

Dear Nadja

The Relentless Gaze

Every story I tell is a song
to the end of stories.

A man I know by exchange of empathy,
a temptation to nothingness, stopped by
to tell me he can no longer imagine any desire
for anything, a word for things to do.

He disclaims suicide.
Even his curiosity is shaken down.

When I came back with the coffee,
he was gone.

After all these years,
in occasions of conversation,
I don't know his name, Tom
or John, a common name.

He's too frightened
to be a poet, he said.

But there is no fear in the man,
only courage without eyelids,
only strength without dreams.

San Francisco, Friday, January 15, 1982

Dear Nadja,

You know what a family can do to prompt our lives to aberration.
And you know it may have nothing to do with family. I've decided, since
you are locked into a silence, I would write you every day and open up my
own silences.

I know there's no definite day for you to be released, so I imagine there's plenty of time for me. I'll be 40 in a month. I've had a few flashes of what that means to me. As for what frightens me, I'll try to be calm about it. Maybe it's too soon after your own 40th, for you to have any wisdom to impart, and maybe it's all a red herring.

I depend on you for encouragement in this. If you open and read my letters, I'll be encouraged. You are always strong in my mind. Maybe too strong for all this we call the real world. It's such a weak sister (pardon the joke) compared to the world I know you know. My admiration for your spirit will never diminish.

A friend of mine, Bruce, just came by my table, in this coffee house called The Owl and the Monkey, and said, "You looked like a woman, for a minute there." Robin chimed in, "It's your hair." Then Phil said, "You look like a faggot." I said, "No, it's what I'm doing." Writing to you, thinking of you. Nadja, you have always meant "woman" to me, so much more than Mother, as she likes to call herself, who always seemed neutral, in some awful, majestic way.

You must be the woman she could never let out. Speaking of let out, I hope they don't let you out too soon. Another joke. I believe you are where you are, because you chose to be there, and I believe you will be somewhere else when you decide to be somewhere else.

If any poems come up while I'm writing, and if they're any good, I'll copy them out for you. I remember what Hawthorne said, "What prisoners we are of all that we take to be most natural."

I'm grateful you've gotten yourself arrested, so to speak. I'm greedy for this strange opportunity.

All my love, Steve

SAT/JAN 16

Dear Nadja,

So much is happening so fast, just when I've begun to think of silences. Silence opens up the world around me. My own noise either competes with or drowns out the rest. I'm leaving out communication, but silence encourages it, so I'm not leaving it out at all.

I'm in the cafe I mentioned yesterday. I've been coming to this cafe/ coffee house for over five years. It's on Ninth Avenue, in a neighborhood called the Inner Sunset, just off Golden Gate Park. I do most of my writing here. Writing to you has brought you closer to me. I read that Kafka wrote to his sister, and his letters to her were more lively and more loving than he allowed himself in real life or in his books.

I believe in letters. IN SCRIPTO VERITAS. Kafka was a tormented man, and his letters were expressions of his true feelings, however much he was, otherwise.

It must be cold in Baltimore. I thought of you, in your room, and I wondered about it. What was it like outside your window? As I sit here, in the California sun, it feels like summer. Then I realized you are there, not here. I see summer outside your window in my imagination. I admit to feeling an effort, a wish, to provide for you. I can't make it summer in Baltimore. Summer will come.

There's a lot of talk in the cafe that something is occurring. Everyone searches for, looks for, and waits for, the accident of a Greenwich Village in the late forties, or a Paris in the tens and twenties, those magical moments when artists remake themselves and the world around them. I'm not sure it's magic.

Reagan is the President, the preppies are back in control after ten years of false freedom, false democracy, and now it's back to reality as they define it. The people in The Club are back in control as if they were ever out of control, and everybody outside The Club is feeling the chill.

That's not magic. I'm less alone than I was when I thought I would be welcome in the club, or when I thought the club was disbanding.

Harper & Row just returned my first prose book, **Savage Amusement**. They read it and wrote me an actual letter. They said the book

contained "considerable self-insight," but they deemed it "not of wide enough appeal to be commercially viable." It was signed by the Director of Operations. I have always assumed I would be accepted, and it strikes me that my assumption is no different than my friend Peter's constant striving to be accepted.

I began to think of the different ways you and I were and were not accepted by the family. It reminds me of the business of aberration. Then I thought about The Club. Same difference. The aberrant moments, when the shit gets sorted, are moments of clarity and freedom.

Daddy Ronnie and Mommy Nancy have taken the illusion out of our wish to belong. Now we belong to each other, my wonderful Nadja, you and I. Come be with me in the cafe, in mind, in spirit, in body, anyway you want.

Welcome home,
Steve

SUN/JAN 17

Dear Nadja,

(5PM) I got a phone call this morning from my son, Jack, saying he and Rachel can't come up to the city, because, "We've got a lot of errands to do, and we can't afford the train ticket." It's \$5.00. But they'll be up next weekend, for a couple of days.

(7PM) I started this letter in a good mood. It's hours later, and I don't feel so good. It's not that I feel bad. It's more that the sense of heightened experience I've been feeling for days has slipped down into ordinariness. It's an attitude that matches most of this Sunday evening's coffee house patrons.

Across the street, they are hauling damaged cars into the garage and damaged dogs into the veterinary. I sold my car today, for \$150. That eliminates one dead headache, takes care of the rent, and gets me through one more week. My share rental is mercifully low.

When I realized the kids weren't coming, I did the laundry. At the grocery store, I ran into a disheveled old man who wanted food. He said his welfare check had been stolen. At the time, I didn't know I was going to sell the car, so I thought I had only enough money to get me to Tuesday. I gave him thirty cents. He wanted to buy a Hostess apple pie, so I gave him another quarter. Pie in hand, he told me he didn't want candy. I started across the street, and he yelled after me, "Thank you, Sir."

I was embarrassed. Then he yelled, "I hope you get \$100,000." I grinned at him. I expected a shoebox fortune on my doorstep, when I got home. Then I got the call about the car, and within an hour, I had money. Thank you, old man.

The cafe is nearly deserted. Those who are here are somnambulistic. I've been thinking about sex, about how much sexuality is at the core of everything creative. Whenever I want to infuse myself with energy, I remind myself of my sexuality, of the sensuality of my being. I look around the room, and it comes alive.

What I was thinking about, when I thought of you, before I started writing, was wanting to advise you to put the make on your surroundings.

I feel stupid saying this. It's totally inappropriate. It also seems a denial of your overwhelming particularity. What? I mean your silence. Well, forget it. If it makes sense, it'll come to you. I remember those times when my own sensuality could be imagined only as a violation, a violence, a rape. I don't want a mind-fuck here, either.

I'm afraid I'm not going to get very far talking to you about you. I'll forge on. I'm talking to myself, as much as to you. Advisor, heed thy own words. Advice is in the mirror of the advisor.

I miss Jack and Rachel. I never know how much, until I find out that I can't see them.

There have been, and now are, several attractive women in the cafe. Until this moment, I've only barely noticed them. There is a surge in my genitals that forces me to clench my thighs. A rather plain, slightly frizzy blonde came in, wearing an open neck, silky blouse over what appears to be great breasts. Her fine points, as it were. She stretches, taking off her coat, fingers her hair, sensually positions her torso.

I remember you telling me, one night, years ago, that some woman I was titillated by, was obviously only flirting with the room. Ever since, I've taken pains to look for the genuinely sensual woman. I'm still often distracted by the obvious.

I'm amazed at the conjunction of language. "Taking pains" to find sensuality. I think I mean eliminating the pains; whatever is superficially appealing that distracts from the genuine. It actually hurts.

I have a new recognition. I'm in love with the world at a distance of six inches. My eyes become conveyors of sensuality. Analysis begins beyond that distance.

I'm rolling now. Except for this rotten pen that has thinned out, like a black thread in the snow. What does that simile mean? Maybe it means that the pen is running out of ink. You see how I analyze. My whole trip is spontaneity, amazement, and then analysis. I was told once that I didn't need a shrink, because I was my own shrink. I'll buy that. I only wish I could afford to pay myself \$50 an hour.

I hate it when I find myself gawking at some women. It's like watching television. They hire this bouncy broad, the camera zooms in on her chest, the dialog is entirely forgettable and suggestive, and you've been

had. One has been had. I'VE been had. Thank God I have a sister with brains, guts and heart.

Now I'm thinking that the woman in silk just happens to like her clothing. Finally, she leaves and literally marches up the street. I feel stupid, sometimes, being male. I know some men who are vengeful, some are arrogantly derogatory, some pitifully wimpy, and some take power by paying for it, one way or another.

Ultimately, it's being on earth with the unknowable difference. Despite all your life in mine, I am baffled. I'm more baffled, however, by the difference in you that is you. I know you are silent. I know you may be suicidal. I know you're beyond me. It makes me feel ordinary. You say I'm lucky because I write. I suppose so. I think I know something of what you feel and don't feel.

You know I've, *quote*, been to the edge, *unquote*. Wow, I can hear the self-denigration in my voice. Here I go, apologizing for my non-sanity. But, I'm so insufferably sane. Always, the morning after, the day after, the year after, I come to the surface, back to reality, down to earth, and I write. I feel like a thief of your awareness. But it is my own. It's my job to report back. Please forgive me. Please need me, as much as the half-dead, so-called sane need me.

All day, for the last three days, my face has been hot, my eyes red. I'm bursting with tears, unreleased. Not for you, not because of you, but because you are in my life. My sister. And so much more than that. You represent something, in Woman, that is silent, noble, wise, and immutable, and yet sensual and loving. Most women would be jerks without you. And most men.

