
Somehow, now, I can bear
To think of you
Under the earth
In the rain

Taking the airs
Of paradise
Breathlessness

We know there's something of surrender
In the sound of rainfall—
Something in our bodies
Letting go
Of the lost music

Circling the unlit candle
A devil's moth
—Circles
And yet the same circle
I think of desire

Two persons on the brink
Of be-
Coming one
Someone (I don't remember who)
Blinked and now (the rain stops)
We are two.

Book III
Heart Murmurs

—WHAT KIND?

Point—

We hate to admit that far from being an escape, day-dreaming is a form of exile.

Play the game of *What if*, and bingo! You're on the outside looking in: poor Ovid exiled amid the barbarians, dreaming of Rome; beard pointed south, Dante dreaming of Florence.

Taunting the poet of the Divine Comedy, the River Arno runs clear for once! And Beatrice, who married a butcher, never gets old.

Is it—is day-dreaming—in our DNA?

Not to say that day-dreams don't come true; it's just that they represent a desire to confront, even embrace, our secret desire for exile.

Why did Eve eat the apple? Spin in circles until you fall down: then repeat after me:

Hello? —Because she was bored.

Counterpoint—

The still waters of our longing for Paradise—the joy it provided and the grief of losing it—run shallow.

God help us, our longing for other things runs deeper.

Closer to home—I'm thinking of Swan Lake village—I enjoy the sound of Bond Creek flowing 100 feet east of the bar.

It's syncopated to Phil's bar-talk of his wife of twenty years who recently left him.

She had the perfect gig, he tells me, wiping the bar.

Two wonderful kids, a good husband—I think I can say that—and a paradise to live in. I mean, how could Swan Lake be more beautiful?

Coda—

Apprehend means two things: To capture, and to “grasp,” i.e. understand; *cf.* its kissing cousin, *Comprehend*.

It’s a word I don’t like to use when speaking of beauty.

Try apprehending beauty in words, thoughts and feelings; and *poof!* The thing of beauty disappears and *you* disappear.

When we fall in love with beauty, tears are often conjured but never laughter. Why?

(I don’t mean tears of joy. I mean something more profound.)

There’s a nether-region somewhere (in the cortex?) beyond tears and laughter.

In other words, tears are a substitute for something.

We get a feeling for what this something is by watching Greek tragedy which rinses out the eyes, but not with tears.

Oedipus—

I am the child of Luck!

ANOTHER SUNNY DAY AT CHARLTON CEMETERY

Metaphor, too, is a form of exile.

We go from eyes (the tenor) to limpid pools (the vehicle) because there's another truth we don't care to face: namely the possibility that we are metaphors and the images of imagination are real.

In the mirror another mirror

Let's take a step back and catch our breath.

. . . So what's the tenor to *our* vehicle?

—Dreams, naturally! Not day-dreams: “real” dreams, performing a dance macabre for the insomniac moon.

What if—

What if the moment of death is a vehicle spawned (a salmon up the river!) by the tenor of birth?

Or is it the reverse? I forget, not being dead yet.

—the moon a tragic lantern

ALL LANGUAGE I SHOULD PASS—

Are there metaphors in Purgatory? In Hell?—
Without judgment, no forgiveness!

But, as I've written before: in Hell, no judgment
therefore no forgiveness.

Now—just now—I think I have an answer to the
question.

In Hell *everything* is a vehicle: eyes, limpid pools,
day-dreams and night-dreams.

*And the girl with a lazy eye you meet at the bar; in
Sartre's No Exit, the long blue hill to heaven no one
bothers to climb; in Spain, the last #11 Palo bus from
Malaga at two a.m.; the owl-clock you buy for no good
reason at an antique store—*

(Yes, there are clocks in Hell—prompting (forgive
me!) another question:

*Which would you prefer in the Infernal Regions—
clocks or clocks without hands?)*

One exception to the rule of metaphor:

In hell, the *words* are real: tenors coming back to
haunt you.

I mean loving words you never uttered.

—Because in Hell, when it comes to words, the
territory is not the map.

Ask not to know for whom—

IN THE VINEYARD

A few nights ago I dreamt of quenching candles—
as if their flames were dying of thirst.

If reincarnated I want to come back as a moth—a
lace-wing. Oh yes, vanity is alive and well in the next
life!