Love,
Steve

TUES/JAN 19

Dear Nadja,

I'm sitting in the Cafe La Boheme, on 24th and Mission. I don't think it was here when you were here last time, but in the past few years, it has established itself as a fixture of bohemian culture, cultivated as it may be. It's a nice place, but too expensive. Phalanxes of teenage Chicanas troup in, with blase aplomb, to groom themselves in the only public access toilet in the neighborhood.

I live on 17th and Dolores, which is much closer to this cafe than to the Owl & Monkey, but I find this place pretentious, in a laid-back San Francisco sort of way, "Yes, I'm cool, but I would never act as if I was."

I have to tell you what happened, yesterday. First, it was sunny. Then, it hailed. Then, at 11:13 PM, there was an earthquake. 3.0, on the Richter. I wasn't able to write you, yesterday, and I didn't understand why, until this morning. This is difficult. After Sunday's outpouring, I woke on Monday, eager to say more. But I became silent. In the evening, I turned angry. I didn't know why. I looked around at the cafe of familiar faces, and I disliked every one of them.

At 9:30, I decided to go home. That's unusual for me. The cafe stays open until 11, and then there are bars in the neighborhood, where I go to continue the evening. On my way home, with several beers in my belly, I kept muttering. I often find myself trying to cheer up people who lead lives of quiet desperation. I began to complain. Who cheers me up? After playing healer, I wonder, who heals the healer? Still, I didn't like the feeling, and I wanted satisfaction.

This morning, I woke up in a mood that always surprises me. Half-asleep and well-rested, I laughed, for no apparent reason. It's not much of a laugh, but it means I'm pleased with being alive, with coming to consciousness.

I also realized I was angry with you. You, my sister, the person, not the immutable nobility I spoke of on Sunday. The problem is, it's so hard to be angry with you. I love you so much. I read an article in the paper this morning about a fourteen-year-old autistic boy, and I could imagine being

angry at him for the disruption, the guilt, the trouble he had caused. And yet, how can you be angry with an autistic boy who has no sense of others.

I'm not comparing you to that boy. You're not neurologically impaired, not insane, not retarded, not unconscious. You've never caused a moment of trouble that I didn't think was justified, even honorable. Even inspired. Mom and Dad may hold you responsible for their unhappiness, but blame is one of the poor tools in their kit-bag of life.

What angers me turns on some sense of myself, for choosing a selfish life, and also for not being able to rid myself of my compulsion to please people. And I'm angry at the course of thinking and feeling that poetry has taken me. Beyond the naive arrogance I felt when I was young. Beyond a simple sense of the world's fascinating complexity.

Sometimes into the awful horror of unknowing. Sometimes the world looks like a giant day-care center. Sometimes, it looks like an endless cock-fight. And always, behind it, an emptiness.

The woman sitting next to me is telling a friend of hers how miserable she is. She's given up drinking, but she can't stay home and work, and when she goes out, the atmosphere in cafes repulses her. She speaks with a harsh sibillance. A harsh Sibyl. A Prophet of Misery.

She must be very angry. And she is being meek, humble, self-effacing. That blast of S's is annoying. She says she has a blond, blue-eyed fetish, but Robert Redford doesn't turn her on. She says she had a very bad week back in '79. She had a forty-five-year-old boyfriend who couldn't understand her bad karma. She says she's going to write her autobiography.

I enjoy literary eavesdropping, but it's also one of my poor defenses against such attacks. Her voice drags and scrapes, like hauling a broken-down piano across a parking lot. At dawn, I was going to add. He added. I'm imagining the parking lot of the old Turnstyle Discount Store back in Moline. My mind leaps across the freeway to the new mall where Mom and Dad have their restaurant. There's a kindness for you, to call their burger palace a restaurant.

When I was back in Illinois in '80, I tried to sit in the Big T Family Restaurant and pretend I was in a cafe in San Francisco. Good Luck. Mark told me that fast-food is not fast-serve but fast-eat. All of the food is

designed to be chewed and swallowed as quickly as possible. Chewed for sure, but it gets hard to swallow.

So, here I sit, dear sister, chewing on a few thoughts, 28 times to the image. A tea and salad guy just sat down, opposite me, at my tiny table, and I think it's time to move on. I'm caught between the steamfitter's nightmare and a holistic wet-dream.

Maybe I'll pick this up later. Ah, the library. I think I'll go to the library. "The Realms of Gold," as Miss Garst used to call them.

WED/JAN20

Dear Nada, (sic)

I'm back in La Boheme. Last night, in The Owl and The Monkey was dreary. All the paintings were removed from the walls, and the place looked like a bus station, like a warehouse for transients. The paintings, that had been up on the walls, were portraits of the regulars in the cafe. The one done of me was sufficiently bad, that I was able to sit beneath it, unrecognized.

When the paintings went up, the social milieu took a shot in the arm. Everyone began to rise to the occasion, with a sense of validation. Just as I began to imagine a renaissance, the place turned dreary. The cruelty of imagination.

I took the trolley home with Jeff Miller, who lives near me, and I was amazed to hear him talk about the failure of women to return his consistent efforts to cheer them with anything remotely cheerful.

I sat down here, in this cafe, and immediately caught the lively eye of a young woman. Then, a street bum, mumbling to himself, pushing a shopping cart full of rain-wet THINGS, parked it by the plate-glass window, came in and sat down across from me, and VORACIOUSLY attacked near-empty soup bowls and left-over bread scraps. He made a quick round of the room and found enough for a decent brunch, before the manager chased him out.

I'm in a lull. I'm calm. I'm healthy. With nothing to report, I'll report nothing. For example, yesterday, I took an application from Pepsico to become a driver. My house painting business is kaput. I called Dad last night to get the specifics on the truck I drove for him. He sounded awful, as usual. I tried to joke with him.

Robert Penn Warren has a new book of poems, making a sense of his long life. In sum, he says that all he's gotten from knowledge, particularly poetic knowledge, is that he's " . . . simply a man with a man's dead reckoning, nothing more."

It's POURING rain.

Every time I read one of these poets' old age perceptions, I want to send it to Dad, but I hesitate. I was about to send him Loren Eisely's

autobiography, **All the Strange Hours**. I hesitate, because I think, rightly or wrongly, that Dad's long life of intellectual hide and seek has ill-prepared him for these books.

On the other hand, these are good poets, and Dad's not a fool. Sometimes, awareness catches up with you, and the finest writing becomes available. It doesn't necessarily require a degree to perceive. It only requires willingness and effort.

It's later, and I've switched cafes. I feel extremely vulnerable, these days, but my behavior is decidedly rational. A woman I know, who has always eyed me very closely, and has talked to me in a concerned manner, came in La Boheme, and spoke to me. I was feeling fine and chipper, but she poked her concern into my reserve, and I felt like leaving. I felt like crying.

I haven't been with a woman for a while. I have moments when it seems to me all I want to do is burst into tears. I wasn't going to talk about this, but maybe it's inevitable. Nanci, the woman I've been seeing, to the point of living with for several months, and I are breaking up, have broken up. We have continued to see each other, but in the last few days, she's told me how difficult it is for her, and the hint is more than a hint.

Self-pity doesn't appeal to me, but sadness is a true thing. I'm reluctant to express sadness. I suppose if I were sitting with you, right now, I'd feel the same, holding up the world, without tears, my sadness oceanic.

At first, I felt it as, and I called it, depression. Then, it was despair. Then, I called it self-pity. Now, I think it's only sadness. I don't have a woman to cry with. Not like they do on TV, or in some other town. I am crying with you. I feel the loss, and I cry.

FRI/JAN 22

Dear Nadja,

You linger, in my mind, somewhere between life and death, as a voice, an idea, a dreamed image. Whenever I think of you, I remember our biographies, until I think deeper, and details faded to nothing. I am left in atmosphere. At most fear. Fear/that what you are/is not. I see you in there, lost nation of tribes, lost detail of woman, lost magic in reason. I am going into silent Nadja. I do not expect to return.

SUN/JAN 24

Dear Nadja,

Who am I writing to? You see, Nadja, I don't know who I am writing to. Who "to" is who "for". Does knowing who you are clarify who I am? Does writing to several others, or many others, make me one?

I met a woman, yesterday, with black hair, black eyes; a woman who strides, with intention, who stares darkly, whose face blooms in a smile, like a night-blooming flower.

She talked about you, Nadja, before I had said a word. Two days ago, when I was reading Baudelaire, she sat across from me and tried to foment, to ferment, an introduction. I said nothing. It seemed inevitable.

Last night, she engineered the introduction, and then leaped on me. I said Baudelaire is good when you're feeling bad. She said he's good when you're feeling good but you don't believe in happiness. Then she talked about Rimbaud and his local disciple, Bob Kaufman, and their sanity. I said it was a challenge, going into a vision that's not called sane but is even saner than sanity.

She grabbed my arm and clenched the muscle as if it was a caress on the skin. She asked if I had a car. I said no, and she was gone. I want to release myself into you, Nadja. I have to trust my poet self and release it, even as I want to trust you, Nadja, even as you have released into your silence.

Today, the 49ers won the Super Bowl. I went out into the street, after the victory, and cars were flying by, arms waving, voices shouting, everyone holding hands in the air, finger-pointing to the sky, and I began to weep, to cry, to rejoice.

The killings in this city, all the degradations and depredations, the abuse and the refusal of love of the last years, were erased in the euphoria of this wonderful, silly victory. I couldn't block the happiness I felt, haven't felt, for so long. I felt an elation in the heart, no matter the excuse, like crying while reading a bad novel.

I don't want to *get* drunk tonight. I want to be drunk, to stay drunk. How awful to be so afraid, to be so aware, of the jail of hearts, that I can get free only by devices.

I was just hugged four times by a poet named Susan. I wish people would hug each other more. I would hug you, Nadja. Always when we embrace, an encirclement of ice around my chest is broken. Poetry is the way the words change when someone is feeling true in a new-thinking way.

One should always be drunk. That's all that matters; that's our imperative need. So as not to feel Time's horrible burden that breaks your shoulders and bows you down, you must get drunk without ceasing. But what with? With wine, with poetry, or with virtue, as you choose. But get drunk.

Baudelaire

There is ice on my heart, and only for one good reason; that I've not been in a loving embrace with a woman. It's not carnal desire, or perhaps it is. Love starts it out, then the body, then the rest of the love comes out.

First, the scout, then the meeting, then the whole tribe moves in across the river. A very small woman has entered the cafe. My eyes re-describe the dimensions of the world so that I look at her in her full nature. I see that she's beautiful, and what a surprise to her, for one moment, to be away from the big ones with little eyes.

If no one listens, be silent. If you find another silent one, be ready. All heaven may be breaking loose.

MON/JAN 25

Dear Nadja,

I want to maintain my amateur standing as a human being. I don't want to put an occupation on a tax form. Do I want people to read my poems? Sure. In the Midwest, when I was home, last year, I discovered something. People said, "What do you do?" I said, "I'm a poet." "Oh," they said and stared dumbly. Enough times of that, and I saw. Poets do not exist. They did, hundreds of years ago, but not now. There is no such thing as a real poet.

On TV, a star football player is interviewed about his recent injury. He says he will be operated on and then, rehabilitation. The sportscaster looks expectant, ready to hear of the player's anticipated return.

"I will never play again," he says, "I'm finished."

"Oh," says the TV man and stares at him as if he's a dead man. He abruptly ends the interview. The player is dead to the world. The world is dead to the football player. He can no longer write on his tax form: FOOTBALL PLAYER.

"How do you make a living?"

"I don't. I live a living." Ha! What a joke!

"Where do you get money?"

"I impersonate a worker, until the fraud is revealed."

"What about all the workers of the world?"

"Most of them will never be revealed in their fraud."

"Worker, here's your mask, your profession, your job. You will never survive without it."

Nadja, don't you see what you've done? You've ripped off the last mask of socialization: speech. Now, they will try to weld a mask to your raw soul. INSANE. ANTI-SOCIAL. NEUROTIC. PSYCHOTIC. CATATONIC. BRAIN DAMAGED. "Tell me, Nadja, what is your name? Your name is Nadja. Can you say *Nadja*?"

Did our parents engender this? No more than any other representative of the fear of aloneness. It is the fear of singularity. Ha. To be alone, to have a singularity, a being, uneager of violation. There's no lobby in Washington for that one, Nadja.

"But what are you afraid of? Aha! I see. This withdrawal, this shyness of yours, is only a snobbish disregard for others."

"What others? Tell me which others. Do you want to read my poems?"

"No, we want to interrupt you. We want to stop you from writing poems."

"Why?"

"Because poems do not allow us to interrupt you, before we have to think like a poem thinks."

I painted hallways in an old folks home today. I really did. Old Russian Jews. They've certainly come down a Steppe or two. Despite the Niner's victory, not one of the old folks stuck his fist in the air and said, "We're Number One!"

TUE/JAN 26

Dear Nadja,

I like invisibility. It's absurd, because I'm so well known. I sit, every night, in the same cafe, in one of two chairs, in the most visible spot in the window wells, by the front door, half in and half out of the cafe.

But I don't see myself sitting here. I look out. I see what passes. I don't expect recognition. I expect to recognize. I'm constantly chastised by uncomfortable acquaintances, because I remain, apparently unambitious.

What a foolish thing ambition is. If you wish to become something, then become it. If you have to desire it and work for it, it's merely that someone else has a job, and you want it. Now, you're in a battle.

I talked to a poet, today, who has twisted legs. He was born that way. "You adapt to it," he said. I said I had seen people with muscular dystrophy and cerebral palsy who, if I looked outside the ordinary, I saw that they were moving with grace, moving as if in dance movements. He hadn't thought about it that way. He thought that, by grace, I meant spirit. I didn't. I meant movement.

Now that the local team has become world's champions, they say the people of the city will feel a common bond and be friendlier to each other. They say crime probably won't go down, but people will feel safer, anyway.

I was waiting for the bus with an unlit cigarette in my mouth. A man standing near me, said, "Want a light?" I showed him my lighter, and said, "Thanks, anyway." He said, "49ers! Number one! Right?" and raised his finger. I said, "Yeah, number one." Then he did a strange, shuffling dance on the sidewalk. Then he asked me for the time. Then, on the bus, he talked to himself and sang a song. He wore thick, dark, narrow glasses, like windows in a bunker.

SAT/JAN 30

Dear N,

The guy in Irving Variety is so tickled when I come in, every two weeks, to buy my favorite pen, that, for me, he's kept the price at 69 cents, when, for everyone else, it's gone up to 94 cents. It tickles me, too. I told him that if I was smart, I'd buy several boxes of them. But I enjoy the ritual. It always delights and refreshes me to buy a new pen. He assures me that he has plenty. It's a Japanese pen. So is he. Japanese, I mean. He's not a Japanese pen. Unless his name is Niji Stylist.

My new pen is buried in a bank of pens of all nations. Racey pens, creedy pens, nationalistic pens, colored pens.

I haven't written in a while. I got carried away with visions of apocalyptic transformation. Dogs bit me. Women shunned me. God wrote me a note called "Second warning."

I'm feeling humbler today, more at ease in the world, and tired. I went back to work painting, on Monday. During the week, at night, I began re-writes on a play I began 18 years ago, when I was working at the John Deere Harvester factory in East Moline.

Sandy, who works in the cafe, who's a professional stage designer, designed a stage set for me, and I like it. It helps to know where your characters are. "It's 11PM. Do you know where your characters are?"

Anyway, on Thursday night, I was living with a conversation toward the end of the play, wherein an older worker tells the college boy, "Get out. Get out as fast as you can. This is no place to be. This place is death."

I'm always affected by my writing. It may be why I don't do as much as I could. On my way home, I was absolutely certain I couldn't go to work the next day. I was certain the guy I work for would say, as he did when I worked for him, three years ago, "Well, Steve's a flake, as always."

I didn't know, when I went to bed, that I was acting out the play. I woke up feeling great, went to work, and had a good day. Amazing. I can't handle the excitement of anticipating artistic breakthroughs, or any other kind of breakthroughs. I will always slow down and sink back to the simpler business of process. A distance of a thousand sentences begins with one small word. And, in my case, that word is "I."

We've just come out of the Me Generation, the pundits are saying. It was the Cult of Narcissism, another name for the Seventies. Every decade lasts a couple of years into the next decade. Over the years, I've given myself a hard time about narcissism, but, like all knowledge, it begins with an idea, the idea is popularized, it turns into a fad, the general public plays at it for a while, then the fad fades when people realize it means real change, there's a backlash, and only a few continue on toward enlightenment.

To continue, to persevere, when all around you are rejecting the path, because they took it at face value, is a lonely business, much more lonely than staring at your own wonderful image in a pool of water.

Several women in the cafe are checking me out. One woman touched my shoes to see if they are real leather. One woman leaned over and said, "Hi." One stares at me with big, sad, hopeful eyes. A watched pot never boils. I stopped talking to you and turned my attention to mortal women, and I was ignored. I turned back to you, and look at the reaction. Women are jealous of you.

Or, women are on a wheel of desire, and it's comes round, again. I must look to see how they are with other men, tonight. It feels good, and, as Mao once said, "The broad masses of women must be aroused." The sun is shining. It's warm. There's the best answer.

SUN/JAN 31

Dear Nadja,

You're sitting in a cafe, wanting magic to make itself known, listening to the playful, half-serious conversations around you. Your cigarette drops from the amber ashtray, rolls an inch or two, and lies burning, like a greasy head on a dirty pillow.

Nearby, a woman is flirting with a handsome man. You see moods go by that you're not a part of. You're sitting on a chair, wide, flat, and loose in its joints. You're reading a French poet's spirit that makes you want to be freer, in a city that grants it only to drunks. Wine is arms wrapped around you from the inside, a woman who starts an argument every morning. Magic would melt you to miniscule caresses.

The nearby woman would like to kill some man, not with love, but a composite man designed by a magazine. "I've known so many like you," she says to the handsome man. A sign in the window of a car, at the curb in the street, reads, "This is NOT an abandoned car." Your sadness couples with a pheasant feather on a woman's cloche hat. You think about tomorrow like a list of advice. Magic is called magic because it is never learned.

MON/FEB 1

Dear Sister,

I must be getting ready for the big one. Every approach made to me I rebuff, and every approach I make is rebuffed. I am unfamiliar with this rounded out rejection. I feel somewhat annoyed, often angry, frustrated, then pleased. My sobriety reaches all the way inside the extremities of drunkenness. My eyes, hands, and tongue don't complete the gesture of action. Something essential is withheld.