Don't let the infinitesimal life-span fool you.

Moths have no sense of time. They flutter
drunkenly in and out of eternal Gardens of
sunflowers.

Sunflowers turning—for consolation?—to the
yellow candle in the sky.

Or—

A mayfly of course!

PAUSE TO BREATHE

Moldy oldies on Sirius radio—songs from the fifties and sixties—make me suffer all over again the poison-tipped arrows of young love.

—Eros.

But I like it!

Why in the world?

General Patton, gazing out on the smoking, twisted aftermath of a major battle:

I love it. God help me, I do love it so.

—*Other voices, other rooms*

SIBILANTS

Fluent moonlight—

A language beyond language: speaking to ocotillo,
saguaro, mesquites dripping with mistletoe—even to
desert mallow curled up for the night.

Two-thirty a.m.: I pad to the bedroom window.

The wind talks back to the moon. The moon will
brook no interruption.

Nothing if not clever, the wind summons a cloud:
many clouds, a Spartan army of clouds, marching
from the west.

—Torrents of shadows.

Meanwhile the moon drowns in a bottle of
Chardonnay.

Four a.m.; time to resume my own dialogue with
the other side of the pillow.

The moon half in the bag

—*I can't take you anywhere*

PLAIN SONG II

In the *Journals* of Davy Crockett, there's a wonderful passage about the frontiersman's close encounter with a bee-hunter.

Entering a Tennessee woods, Crockett hears distant singing. Approaching and lowering his flintlock, he spots a clearing fifty feet away. There, sitting on a log, his bee-net next to him, is a handsome young man belting out tune after tune (I wish I knew what they were!).

Crockett is charmed; who wouldn't be? In that era, sans electronic technology, folks made their own entertainment. So here he is, this boy barely out of his teens, taking a break and serenading owls, hawks, bluebirds: anything taking the time to listen.

During a lull in the concert, Crockett hears another sound: the distant hum of a bee-hive!

The hum lends an intimate harmony to the singing.

Reading Crockett's passage, I can't help but think of cranky old Heraclitus, philosopher of Ephesus, who loved the harmony of opposites:

Into the same river we step and do not step.

In strife there is justice.

God: day / night, winter / summer, fullness / hunger

—Let me add: hunter and hunted.

Breathing

Of the Apocalypse

F BUS FROM BERKELEY

Naturally her name reminds me of Malcolm Lowry's haunting refrain *Dolor, Dolente* (in the novel *Under the Volcano*).

At lunchtime Dolores and I stop by a Greek place for sandwiches and walk up to Union Square.

The weather—this is summer, '66—is perfect most days. Sitting on the grass, eating the Greek sandwiches and fending off greedy pigeons, we talk about everything under the San Francisco sun, including my Giants—destined to lose yet another pennant race—and the recent mass killings in Texas and Chicago: first in a series. . .

Thin—a little too thin for my jaded palate—but very pretty, Dolores has a crush on me. Once, impulsively, she reaches out and touches my hair.

"It sparkles in the sunlight," she murmurs shyly, turning to watch a mime performing on the impromptu Union Square stage.

Spotting Dolores touch my hair he smiles, nods, and touches his heart.

Like him, I say nothing.

Around that time I fall for a beautiful model who works at Macy's, four blocks from where Dolores and I sit. Tall, leggy, blonde, she holds my hand as we walk to work from the bus station (Dolores lives in the City, the blonde and I across the Bay).

When I ask this other girl out, she drops a bomb: She's Mormon and can't date outside her religion.

So there we are, Dolores and I: balanced by my lack of passion for her and the model's lack of passion for me.

The summer of our discontent, made inglorious winter by—

The scales of desire!

—One more time, folks

Dolor, Dolente—

SONGS OF THE VINEYARD

Let me revisit the two meanings of *dear*: well-loved
and costly.

Cantilever of souls! One single word—

No matter. Number, Pythagoras believed, allows
us to gate-crash the mind of God.

I see him standing on the shore of Samos:
fascinated as the wall of blue sky and the line of ocean
intersect each other—at a right angle!

As for death's dear and delicate arithmetic—

1 (myself) + X (so many inamoratas) = O.

Undo the math, dear friend.

In the middle of the journey of our life I entered—

Book IV
Whispers and cries

NOCTURNE

The trees have gone insane.