I look at attractive women, and I can't escape my realistic imagination. I've seen too much to keep up the fantasies that used to override everything else. When I was a teenager, I undressed every woman I saw. I became anxious, because I couldn't stop my imagination from performing that curiosity of desire. I've come somewhere else, finally. Now here's the simpler explanation. I'm going through withdrawal from Nanci. I believe that, and I reject it.

That little entertainer, the one Mother raised me to be, is dying. The little worker that Pappy raised me to be, is called only to function at survival. The poet that I was, all the way through, and have made myself to be, is finally emerging at 40. No more potential.

The song and dance is over. If you stop the song and dance, you don't get paid and you don't get laid. Human beings are remarkably good at putting on a show. I'm no longer reflecting people back at themselves, dazzling them with my coat of mirrors.

I've stopped apologizing for being what I am. The flip side of apology is "Gee, I hope you like me. Want to see me dance and sing?"

The hardest thing I had to deal with, dealing with Nanci, in our year together, was the nagging feeling that I didn't believe her. There's a dark side to her, even suicidal, and yet I always felt it was problematic. Her family abused her. I know that. But, after a year watching her acerbic, melancholic nature, their abuse seemed like a red herring. The dependency on that family abuse and her adamant refusal to escape it, left me out of connect with her. I think, Nadja, some things are truly to be blamed on family, on circumstance, and some things are beyond, outside, unexplained.

TUES/FEB 2

Dear Nadja,

Yesterday seems garbled. For the first time in many days, I'm at my writing, fearful I may be interrupted. I was going to go to three Russ Meyer films tonight, in order not to think about sex. Russ makes sex movies with big-chested women. Last night, an attractive girl, across the room, began making eyes at me. I became overly excited. She approached me.

The guy I was sitting with said she wanted to fuck me. Well, if she did, she chose the future for its fulfillment. She sells parts, on the road, for Mercedes Benz. (She stands by the highway, waiting for one to break down.)

We made sexy parts jokes. In gear. Racing engine. Breaks. Accelerator. Wait a minute. She said breaks. I said accelerator. My eagerness, once again, overread the situation. The guys around me thought I should go for it. I did. I ran out of gas and went off the road, into the ditch. "The bitch," I said, walking home. She wasn't a bitch. IT was a bitch.

Instead of naked boobs in a theatre, I've come out, put up my OCCUPIED sign, and I've gone to writing. I'm content, this early in the evening, to anticipate the unknown. I had a good day at work, but there's no work for me tomorrow, so I have a nice, long, easy night ahead and plenty of sleep tomorrow, and then, tomorrow afternoon and night.

Chris thinks I need a change of scenery. Chris always thinks I need a change of scenery. Chris always needs a change of scenery. This paragraph needs a change of scenery.

I got it. There are two tables I prefer. I was sitting at last night's table. Bob was sitting at the other one. He got up to move to a larger table and grinned at me. "OK, OK," I said, in a voice of resigned bemusement, and moved all of my belongings way across this state of being. I've gotten the scenery I wanted.

I think every writer has a fear of quiet times in the imagination. Except for the ones who know the great profit from quiet. I keep forgetting what you've done, who you are, where you are. I hope that's good. I imagine you have people hovering about you, with bated breath, concerned, watching and waiting, probing, questioning, inspiring them-

selves with you. If they'd only just leave you alone. But how can they, when it's their life work? How successful they would be, in their life work, if they could simply embrace the ways of the mind?

I'm writing these letters to you out of my own needs. You will do what you will do, and I cannot change that. Once again, I'm grateful for that simple truth. Before I sat down to write, I talked to a woman who asked me about writer's block. She finally decided it was emotional. So much of her heart is involved in her research, so much is at stake in its reception. I realized I too, have suffered a hesitance, a writer's impediment in writing to you, and in writing the play, **Harvester**, that I'm working on.

I rush in. Fingers and thoughts fly. Then I realize how much I care about what I'm doing, and I start to block the very writing that comes most easily and is most involving and most enjoyable. I told her to leave off worrying, take her history of completed work as fact, and let the moment dictate to her. I felt my own advice. I'm talking again, speaking, imagining.

These people I imagine hovering about you. I'm enclosing five bucks. Send them out for a beer.

I'm stuffed. Full of good food; milk, banana, chicken soup, bagel and cream cheese, cucumber, blackberry jam. I feel quite healthy, tonight, (since I passed by Russ Meyer's melon patch).

The woman I was talking to said that in fifty years, people will walk by on the street, and point to my table, and say, "Look. There's where he wrote his famous book." Not this one they won't. Unless you decide to go into the publishing business. I'm going to do some reading now. Maybe I'll find some pearls, emeralds, succulent berries, bon mots. I'm not hanging up. Lay the phone down by your pillow.

Here's a quick addendum, to say that whenever people come in, that I don't want to talk to, I have to throw out an invisible shield to keep them away from me. The smart ones know. The dumb ones sit down and rattle away, until, after many minutes, they say, "Oh, am I interrupting something?"

I learned the name *Rachel* symbolizes the contemplative life. My daughter's name is well chosen. I have so many active friends and lovers, when I'm most at home, among the contemplative. Dante says that love is that which moves anything in the direction of another.

WED/FEB 3

Dear Nadja,

(4:30) A little girl wandered up to the counter, saying, "Can I have a bite," to everyone. She stood two feet below the counter, shouting gaily, "Can I have a bite," over and over. I thought, what a sponge this kid is, and what a rotten mother she has. Her mother, with a bedraggled look, went to retrieve the child, explaining to the girls behind the counter that she wasn't saying, "Can I have a bite?" but "Can I have a sponge?" She got it, walked back to her table and happily cleaned up her spilled soda.

(7:30) A girl on the bus is reading a book. Idly, by the door, I read the title, upside down, "Falling Bodies and the Birth of Mechanics." Sometimes, I get a fog on my glasses, a distractedness from the outward appearances of things. I mean, how and when they appear. I see through. I see to. I see among. It's being, not looking. The extenders of being are very powerful. One does not "work" to be in contact with the being of others and other things.

For those who work very hard at contact, and for those whose failure at it is epidemic, even endemic, I must seem easy pickings. I become without boundaries. Accordingly, my fog can envelop me, and I can be here, near to everything, like the sound in a thick-aired swamp, and still be undetectable. Then, I don't need any protection. It's only when I feel "obligated" that my head aches.

It's like this. A wild animal, with its keen senses, is put in a zoo. It is in shock to be unable to blend in, to look and see so many eyes seeing it too easily. Every zoo animal is like the wounded. Its vulnerability comes on it like a stunning blow. But, it isn't wounded. Nothing natural informs its critical weakness. It has no clue, informed to the senses, why it can no longer hide and seek. Blend and extend. Hear and fear.

An animal, in a cage, is entranced by the light of the attention. It paces back and forth in a trance. It is forced to create an ego. It's given a name, a personality, a limited world, a regimen, a routine, a fucking job, for Christ's sake.

"This animal, ladies and gentlemen, is a Tiger." When the cage door is left open by accident, it suddenly becomes THE tiger. Watch out for THE TIGER! If it manages to effect an escape, entirely, totally, it becomes poetry. Its effect in the world is osmotic. It roams in the heart of nature, unnamed, original in every step of its paw upon grass or twig.

I've taken to wearing low-heeled crepe-soled shoes, lately. The soles of my boots wore down, then fell off, and I couldn't afford to get them fixed. The boots made me taller and noisier. I liked them, because they gave me a position in the world. These shoes give me an ease, an invisibility that I wanted. I got it. If I'd really wanted the boots fixed, I could have managed it, but with these shoes, I feel closer to the ground, better balanced, more fluid. I'm not striding these days. It's just as well, if not better than well. Cat's paws.

Jeff said he was getting sick. I made a joke. I said, "Oh, my god, I'm getting well." I talked to a 65 year old writer, Larry Fixel, today. He's having his teeth worked on, and he proposed to his dentist what he thinks of as a three-word world. He got the dentist to agree that he was stabilizing, no longer deteriorating, and may soon be improving. A goes through B to get to C.

I spoke to Larry about you. I see your choice of silence as stabilizing. Deterioration was before, and its goal was suicide or madness. What improving is, I can only guess for myself.

I have a friend, Chris Blum, who wears me out with his apocalyptic cynicism. He gives the world twenty years. If he's right, he's dead. If he's wrong, he's still dead. When he was up getting a Calistoga, I told Richard I couldn't listen to Chris for very long.

"Why not?" said Richard, who is himself a cynic.

"Because it doesn't suit me." I surprised myself with a Christian reference, "It's my job," I said, "to light one small candle, not blow them all out." I have another vision, or version. Between the active and the contemplative is the creative. Your silence is my night forest. I am your tiger. Poetry is our bright burning. Nadja, I answer your silence with all my love.

(Later) An intensely unsettled and dissatisfied woman, Sherry Stern, came in and assumed to sit at my table with me. I know her to be a talker

who probably wants to get laid. I think she'd really like it if I desired her. I don't. I gestured with my hands that I was tented by my writing. She was abruptly forced to find another table.

On her way out, I smiled, and I was about to apologize for appearing rude, when she said, wistfully, with a spiny backbone to it, "I hope whatever it is you're writing makes you a million dollars." She drawled, dreamily the word million. I shrugged.

"I don't," I said, but she had already slammed the door behind her.

THUR/FEB 4

Dear N,

Widowmaker. "She was the roughest, toughest critter, never known to be a quitter, and the pride of all the cowboys, so they say." (I sang that, all day long, while painting. The last line is run on. It's the theme song from an old kids' recording of the story of Pecos Bill.)

When I got off work, I walked over a block to Jim Boyd's house. He lives on Pierce in the Marina District, in a garden apartment, or in-law apartment, as it's called. Jim's a teacher at City College, and he's a big hit with his female students. But, little did I know. He was glad to see me, but he warned me, at the gate, in his bathrobe, that it was an unusual situation, but he didn't mind, if I didn't.

I hesitated, and then I went ahead. In the middle of the one room apartment, lying under a blanket, was Yolanda. Attractive, young, pink-fleshed, shoulder-naked, Yolanda. Jim gave me a cognac, then a second, and we discussed the 49ers. I begged their forgiveness for the intrusion, he and I made vague plans to get together, I took another casual look at Yolanda, said nice to meet you, and left.

Ten minutes later, I thought, "Thank God I can't remember the sensation of flesh. Can YOU?" I asked no one in particular. I pity the poor soul who can remember the ecstasy of the flesh. Like pain, it cannot remain in the memory, except as an imitation of a memory.

I went to the grocery store across the street from my place for a can of V-8 and a can of chili. In came a lanky, swaying, disheveled guy, with a towel around his head. At the counter, I saw he was bloody under the towel, with dry red hands and caked blood on his face. He turned and looked at me. I looked at his eyes. He didn't seem too far gone. He was buying a half-gallon of white wine and a six pack of beer. He said to me, ironically, "Do I look that bad?"

He stumbled out onto the sidewalk and up the street. The Iranian behind the counter told me the guy had had a broken back. He wore a brace. He speculated, "Maybe they're making a movie." Yeah. Maybe.

I imagine the guy saying to his girlfriend, "I gotta go to the hospital," and she says, "Yeah, OK, but wouldja go to the store and get some wine, first?"

Jeff just came up to me with a quote from Louis Auchincloss, to the effect that salvation for shallow people is probably being told that their fears are shallow, too.

Last night, exhilarated from writing, I went into Yancy's Saloon and sat at the end of the bar. I talked to Dan the bartender. Dan and I both went to Grinnell, ten years apart. He spotted me wearing my old letter jacket. He's even sought out and read my poems.

I told him I was looking for an external world that corresponded to my internal one, but I wasn't having any luck. Denee, pronounced De-Nay, the waitress, was talking to a friend of hers, over my right shoulder. Denee said her problem was that whenever she started talking about what mattered most to her, that is, her beliefs, it was always too heavy for most people.

"I'm game," I said, "It's not too heavy for me." It turns out, she was talking about reincarnation and karma.

"What about all those people drowned or washed out by the recent floods in Santa Cruz and Marin?"

"It's group karma, from their decadent life style."

"Oh," I said.

"Jesus," I thought, "This is what's too heavy? The only thing that makes it heavy is that it's such a load of shit."

The thing that gets me about people who say they've had past lives is that they never say, "I was a dumb fuck who never had a good thing to say, never did anything at all and spent my entire threescore and ten years staring at the gound, hating everybody." I wonder how many people used to be Cleopatra, or a gladiator, or an Indian.

"Yippee-aye-ay, aye-ay, yippie-aye-oh, the roughest, toughest critter, west of the Alamo."

It's open-mike night, tonight, in the cafe, and I'm risking post-party blues again. I'm up for a social good time. At the same time, my writing hand is moving like a goosed pig. Uh, oh, a literary allusion. I'm in trouble, now. I told Richard he should go up to the counter and buy out all the cold Rainiers.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because there're more, but they're not cold."

"What?" he said. He thought I had said, "They're morbid, but they're not cold," so he said, "I don't want to hear any of your poetic shit."

People pile in the cafe. The music does it. The capacity for vitality is catalyzed by music. An attractive woman comes in, and Richard says, "Good evening!!!" Richard has a social style like a foot in the aisle.

SAT/FEB 6

Dear Nadja,

I could not get, long enough to keep it, an erection. Richard introduced me to a woman I liked immediately. Not pretty, but comfortable. We ended up at her house. I wrestled with her all night, enjoying it, but not coming. I slept very little, and the next day I was a wreck.

Paint fumes sobered me, but it made me mournful. With less awareness than time has finally given me, I would have tried to see Nanci, after that. The current discombobulation sends me to the past when the future closes off.

That said, I went back to reading W.H. Auden's essays. I read for a while, and then I was compelled to say something to you. Auden says that the Muse despises those who will not stand up to her. Without realizing the connection, I was compelled to take a stronger stand in regard to you and your situation.

Since you are the muse of these letters, silent as you are, my first impulse is to argue. Instead, I wonder. I know to *whom* I am writing. But, to *what* am I writing? What is it that all of this is meant to say? Dear Nadja, I mean to say; LIVE!

A woman I met last week said to me, "You stir things up and you calm things down." I got a kick out of that.

A small man, who likes me, (he woodchucks around the cafe, chewing on things he sees) said to me, the other day, before open-mike night got rolling, "I never feel like things are quite real, until you show up."

I don't think it's through any great virtue of mine that he feels that way. I think it's because I like being alive, and I want others to feel that way, too. Sometimes, it degenerates into becoming an entertainer or a cruise director, but at least, in my poems, and in some of my other writing, and some parts of my life, there is a genuine affirmation.

Nadja, I want my letters, i.e., all of my writing, to be an affirmation. You are, in part, responsible. When we were growing up, you were an inspiration to me. You exhaled vitality, and I breathed it in. All I want to do is return the favor.

SUN/FEB 7

En, again,

"Thirty days hath September, August, May, and December, All the rest have thirty days, or more, except February, which has less." (Thanks to W.H. Auden, for the beginnings of understanding.) Ten days to 40 years. Ten Days That Shook the Man.

Let's start with a confession. I love this kind of writing. And, here's an even bigger confession. I haven't mailed these letters to you, yet. There's a simple reason for that. You don't exist. I made you up. I don't have a sister named Nadja, who's in a loony bin in Baltimore.

I'm the first-born child. I don't have any sisters. I have two brothers, both younger. The youngest, Scott, was supposed to be a girl. He was born with curly, blond locks, but now he's 33, 6'8", 250 lbs., and his hair is thick and brown, turning grey.

I wrote my parents last week, and I mentioned you to them. I figured you were born July 7th, 1940. They were married the day Freud died, September 23rd, 1939. That's enough time for you to be legitimate, and it's unusual, I think, for the time, that they didn't have a kid until February 17, 1942, when I was born.

Toward the end of the letter, I became nervous. I thought, "Maybe my sister did, or does, exist." The woman I went to bed with last night has a brother, a year older than she, who's in an asylum. So, we'll just play this out and see what happens, OK? Even though the ruse has been exposed, I can't stop thinking of you, Nadi. Someone suggested, the other day, you might even, somehow, write me a letter. If you do, and stranger things have seldom happened, I promise I'll send you the whole package of completed letters.

Anyway, back to my point. I like to write this kind of journalese, but with the continual sense of the presence of a reader. At odd moments, I've carried on this conversation with an imaginary skeptic.

"How can you write this stuff? No one will want to read it. It's too personal. No one writes like this."

"I do. It's the end of potential, the end of ambition, the end of pretense, the end of attempting greatness."

"What is this, then?"

"It's just a book."

I went over to Salonica's on 24th, with Mike Raifsnider, last night. A trio (singer, piano, and drums) was playing. The singer did some light Billie Holliday. I like that way of singing. I hear it for a while, and I can do it, too. Today, I can't remember it or reproduce it. But I can remember the words I made up.

"Sometimes, you come home, and you treat me right.
Sometimes, you come home, and you beat me all night,
How can I call this love?"

Oh, and here's a country and western song hook,

"Every new first time feels just like the last time."

What I like about this writing is that the exigencies of satisfying a restless and demanding audience fade from requirement to relationship. If it works, it works. If it doesn't, no amount of working at it, works.

Nadja, you and I have been together for 40 years. Isn't that enough time for me to relax? All right, you exist. Relax. I was only kidding.

"Baby, it must be love." (Blind Willie McTell)

SUNDAY EVENING/FEB 7

Sister,

This kind of writing is what I can no longer do in my poetry; be personal. The wood, that I make poems of, has to be dry, in time. This is where I get to bend saplings and whittle, whack at the weeds and underbrush.

Mike asked, last night, what turns me on, and I said, "Love, beauty"

I thought, today, to add, "... youth."

I've been assiduous in wanting to allow other considerations, but in matters of eroticism, there is no legislation.

The other day, in my usual half-embarrassed way, I was wondering why I spend so much time reading about the lives and reflections of other poets. Larry Fixel suggested that we need an inner community, a circle of like minds, that aid and reinforce us in our relative isolation. That may be the great use of all literature.

MON/FEB 8

Dear Nod Jah,

Janice bums a light, calls me "Rah Ka Shay", which means "keeper of the flame." "What sub-culture is that?" I ask. "I don't know," she says, "I picked it up from a movie, when I was six. I wanted to name my first horse that."

Waiting for the bus, I picked up, from the sidewalk, one of those small, Christian propaganda sheets, "Dear Brother." I got to thinking about the good stuff, like Jesus' line, "Whosoever shall give up his life shall receive it." That's a tough one. You can't play it, like a gamble. "Well, I'll give up my life, like cards on the table, in the hopes of getting it back ten-fold." You have to give it up. Period. You can't hedge the bet. Keats said Fame is like a wayward girl. She'll only pay attention if you ignore her. That's kid stuff. Half-assed salvation.