They shake their heads back and forth so violently
I'm afraid they'll snap their trunks.

The wind only takes shape from what resists it.

Yes, I wrote that in a contrary mood when the
cosmos itself seemed to have gone crazy: a Dissonance
of comet vs. comet, star vs. star, galaxy vs. galaxy.

Twelve-tone music of the spheres!

*—This just in! Forget glass: the stars are
actually tuning forks*

CANNED LAUGHTER

I turn off the 55" TV in my mind and stare out to sea.

Hunger pangs come and go, growling of Michelangelo.

What's happening to me?

Wavelets roll in, clutching orchids of foam—

—Courtesy of that old suitor Death, out there on the horizon.

On the real TV, imaginary food: the veggies of our discontent—

Beets, red celery, okra (Oprah)—

Greeting the dawn

Test patterns

THE TWO VALLEYS

Yes, the moon is a pun.

I'm haunted by that dull silver coin from last night's dream, the one I kept tossing: *Heads I lose, tails I lose.*

It turns out money does grow on trees.

(Garcia Lorca: *The moon/is tossing money/down through the black air.*)

A Santa Clara Valley orchard of puns; flowering only on nights when shadows sing lullabies to the wind.

Oops, almost forgot—

Every tree in these orchards was cut down to make room for Silicon Valley billionaires flipping two-headed coins all day long.

See what I mean about money growing on trees?

Asleep beneath the freeway
 Ghost of a kid
 With a BB gun

TRIP TO THE COAST

Strange how all our beliefs disappear.

No kidding!

Here we go again, folks, singing the blues,
remembering Matthew Arnold's ominous waves
licking the shores of Dover.

—Cats lapping up the spilt milk of faith.

Whoa! —Here comes a fog bank calling on you to
invest, not your money, but your desire for . . . the
redemption of sleep.

—At 100% interest.

Blessed sleep which—think about it!—is pretty
much the same whether you happen to be six or
ninety-six.

—Precursor to the Big Sleep. Now *there's*
something to believe in.

Low tide on time

From the next dune

What did you expect

PLACE VENDÔME

Baudelaire's hell flowers—

And the gorgeous Jeanne Duval (was she really gorgeous? Opinions differ), B.'s Black Venus.

—Bless her heartlessness.

They shared some rough and tumble times. But she also gave B. some great poems.

He hung in there, twisting in the wind, laughing at Jeanne's infidelities like Troilus from the Seventh Sphere.

Once upon an October afternoon I laid a chrysanthemum on Baudelaire's grave.

Burnt-orange leaves were falling. *Contra* B.'s hell flowers, there wasn't a smell of sulfur.

When I left Montparnasse cemetery it was raining. From a bistro I heard snippets of a song by the American rock group Los Bravos:

Black is black, I want my Baby back—

—banking westward

A Boeing 777

CONSTELLATIONS—1951

The stars = origami unfolding in a cut-glass bowl.
There's a starry swan—cygnet, I mean—; a goose;
a mourning dove—

One summer night the stars whirled above me as I
spun like a top (eight years old, I'd crawled out my
bedroom window and met a friend).

Seeing the sky turn—now it seemed like a wagon
wheel—I was the hub: center of the universe!

Then my friend started spinning. He, too, became
center of the universe.

—A universe with two centers? Three, four, five—
Impossible!

Of course we never questioned the miracle of the
two centers.

Instead we kept spinning until we both got dizzy
and fell down.

—Shooting star
now you don't see it now—

APPLE JAM

Booted out of the Garden, I'm consoled by the pale purples of foxglove blossoms.

We'll miss you, the flowers murmur as a breeze springs up.

I'll miss them too—except that I'm on a mission to recapture the unholy grail of my youthful loves.

Still digesting the apple, where did Eve think she was headed?

Speaking of consolation, I once fell in love with Eve in Michelangelo's *The Expulsion from the Garden*.

She's . . . *Dumpy* is being charitable. Shamefully, this comforted me because unattractive females were never a threat to my ego.

If they wouldn't listen to reason, like a coward I could always tell myself:

Oh, well, she wasn't that hot. . .

Whatever happened to tender feelings for women?

From the bare ruined choirs of Purgatory, faint voices:

Tenderness, too, is dying on the vine in the Garden.

Navel of the earth naturally an outie

RIP-TIDE

Sleepless nights—

When I first heard the phrase as a little boy, it puzzled me.

How could nights be sleepless? A person might be sleepless—but the *night*?

How could that happen? Darkness tucked in by the moon and stars, waiting for a lullaby?

So I concluded that the night was a living thing, not simply a habitat of other living things.

Another question: Do ghosts count as living things? Goblins (I'm not sure I knew what a goblin was); banshees (ditto); witches? I never believed in witches.

Before I drifted off to sleep, I imagined I heard the night's heartbeat, synchronized to my pulse and the pulse of the ocean.

Or were the heartbeats of night and of the ocean one heartbeat?

Time

Telling

Me

LOST AND—

All those doomed kisses!
Does the mind of God have room for them?
Along with everything else He invented kisses—
but neglected to take out a patent.

Why?

*On Coronado Island we spent warm summer
evenings together, which is to say apart.*

Let's not get too drippy here.

*—What does the poet say? The lips are never so far
apart as when you kiss.*

And the poems, God damn it, the poems—

*Memo to God: If you would, Big Guy, please dismiss
the above as patently absurd.*

Yogi Berra—

*When you come to a fork in the road
Take it*

LET'S GET REAL

*Beauty is momentarily in the mind,
The fitful tracing of a portal,
But in the flesh it is immortal.*

—Wallace Stevens

We speak of the old as being beautiful “in their own way.” Quadruple shame! —Might as well say, “Some of my best friends are old folks.”

They are beautiful but we don't believe it. We're too busy turning our eyes to the dazzling quality of the skin of a young Liz Taylor. And her double eyelashes: a genetic mutation that made her even lovelier.

—Or the olive skin of my Greek girlfriend Rosy-Fingered Dawn, whom I've failed to immortalize because she never existed.

Therefore the eye starves. —And starves. And, having starved, achieves immortality.

Rumbles of thunder
Grandpa, it sounds like
Hunger pangs

SWEETNESS AND LIGHT

Wish I could show you a publicity still of Anne Francis; but you can check her out on *Wikipedia*.

What entranced me about Anne was the beauty mark near her lower lip. Everyone on and off the silver screen said it enhanced her beauty, which it certainly did.

Why? It was a flaw! How could that be?

(Bulletin: Perfection—the dream of perfection—is the perfect crime.) Don't tell this to restaurateurs who boast that their rib-eyes are “grilled to perfection”; or the producers of the film *The Perfect Storm*; or—

Re-wind to Anne Francis.

Maybe she was embarrassed by the beauty mark. Was it, for her, a kind of feminine mark of Cain? She's left us now, so we'll never know.

I do know that when Tim, twelfth-grade chum and “silver-tongued debater,” confessed to me his crush on Anne Francis, he began to stutter.

—Trippingly on the tongue

NO ROOM AT THE SHELTER

1.

Do you folks out there know how agonizing it is to be alone?

I do. And I don't. Is anyone listening? No loneliness is less self-aware than the loneliness of the poor listener.

That's OK. I tune out all the time, especially when I talk to myself—trying not to interrupt.

And—let's not forget—it's no fun being the center of the universe unless there's someone there to look on.

2.

What of the loneliness (I think he would've said *aloneness*) of the addled guy who stops me on the street.

"I hold on to my dignity," he says out of the blue, and repeats it. "You see, this is a test. If I pass, nothing happens. If I fail, I'm doomed. Hey, nobody promised me a rose garden!"

He pauses, watching kids play in a nearby fountain.

When I offer him money he politely refuses.

Deserted downtown
—Waiting for the green light

OVERTURE I

Hemingway writes about the Presentation of the Bill: the moment of death or, worse, when terminal illness sets in.

So, *to be or not to be* isn't the question.

The question is: how big a tip do you intend to leave the Waiter?

Today's desert dawn: rouged lavender and pink like a courtesan.

Or is the sun *setting*?

Are my times and directions that screwed up?

Am I still caught—a wolf in a trap—in last night's dream of dying?

Hint: If you wish to be immortal, begin writing down all your theories about what death is like.

You'll be wrong every time: which means, if you keep guessing indefinitely, the real thing will never happen!

(While I think of it, why is Death always a he? To my former romantic selves, the ones who took it on the chin, she makes better sense.)