I have to say I'm working on giving up my life, fame and fortune, etcetera. It's a big etcetera. This is what I called "faith's arduous achievement." When I wrote that, in a poem about quickie Christians. I wasn't sure what I meant by arduous. It's not through effort, or at least, recognizable effort, that one achieves faith, but there is a toiling, in the spirit that has to live in a spiritually mediocre world, to put it kindly.

People have been telling me I'm a nice guy, lately. It's been seven years since I last considered myself a nice guy. I'm not sure how it happened, but once people start telling you how decent you are, it's appealing to keep it up. Back then, it was, "No more Mr. Nice Guy." I was pursuing not being pushed around, asserting myself, saying no to jerks, recognizing my dark side, taking the hesitancy out of my poems, trying to stop hinting at the knowledge and/or wisdom I had and wasn't admitting to, in my work. That got done. But at a cost. Then, in love, I had to overcome my "needing to be loved too much." Awful rages. Misery. But, that got done, too.

Mother said, two years ago, that I was too violent for her. She also said I was too sexy for her. I don't feel violent anymore, and I don't feel the violence on me. I don't feel too sexy, either.

I went to Sue J. Carlson's apartment, last night, celebrating her new poetry magazine, and we got naked and talked about love and poetry. I had no erection, despite the pleasure I was feeling. I told her that was a new phenomenon. She said I was probably getting ready for "the big one." I liked that.

I told her your birthday was July 7th and your name was Nadja. She said her middle name was Nadya, but she never used it, and her birthday was July 6th, at 11:55 PM. I may have made you up, but I'm not making this up. This is pure psychic coincidence, but she's like a little sister. She's 23.

Whenever I think about a new woman, I remember Nanci. It's a feeling of loyalty. I've felt it before, with other lovers. It took me three years to get over my loyalty to Roxan, and she kicked the shit out of loyalty.

I had a dream, the other night. I was in the back seat of a car, and a girl got in. We were sitting together and moving close, so close, so in tune, so in touch, that it became lovemaking. Beautiful. She told me she lived upstairs from me, and she'd heard loud music from my room, late at night. All I could think was that I'd left my TV on when I passed out, drunk. It seems to me, now, that the message is; drunkenness is blocking my contact with women.

The same night, I dreamed I was standing on a precipice. Far below me was a river. A great plain lay off from the river. I fell from the cliff's edge, holding a small, uprooted tree. The tree was about my height. It had a trunk, three inches in diameter, and a ball of foliage. I found that by maneuvering the tree, I could use it to stay in flight. As I flew across the plain, I lost altitude and, at a great speed, I realized I would have to crash into a bank of tall trees. I decided to cross-body-block a few trees at once and cushion the blow.

At contact, I lost consciousness, but I regained it long enough to find that I had wrapped myself, arms and legs, around one trunk. I lost consciousness again, and found myself lying on the ground. A woman's voice said I had 143 broken bones. But no one would help me. Eventually, I found I could move and finally, I stood up. (143 bones! I guess I heal fast.)

My friend, Sue, the poet/editor, said that trees are thought to be symbols for women. I got a little help from one, clung to another, crashed into many, was ignored by another, and survived alone.

The curious thing, right now, is the happy feeling of not being victimized by my own random lust. I used to want to screw any woman or girl who smiled at me. Or I thought I wanted to. I love the way the mind/body makes these decisions for you, or at least finishes the job.

I'm still curious about women naked. Maybe I'll take to drawing them. That's the ambition of many years standing. Maybe I'll have a resurgence of lust. Who knows? I doubt it.

Considering **Savage Amusement**, and now, this book, it's interesting that the really bad times fell in-between, and were not, judging by the inactivity of my confessional pen, suited to discussion. I certainly have stories from those years, and maybe I'll get into them as the pages go on. It's a rewarding process, this prosody. It creates a contemplative pleasure that happily anticipates each new day, each moment.

I've been considering, for many years, 5 or 6, putting together a one-man show culled from the letters of John Keats. It's never come together for me. Tonight, I thought, this book is my Keats letters, not intended to be great literature, but an expressive format, nonetheless. None the less than literature? What is that?

This, my dear sister, IS literature. Don't you just love it? You and me, kid. Rah Ka Shay. My advice to young authors? Write what you like, and the devil take its due. The problem in writing what the world wants is that the world doesn't know what it wants. It doesn't want anything. There is no world.

There IS a full moon tonight. Despite that, the cafe is very quiet. What does VERY mean. It's a GOLLY word. Golly, the cafe is quiet. I predict it will get loose at ten, in half an hour. This prediction is without basis in karmic fact.

(And did not happen.) I would like to lick someone's pussy, with the innocence of discovery. MY innocence. Here's my poem for the passage of the last seven years, called "The Azure Blizzard." (To the best of my knowledge, the azure blizzard is rain; torrential, cold rain.)

The azure blizzard of wanting to know every goddamned thing there is to know, drowns out the innocence, but innocence returns, remembering nothing of the storm.

Uh, oh. A born-again Christian has sat down at the next table. He's warming up to his sales pitch by chatting amiably about cartoons and music, but making off-hand Christ allusions. A cartoon of Reagan, neck-deep in water, reminds him of a Christian song about salvation rising about the baptismal drowning man. When it finally gets to his head, it's decision time. He's had one beer, to show what a regular guy he is.

The guy he was talking to gave him a decidedly un-Christian cold shoulder, so he's gone. It's tough when you're carrying the Revealed Truth around in your back pocket, like a lump of plutonium, waiting for a reactor to show up. Or wise up. All the debate about what should or shouldn't be, is or isn't, can or can't be, is the crossword puzzle of religion.

Sometimes, at night, in winter or summer, when the fog is in, Ninth Avenue, in this most pretty cosmopolitan city, could be B Street, Billings, Montana, or C Street, Joplin, Missouri, with newspapers blown against the curbed wheel of a car, cold lit windows of deserted shops, rooftops edged against the black night sky, the streetlight's automatic repetition of its three dot poem, red, yellow, green, and red, yellow, green, the man's hurried walk to some other warm room, my eyes drop to a fitful drowsiness, the numbing cold, the apprehension of hungry dangers.

Good night, Nadja, I hope you sleep well. If there's no comforter, take my love and wrap yourself in it.

TUE/FEB 9

Nadja,

Going home from work, I got off the bus at 16th and Dolores and cut across the boulevard, the one planted with palm trees. Straight across from the "Historic" Mission Dolores, I came across a pair of crutches. They were dropped on the grass, as if by a miracle. Some poor soul had come to stand, with his mangled legs, to worship St. Francis, and, lo and behold, a miracle.

I told Tom the story, so he told me one. Tom is my roommate. I called him Kent Ullen in **Savage Amusement**. I've known him for 12 years. It's turned out to be a pleasant surprise to become his roommate, after all these years. He's a real swell guy. He said, "Steve, the next time I'm making love to Joan Baez, please don't interrupt us, OK?"

He dreamt they were making love, and I came in on him and Joanie and spoiled the magic moment. It was a different house, like in the old hippie days, he said, with people coming and going all the time.

(I used the word *across* three times in the first two sentences. Hmm. A cross, a cross, a cross. Well, the mission IS a church.)

(later) I'm writing in the cafe, and Phil says, "There hasn't been a wild and boisterous night in the cafe for weeks!"

Two cute girls approach my table to join the fun, then opt for later.

I say, "I'm feeling good tonight. I'm up for it."

Dan says, "Steve has been known to make a spectacle of himself."

"It's been diminishing as time goes on," I say.

The women are chatting amiably and looking around, tonight. See? Women run the party side of life, if not all of it, at least in the sense of the senses. (Boy, I hedged that curious generalization, didn't I?)

Claire and Melody are discussing a mutual friend. Claire says he should be a doctor or a lawyer, he doesn't have the stamina to be a poet, he's unwilling to be poor, being poor takes stamina, he's a penthouse poet.

"You have to suffer," Claire says.

"Steve sits and watches other peoples' suffering," says Dan.

"I have to go elsewhere to do my suffering," I say.

Claire has been having piano dreams. She dreams she has a piano to play. Dan says he has piano dreams, too, only they fall on him.

A guy they call "Nice Lee" sat down opposite me and suddenly I was plunged into a circle of hell. Lee is a most boring fellow. Dull is not bad. Dull people just sit there. Boring people insist on imposing their dullness on others. Mercifully, when I was up getting a beer, Ralph took my seat, and I was reprieved.

Bruce fixed me the largest turkey sandwich I've ever felt obligated to eat, on purpose, and now I feel bloated.

The place has stayed mild, not wild, so far tonight (he said, in his baited wait.) In the last book, this is about the time the girl showed up. It was a blind date, and she lingered until near the end of the book. At the time, I thought I was writing a true-love story, but it turned out to be something other than that.

I told Clark, an old friend I work for, how much I'm enjoying myself these days, writing and working.

"It's because you're playing," he said.

I almost took offense, feeling cut to the quick. I criticize myself for not struggling, in love and poetry, the way "true artists" are supposed to.

Clark said, "It's your job to show the rest of us how to play. You're doing what's needed, restoring play to our lives, where it's missing."

Startled, I said, "Play may be more important than seriousness. The seriousness is always there. What's substantial is either there, or it isn't. You don't need to work at being serious."

He had prompted me to go deeper into my own understanding. I will stay near the surface unless something pushes me deeper.