From the ghost of Miguel de Unamuno:

Love is the sole medicine against death, for love is death's brother.

Did I get it backward? Who cares? The vaccine is made from the virus!

Curves of the moon of my nurse

ROSARY BEADS

Everyone says be careful what you pray for.

How about: *Be careful what you don't pray for?*

Robert Frost defined prayer as: *Please, Lord, pay attention to me!*

Question of the day:

If you live smack dab on the Equator, do your prayers go “up,” or “down”?

Astride the horse latitudes
riding into the sunrise

DEENA

*If only I could nudge you from this sleep—
I, with no rights in this matter,
—Neither father nor lover.*

—Theodore Roethke

She would've been a beautiful woman.

Murdered just shy of her seventeenth birthday, she hadn't quite grown into her good looks; but you knew.

Her name was Deena Bonn. After her death, a scholarship fund was set up at the high school where she'd been a junior. I won the Deena Bonn Award in 1961, enabling me to enroll at UC Berkeley that fall.

—First link in the chain connecting us.

The murderer was a Stanford tennis star named Thomas Wallace Showalter III, a spoiled rich kid from the lower Midwest. Reptilian-eyed, oddly handsome nonetheless, he'd dated her once; but now—the day she died—she had a boyfriend.

Jealousy wasn't the motive.

"I don't know why I did it," Thomas told the Palo Alto police, adding "Maybe it was a sex thing." He thought of raping her after the fact, but changed his mind.

An hour earlier he parked his convertible in front of the station, strolled through the door and casually informed the booking sergeant that he'd shot a young girl in the head.

"She's out there in the car."

California's 1958 population being much smaller than today's, the murder rate was smaller too; so a case like this was big news, even down in LA, where the *Times* ran a front page story about Deena and Thomas entitled, *An Urge to Kill*.

My mother took Deena's death hard, because the bubbly high school girl grabbed an occasional ride with her to and from school (Mom was the library's textbook clerk). *Sweetest girl you'd ever want to know*, she told me.

—*Second link in the chain.*

. . . When I went up to Berkeley I checked the Student Union bulletin board for anyone who needed a roommate. I called one up, met him at a rental at 2638 Parker Street, and we moved in. Jay was a junior physics major.

One night over hamburgers I happened to tell him the story of Deena Bonn, and how without the scholarship I wouldn't be here. When I mentioned the killer's name he dropped his sandwich.

—Thomas Wallace Showalter the *Third?*

"How did you know?"

"He—we grew up next door to each other in St. Louis! Tommy was my best friend."

—*Third link in the chain.*

Many years later I dreamt of Deena.

She's walking toward me down a long, grassy hill. The grass (*lovely uncut hair of graves*, Walt Whitman called it) is the golden color of her hair. A breeze springs up, rippling the grass like light on satin.

When we meet I take a small box from my pocket and give it to her.

“I want you to have this.” She opens the box and takes out a jade bracelet.

We gaze at each other for a long time. The wind is rising.

“Oh!” she exclaims as she puts the bracelet on her wrist. “There are three links missing.”

—Cloud-whispers

REPRISE

No: ghosts exist, I tell you!

If you look closely, you can pick them out in a crowd.

Even though downtown is bereft of traffic on Sundays, they're the ones waiting patiently for red lights to change. No jay-walking for them!

Bereft! —A favorite word in the lexicon of ghosts.

Beautiful word, actually— if you don't look too closely.

They are, as I say, patient, waiting for the moon to rise and shine.

As we do, they feel that the moon is beautiful— with or without a schoolgirl's complexion.

Deena—

—Yes: cloud-whispers

SUPERNOVA

*It's a strange courage you give me, ancient star;
Shine alone in the sunrise toward which you
lend no part!*

—William Carlos Williams

A bird—red-tailed hawk?—just flew over the house.

Not an omen: omens are hard to come by these days.

I've heard that hawks snatch rabbits up in their claws; climb to a hundred feet or so; drop them, watching them fall; then retrieve the furry bodies for Sunday brunch.

—Apocryphal? Don't know. Here I am in the desert east of Tucson, surrounded by flora and fauna with two missions in life: a) to survive and b) to mess up my world.

Me being me, I fall head over heels for their beauty anyway.

Beauty, writes a poet whose name (unlike the rabbit the hawk) escapes me, *who has seen beauty?*

Not I, says brother puma. *Not I*, says sister prickly pear. *Not I*, says uncle owl, sharpening his claws.

When the sun goes down, they form a chorus:

Our task is to show you fear in a handful of Sonora sand; and, therefore, to show you beauty.

Don't give up the day job.

I walk up the ravine
Desert wind:
There goes the neighborhood

OVERTURE II

This morning's sky: another shameless harlot
rouged in bright reds.

Memo to Ms. Dawn:

*Don't think I haven't seen you luring the computer
geeks—excuse me, farm boys— from under the gas
lamps!*

Gentlemen, we have met the harlot, and she is us.

Phantom kisses

CRUISING TO MY 70TH

1.

A grass fire south of here turns twilight the color of the single-malt Scotch I downed for happy hour.

. . . I love the other meaning of *sentence*—term of punishment.

Here I am, punishing and being punished by the sentence you're reading, which threatens to become a paragraph, then a page, then—

Turns out I'm behind bars "for all day," as lifers at Arizona State Prison say.

Nonetheless, as the moon peeks over the smoky plateau, I have a masochistic urge to diagram sentences.

—Nouns, verbs, and adjectives of the years of our lives.

2.

Where did our love go?

—A song on Sirius by the Supremes, circa 1964.

I turned 21 that year—a very callow 21. Ask Marcia, the willowy girl next door.

My task here is to share—excuse me, *shore*—my sentence fragments against the runes of my past.

(Yep, I said runes.)

—I'm not very good at it.

Nouns and verbs keep knocking on the door,

delivered by my ninth-grade English teacher Mrs. Henderson in a FedEx uniform.

And complete sentences—complex, naturally.

Don't you have a sense of humor?

Can't you take this calmly?

All the words they use

For poetry are meaningless

[Tag-line by Jack Spicer]

SPACESHIP EARTH

I find it terrifying now that I wasn't terrified then.

—Homeless in Tucson, age 23, with no family except my teen-aged brother doing his thing 1000 miles away on the mean streets of Berkeley.

I lived from hand to mouth, tapping into the desert drug scene which, in 1967, was more rampant than Berkeley's.

Spinning in place, riding a dust devil to nowhere, I did have one thing going: a college degree from Cal.

I'd been writing poetry for five years—all garbage, but with enough "felicitous" phrases to convince me to keep on trucking.

Here's the strange part.

Drunk or high or both, wandering nighttime alleys with a buddy who eventually hanged himself, I felt oddly—*secure* is the best word I can think of.

That's being 23 years old for you.

—*So few drink at my fountain*

[Tag-line by Ezra Pound]

RICHARDSON BAY

Forlorn!

—Rhyming with *foghorn* in countless bad poems.

I prefer Foghorn Leghorn, the loquacious Loony-Tunes rooster.

Seriously, folks, the word entered my head when Charlie, my other twin grandson, lost “Bear,” his constant companion.

“Bear, Bear,” he called, wandering like a lost soul from room to room searching for the teddy.

Finally Mum found it and all was well.

When Charlie outgrows Bear, the little guy (Bear, not Charlie) will be stuffed in a box and put in a closet until spring cleaning thirty years from now.

But I digress (I almost said *regress!* Well?).

Three-year-olds dream, so I wonder if Charlie dreams about Bear.

Does Bear come alive and talk? Will he—
forlornly—tell Charlie:

*Bubba, pretty soon I'll be kicked out of the den like a
real bear. Next stop: the hall closet—*

*I'll never let that happen, Charlie shakes his head.
Not in a million years.*

Robert cry, wake me up

MAYFLY

—First light of a desert Saturday.

It literally dawns on me that the difference between me and my former self, the kid in Berkeley, is one of kind not degree.

Ditto all my former “selves”—

Until a few hours ago, I’d always thought of my former identities as buddings of the present-day Steven Carter.

But no: Turns out I’m my own family tree. Perched on its branches are boys and young men of different ages; all gazing in different directions.

If there is an afterlife, I suspect that we’ll have no memory of our time on earth. So much for reincarnation!

Except for one thing—

—In M. Yukio’s Japanese tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility* (which I taught in the university), the theme is reincarnation.