The cafe is filling up. You know, Nadja, seven years ago, I filled pages worrying about my physical and mental health. Now, whenever I talk about it, I stop. I was pudgier then, too. Today's the first time in months my belly has bulged. I'll take another belt, and it's a cinch. I won't waist your time gutting that issue. I'm sure you're in suspenders. Aha! A brace of puns.

Not enough sleep, paint fumes all day, beer at night. Add it up, and you'll see I'm less than sum would wish. But, my attitude is sanguine. I'm like the doctor, wandering from rheum to rheum. Have patients, Sis. My

dear sister, my spiritual advisor, Nun the Wiser. (Did you hear about the poet who'd subtle for anything?)

WED/FEB 10

Nadja,

Paul Westhead, former coach of the LA Lakers says, "My own personal love, something I've always wanted to get to, is a complete analysis of the art of poetry. I've been reading textbooks on the techniques of poets. I really think poets have the key to many things. They capsule images. They see things exactly. Learning their methods can help in a lot of areas."

For instance, last night, I dreamed that large monkeys were eating large monkey fetuses. One of them said, "Well, I'll have to make a meal out of this," and began plucking the ears off, crushing the skulls in his shark-like mouth, devouring the innards with casual disdain.

I told Clark about the crutches in front of the church, and he thought the guy probably had been beaten and robbed. Clark is a realist-pessimist. A student of History. He says he enjoys romance because it's serious play.

I saw a friend of Nanci's last night, and I had the urge to ask her how Nanci is. I didn't. I wouldn't have known what to do with the answer.

In re my treatise, the other day, about life and fame, I'm thinking of another; love. I've been coming to this cafe, every night, to write, for sure, but also, looking for love. As Bill Siebenschuh said, one January, as we sat in the college student union, looking up every time the door opened, "We're all waiting for the magic person."

I'm getting tired of this anticipation. I haven't been doing other things I could be doing, so I could be in my chair, waiting for you, waiting for her. I was angry, this morning. I had a sharp tongue, last night. I've been nice, not drunk, not lustful, working steadily and reliably, paying my bills. It may be time to eat a monkey fetus.

I'll be laid off painting, tomorrow, and when I learned that, I could taste the metal in my mouth, sucking the chrome off of spoons.

FRI/FEB 12

Dear Nadja,

It's good to hear the entreating silence of your ears. I'm at the Cafe Durant, in Berkeley, upstairs, in the open air, overlooking the street. I'm having a beer, nursing a hangover, the kind where I feel fine but don't function on all cylinders.

I jumped up and had a very good time last night. The poet named Sue got up in the O&M, last night, open-mike night, and read some of her poems. I introduced her. She stunk. Terribly sincere, meaningful, artificially performed paeans to the self-righteousness of youth. Bad theatre, no music, and she was thrilled and sat on my lap and hugged me. Then, I flirted with Barbara for several hours. We agreed we'd like to make love together, and she went home.

There are several boys tossing a football on the street below. That's good, because quarterbacks have to learn how to throw in traffic. A professor of language has been visiting with three of his students at the next table. "I'm sorry I couldn't come earlier and stay longer. Well, I must go and earn my daily bread. We should, um, do this again, sometime."

His students did not respond to his lonely appeal, as naturally unconscious as they are. Loneliness comes with consciousness. Isolation in the midst of, as it were. He was embarrassed and hurried off. The students immediately dove back into their appropriately stimulated discussion.

SAT/FEB 13

On BART, coming back to the city from my visit to the cafes of Berkeley, I sat near a young woman who was all dressed up, with luggage, going somewhere. Going into the tube, she took out a notebook. Its cover was emblazoned with a dozen sets of ruby lips. She made a numbered list, in an even hand.

1. lose 15 pounds
2. watch soap operas
3. \$5.00 movies
4. study for permit
5. obtain permit
6. sleep in
7. exercise
8. read SAT book
9. read novels
10. write story

I went to the Gateway Theatre to see "My Dinner with Andre." The projectionist was working his first day, and the movie kept fading to black, at the beginning. It was a good movie, recapitulating much of my life over the last five years.

After that, I went to see something called the San Francisco Armory Art Show. Out front, there were two large banners proclaiming, "GREAT ART!" Uh, oh, I knew I was in trouble. Several thousand paintings. A half-dozen people wandering around Pier 2 at Fort Mason. I was unmoved by what has become a genre. Grotesque art. Andre Gregory set it up by describing art of the apocalypse, its emptiness of light, of the vision of soul.

I came to the cafe, ran into Barbara Englebert, and we joked about having our own Wally-Andre conversation. We decided to write a parody, "My Brunch With Brooks", "My Breakfast with Barbara," or "My Croissant With Clarise". My favorite is "My Hot Dog With Harry," about two guys who meet at a Nathan's wagon on a corner in New York City and chat about their own journey to enlightenment, for five minutes. One of them says to the vendor, "Make me one with everything."

Barbara and I touched, kissed, and we made a date for tonight. My horoscope predicted I would have a romance in '82, born from friendship. Barbara and I have been friends for a year.

I'm occasionally inclined to check out whatever I'm doing, in my particular life, as a specific in an analogy to what all artists are doing at the time. Extrapolating, then, I think artists, at this time, are in secret, in retreat from fame, from entertainment, from Prison Planet Earth. There are individual pockets of sanity, those who imagine an audience that is not brainwashed, who wait for an audience to make itself known, to reject the techno-mediocrity, the anti-intimate, corporate, slick, schlock banalities. (It's fun to make up such phrases.)

I must tell you, Nadja, I'm afraid for my letters to you. Since Barbara and I have begun to disintegrate our friendship into intimacy, or to put it another way, since I've found someone to talk to, I'm not sure what effect it will have on my talking to you. I anticipate that, at best, it will make my letters better, by weeding out casual, throwaway banter, and add in that strength that comes from real, in-the-flesh caring.

I am equally cautious about Barbara. I don't want her, or anyone, to take away the energy I need for you. This is premature, because she and I are still unconsummated. That's a cover word for making love and the entanglement that makes me reluctant to disclose privacies. She knows about you, and she didn't like it that I said you didn't exist. Faith in your true sister is important in this life.

Apropos Prison Planet Earth, it may be that the Great Malaise of the 20th Century, is the end of the illusion of escape. There are no new frontiers. This is it, folks. My line for turning 40, only 4 days off. The end of potential. All cards on the table. (That reminds me of this poem.)

I Took James Wright off the Shelf the Day Before He Died

For years, I've remembered the words I said
in the writers' workshop in Folsom Prison.

I was behind bars, afraid the guards would say,
Wait, We recognize you, you can't leave.

I chain-smoked, until the man next to me counted
the butts in the can with the tip of his sharpened pencil.
Silent and kind, he grinned, as he put the pencil down.

I said, to those men, incarcerated for years, for life,
Joy is profound as sorrow, and yet, I cultivated sorrow.

For years, I feared prison, the door swings shut,
you cannot run, and from then on, nothing changes
for years, for life, and I longed for it, the frenzy
over, slow time begins, the time for joy.

On impulse, I'd like to explain what it was about Nanci that made me
unable to stay with her. She was raised in a family where all the men are
boys, and all the women battle each other for supremacy; all the while,
looking for a man.

When a man shows up, they rush to glory in him and then try to get
him back to boy. It's a subtler process than I can describe, but I hated it. I'm
boyish, but I'm not a boy.

Nanci is deathly afraid of, and dead set against, marriage, but I'm
certain it's not marriage but that relationship, where, as in her family, the
woman is defeated, and begins her retribution. I was on a train, once, with
a man and two women, all strangers. Someone proposed a word response
game.

"Marriage," one woman said.

"Fear," the man and I said.

"Boredom," the women said. We'd all been married.

Nanci is doggedly determined to escape the trap, but there's no
escape, except in change. If the goose is afraid of the bottle, then the goose
is already in the bottle. I love that goose-in-the-bottle Zen riddle.

Q. A goose is in a bottle. How do you get the goose out of
the bottle, without killing the goose or breaking the bottle?

A. The goose is out of the bottle.

Message: If one can imagine a goose in a bottle,
one can imagine the goose out of the bottle.

Q. How do you get your sister out of a loony bin?

A. You don't have a sister. (Rejected)

A. (Second solution) She's out.

Q. Where is she, now?

A. I don't know. (I hope they forward my mail.)

Q. Where are you, Nadja?

SUN/FEB 14

Dear Nadja,

I got a card from you, yesterday. It read, "Steve, Paris. Nadja."

I was thrilled. Barbara and I went to the Indian Center on Valencia to watch Brazilian music and dance. I thought your card must have read, "Steve, Rio. Nadja."

I was wrong. You're in Paris. And I think I know why. Let me guess. Since you are in Paris, and you can't speak French, and you refuse to speak English, it's close to silence and close to the beginnings of language. No one will fault you for saying very little. Perhaps, you've moved into a hotel or a neighborhood filled with Polish refugees, Solidarity exiles from martial law, none of whom speak English or French. There, you are entirely protected and yet free.

I'm glad you got some money from Benny. Anybody who marries a guy named Benny deserves a decent settlement. You can wave money in the patisserie and pick up a croissant on a drippy Parisian February Sunday. Now, I'm a foreign correspondent. It's drippy in SF. Herb Caen, this morning, records a poem written by a guy named Frank Crow, "Roses are red, violets are blue, I'm schizophrenic, and so am I."