Kiyo, protagonist of the first volume *Spring Snow*, dies at 20 and, in succeeding installments, is reincarnated: first as a radical revolutionary; then as a beautiful lesbian; finally as an evil punk named Toru who, in a botched suicide attempt, blinds himself.

None of the reincarnations is aware of the others.

Honda, Kiyo’s loyal friend, appears in all four volumes. Ill, discouraged and alone, in the last scene of the last novel (*Decay of the Angel*), he makes a pilgrimage to the temple where Kiyo’s lover of long

ago serves as abbess.

Trying to make sense of it all, Honda mentions Kiyō, whose death prompted her to enter the convent long ago.

Like Honda she's now in her eighties.

She pauses for what seems an eternity.

"Kiyō?" she asks finally, looking up. "Who might he have been?"

Is this holy woman senile? No—her mind and memory are as sharp as ever. Lying? No, she's not one to lie.

Honda is stunned, then bewildered, then angry.

She's adamant, making it clear that, for her, there never was a Kiyō.

. . . As she gazes at him kindly, Honda begins to think aloud.

"But if there was no Kiyō—"

At once the garden where they sit is flooded with sunlight.

—"Perhaps, then, there has been no I."

Paper doors

Impenetrable

DOWN TO EARTH

I know what follows is true because I don't believe a word of it.

Desert winds compose a mazurka of trees and shadows, lyrics by Chopin—who never wrote a lyric in his life.

Words, he would've said, get in the way.

At some point the poet must lose faith in words. And come to the realization that his words and his feelings don't belong to him.

Ask Keats. Ask Matthew Arnold. Ask Jack Spicer.

Ask a Roman professor of literature, cat-napping as Keats spat pieces of lung across his hotel room atop the Spanish Steps.

On Sirius radio:

*God only knows what I'd be without you. If
you should ever leave me, life would still go
on, believe me; the world would show
nothing to me; so what good would living do
me—*

—Banal, eh? But that's it. That's all you get, Baby. Seriously, the real question is, do the gods believe in us?

Glenn Yarborough on Sirius:

Baby, the rain must fall.

That's what he thinks.

God's in His heaven

—*His* heaven

EROS RIGHT ON TARGET

Always felt like I was on the outside looking in.

Looking in on Heloise and Abelard, that is: the star-crossed French lovers of the 12th century.

All I can do is mull over Abelard's *I must understand that I may believe*. As you may imagine, this got him into heap big trouble with Holy Mother Church.

But Heloise! What a woman!

In love with Abelard, sex, and—ultimately—religion (she went into a convent, becoming a superior Mother Superior).

Dearest, she'd written, *I am God's whore, and yours*.

She wasn't a whore and she knew it.

As for Abelard, he paid—not the supreme price, but close. Castrated by friends of Heloise's guardian-uncle, he too exchanged sexual embraces for the embrace of Mother Church.

The most profound thinker of his day, a great teacher, Abelard was also a rock star!

Heloise said that it was his composing and singing, not his dialectics, which seduced her.

In the end, when they reunited as friends, they completed a holy triad of love: sex (wild, experimental); sophisticated intellectual back-and-forth; and passion which flirted with spirituality: what the Greeks called *agape*.

Early on they had a son, named Astrolabe. That's like naming a contemporary kid "Telescope."

Anyway, Heloise and Abelard were in the back of my mind when I discovered I was an unholy trinity unto myself!

I could never be friends with the opposite sex. I blanched when, in giving me my walking papers, they'd say: *We can always be friends.*

If we were sex partners and if the affair lasted long enough, love morphed into Plato's beggar knocking on the door.

Knocking until—rebuffed time and again—he goes away.

Bull's-eye

THREE CUTTINGS OF HAY

They called it the funny farm.

Half-barren, gumbo-patches showing through the wheat-stubble, it was a sucker's dream.

And a sucker bought it. And made it work!

Most ranchers in eastern Montana—the funny farm is located midway between the Crow Indian reservation and Hadley—said it couldn't happen.

Rains helped. Winter snow helped. Prayer—

That's where imagination kicks in.

My fancy is that the owners prayed to the *Greek* gods. Why not? How do we know the gods don't exist unless we pray to them—or, at least, invite them over for happy (funny) hour?

Today members of the Crow Tribe stand beside their junky cars off Highway 75, checking out the lush fields of the funny farm.

Silent; far-gazing; expressionless—

A spirit is in this place

OPUS 43

“We can hardly be joyful at the prospect before us.”

We = Western civilization.

That’s Kenneth Clark—Lord Clark—wrapping up his TV series *Civilization*.

He spoke these words in 1968.

Now, fifty years on, we can only say that things are much worse. Well, not everything. The Earth Movement has made great strides, as has civil rights in Africa and America (and, by the way, countries like New Zealand, which as a nation has advanced the cause of native populations significantly.)

But we all know the bad news.

Can you say nuclear proliferation? How about Global Warming?

—*A dream:*

My toddler-grandson Robert (twin Charlie doesn’t make an appearance, for some reason) and I are talking about the shapelessness of things to come. Robert appears to be in his late teens.

Tell me about the future, Grandpa.

Oh, God.

When they, the twins, grow up one third of the world will be Muslim—the vast percentage, of course, being good folks. But it also means more unrest in the Middle East; more terrorism exported to the U.S.; more military involvement half-way around the world; more eroding of the U.S. Constitution—the

terrorists' goal all along.

I refer anyone interested in the environment thirty-five years down the road to Jared Diamond's book *Collapse*.

Diamond reminds us that the West, including the postage stamp of earth where the twins live, will be close to running out of water during their lifetime.

—Which brings us back to Grandpa struggling to decide what to tell little Robert.

Perspective always helps—a harsh taste of the distant past, when European people lived in mud huts, scared to death of barbarians astride the north wind, hair limed straight up to make them look taller.

. . . Well, I wouldn't wish my childhood on anyone, but I would share with Robert a "letter" I wrote to my father who died a quarter century before Michael, Robert's dad, was born:

Then there was the day Lynette, a university colleague, who'd proofread my memoir Yes and No, burst into tears, saying, "I feel so sorry for you."

I was surprised by her tears, not only because I'm certainly far down on the totem pole of childhood suffering, but because, in spite of myself, and not to get drippy about it, I do feel grateful, grateful to have lived, grateful for everything, yes; even that morning sixty-one years ago when you wouldn't wake up.

—Still asleep (remember, this is a dream), I'm "awakened" by a full moon whispering lyrics to a little night music:

*Innocence is important
It has meaning—*

Look
It can give us
Hope against the very winds that we batter
against it.

And so—once again—here's to Robert and
Charlie.

And to every crop of newborns—breathing the
universe!

Maternity room wall
—*That clock is fast*

[The poem *Innocence is important* is by Jack Spicer]

INVISIBLE WAVES

Rustlings:

Dry yellow ginkgo leaves; a temple cat looking for mice in the bushes, also dry; a silken eloquence of kimonos whispering behind paper doors; murmurs of rivers flowing into the Sea of Japan.

A Western philosopher speaks of the God above God. Here, in Sendai-Fukushima, when the wind dies down we may speak (well, not speak) of the Silence above silence.

Bashō's star

Always

Always northward

THREE TWENTY-TWO A.M.

—*The dream that I left dangling last night:*

I'm wandering the golden streets of a Mexican town, enjoying being in what passes for the thick of it—when I notice the forbidden splendors of snow-capped peaks glittering in the sun.

Which evokes longing for the playing fields of Eden, then evokes Malcolm Lowry.

Snakes are looking for me.

Now I'm in an alley, looking for pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

I find one, then head to another alley, finding two more; then to a third, stuffing three in my pocket; and so forth.

When fitted together they make a self-portrait of an imperfect stranger.

Snow on the mountains begins to melt; jagged peaks of green glass offer themselves (promiscuously) to a cloudless sky.

—*The dream that left me dangling last night:*

Running over with pity
a beggar's empty cup

V OF CANADIAN GEESE GONE SOUTH

Since we parted, I've walked the streets of hell.

Strange; I never saw you there.

. . . Homer knew the secret: Better to reign in hell
than serve in heaven. Hold it: wasn't that Milton's
Satan? Hold it: shouldn't it be *better to serve in hell* and
reign in heaven? Or *rain in hell*? Or *swelter in heaven*?

Or—

This morning's thunderheads have disappeared.

For some reason I think of the toddler who
drowned in Swan Lake years ago, five miles south of
here.

Better to frolic in heaven—

A mother's cries a raven's cry