My other roommate, Carlos, was one of the musician/dancers in Batucaje. After he danced, a beautiful black woman danced, and it was a quantum leap she took. Carlos was OK, but when that woman flew onto the dance floor, surrounded by an arcing throng, executing rapid steps, all other dancing faded to a fast walk. The band drew back, after her extraordinary art, and held a rhythm for twenty minutes or so, while the crowd broke into dance. We danced and danced. Then we went home and talked and made love and got up and talked and made love, and I still feel platonic.

I'm talking to Eric and Robin. Eric has been comparing law school to a cult, like EST. I've seen that in my friend Mike. Now that he's a practicing lawyer, he's changed. He's become staid and boring. He was going to throw a massive birthday party for me. He used to go on at length about my greatness and its reward, his party. It was to be a grand accolade for me, at 40.

Recently, he palmed the party off on Richard Shuttleworth. Richard went skiing last weekend, and he hasn't been seen since. Mike's excuses are odd. He's too busy. It would cost too much. Barbara told him that a catered party would be inappropriate anyhow. Call it a BYO and open the door. Big deal. I think it has to do with Mike's lawyerization. He's now a soldier in good standing in the corporation. He's been incorporated.

A woman who's a court reporter sat near us. She lives in Sausalito, jogs every day, and has her whole being groomed. The guys think she's interesting. Bill said he thought she was spacey, with her brain locked in at an oblique angle.

It reminds me of a woman I once knew who was always in some kind of space or another - a thinking space, a working space, a loving space. One day I asked her how she was doing, and she replied, "Really good. I'm in a really solid space, these days." Imagine that.

Last night, when Barbara and I were dancing, we had to contend with her bag. She was afraid to check the bag, for fear of losing her passport, among other things. I took the bag, a leather, saddle-bag type, with a long strap, and I slung it across my chest, so it hung in the small of my back. I joked, "Now I can say, 'Last night I danced with an old bag.'" It was funny, but not that funny.

This afternoon, I read that women discard their old bags because of that very connotation. Am I going out with an old bag? Does papa want a brand new bag? I think so. Barbara and I kept grinning at each other, sheepishly, as we tried to be passionate. Pleasant was the peak of the experience. The least little distraction, and I lost my erection. And I didn't care much, except for the missed satisfaction, for both of us.

The last time Sherry Stern came in the cafe and wanted to join me, I waved her off, because I was writing. She was miffed. This time, I was between impulses, so I waved her in. We sat in silence.

"Champagne and cocaine, that's a nice combination," she said.

"What brought that on?" I ask. She shrugs.

"Just uncorked it, huh?" I say.

Then I add, "Uncorked and uncoked."

Sherry says she aches all over.

"I need a full-body massage," she says.

Gee, I wonder what other words there are for that. It's great not being able to get it up for all these semi-attractive opportunities. I'm tired of Texas Chain Saw romances.

(9PM) Another woman named Barbara sat down with me. She's a psychologist and, in the course of our talking, I described Nanci a bit. She picked it up and laid out for me the type called neurotic-hysteric, i.e., unresolved Oedipal complex, inability to maintain long-term meaningful relationships, seductive but often hates sex, global thinking, impressionistic fits of melancholy for no reason, defensive.

"Jesus," I said, "it's amazing how people actually fit these types."

The positive side of much of the list is appealing, and much of it I can identify with. I described you, and she was impressed and certainly didn't see you as anything but sane, but she did think you were narcissistic.

"Artists are often narcissistic," she said.

I think, "Yeah, artists and others."

The Sixties was the We Generation. The Seventies was the Me Generation. I ventured that the Eighties would be the It Generation. Consciousness goes from the group, to the individual, to the universal. The artist goes from ego to narcissism to the universal. Any artist has to develop his or her own voice or vision, and, along the way, act like a hot dog, and then is a doubter.

Anyone who wants to reach universality must pass through stages of self that seem false. Anyone may be arrested at any stage. Anyone going through the ego, through narcissistic or selfish stages, will draw judgment. "What an asshole. What a jerk. What's his problem?" He himself will not know if he believes in the process, or if he's doing the right thing.

As you can see, I've been accused, directly, and by inference, of narcissism. Clinically speaking, the neurotic narcissist is not conscious of others and will take any slight, imagined or real, as a crushing blow.

On my way back to the cafe, after going home for dinner, I ran for a trolley. I got on and sat down, checking my lungs, heart, and legs. Not bad.

A guy, across the aisle, watched me. He was a hard-looking son of a bitch. Young, with close-cropped hair, baseball cap, army boots, cold eyes. There were only three or four people on the trolley, and he was spun around, looking back at me, staring.

I had my fur-collared coat on, and I presumed he thought I was a gay guy. I couldn't decide if he was a fag or a fag hater. We both got off at 9th Avenue, he by the front and me by the back door. We crossed paths, and I was prepared to kick the shit out of him, if he tried anything. On the trolley, his aggression made me self-conscious and nervous. I matched his hard gaze and his body rigidity.

When we passed, he said, in a surprisingly soft voice, "See you later." And, I didn't say, "What's your fucking problem, asshole?"

The question I ask myself, after Roxan and Nanci, both of a type, is; why do I find these women so appealing? Don't all men find them appealing? I know it's a nearly impossible situation. So, I've set myself up again for the question. I have no interest in ordinary women. I am erotically drawn to beautiful but narcissistic women. I'm attracted to neurotic-hysterical women. Big-breasted women. Also skinny women with gorgeous cunts.

Every time. So, I'm not in love with Barbara. So Nanci is screwy, and I loved her, but I couldn't solve her puzzle. So some stupid jerk on the trolley thinks and acts weird.

Nadja is in Paris, living with Lech Walesa. I'm in San Francisco, living with dreams of Paris. Are you getting plastered in Paris, Nadja?

There's a skinny broad with no tits, sitting across the room, wearing a T-shirt that reads, "Reach out and touch someone."

"Hello, hello, Nadja, are you there? I can't hear you. It's a bad connection. What? I can't hear you. Can you hear me? What? All right, I'll keep talking. I hope you can hear me. I'm glad you're in Paris, but now you're even farther away. My imagination can't keep up with you. It was easier before. Are you still there? Can you hear me? I'm sorry. I have to hang up. I can't afford this call. I'll keep writing, I promise. Goodbye. OK? I love you. Very much. Maybe I'll come to Paris. Bye, Nadja, bye. Nadja?"

Nanci gave me an expensive cigarette lighter last Christmas. There was a sailing ship on the side. The thin strip of metal, that was the embossed ship, came off. The glue didn't hold. I'm doing the impossible, Nadja, if not the absurd, if not the ridiculous, if not the stupid. My love is the muse, my work is poetry, my reward is unlikely. All the talk is doom or distraction. Here I am, living for a future of virtues.

"The nightingales won't let you sleep in Platres." (George Seferis)

"That's beautiful," I think.

Then Nice Lee gets up to leave.

"Jesus, I feel depressed," I think.

Lee says, "Whatcha reading, Steve?"

"A book," I say, softly, but harshly, not beautifully, like nightingales in literature. Sunday is my traditional night to howl at the moon.

MON/FEB 15

Nadja,

I have two friends, both writers, and she wrote an article about their life together that was published in "California Living." The letter response was amazing. In the article, she described the difficulties of living as writers, on food stamps, him driving a cab, taking care of his two kids, part-time. She describes buying beer, because it's cheap. Dozens of letters came in, lambasting them for being slothful leeches, parasites, and bums.

A woman I know, a painter, asked me if I thought there were people who are unable to live in this world. She was talking about a poet friend who'd had himself committed in New Jersey so he could get some peace and write. I thought she was asking about me.

This is obvious, I suppose. After the narcissism bit, and after thinking about my thwarted love life, the end of your marriage to Benny, my marginal life as a poet, yours as a solitary and now as an exile, I could hear the accusatory condemnations roiling up from the backwaters of my experience. I got to thinking about how the snow-bound hearts of Middle America would react to your life and mine.

We don't have to answer to them. This little book about you and me and the rest of the aberrant gang will go on the shelf. Don't open until after the war. Later. When things have cooled down. When the people who don't pay any attention, except when threatened, have stopped paying attention. I know you're not having an affair with Lech Walesa, so who else?

Barbara is reading **Savage Amusement**, and she likes it. She didn't get anything done, because she was caught up in the book. She says it has an underlying sadness. True. The old inescapable Underlying Sadness. The great virtue of literature. You don't get anything done, and you feel sad.

Barbara's friend, Craig, says his brother said The Owl and The Monkey is a seedy place. I had just left one chair, because The Bug Lady sat down next to me. She takes a bath once a lifetime, whether she needs it or not, and her hobby is picking real and imagined bugs off her body. The fragrance drove me away.

"It IS seedy. I like it," says Barbara.

I do, too. The door is open. Anybody can come through. And does. I didn't work today, because it's raining. The sequential satellite photos of the continental shelf looks like lace curtains in the wind.

Darryl Cox called me. He runs a house for homeless boys out on Hunter's Point. I went there to look at some rooms he wants painted. I was uncomfortable entering the ghetto. Winos and pimps, buses packed with unemployed teenagers. I don't know the rules in poor Black society. I like Darryl. He introduced me to Willis, 16, bored, lost, sitting in his purple-painted room, he didn't want the color changed - it matches his psyche.

I walked off The Point. I walked for miles. Today is Lincoln's birthday, sort of, so the streets were un-commercially deserted. I only had a dollar in my pocket, because the bank is closed. I owe rent. No work. Rain. I passed an empty field, and for a split-second, the smell of rain-soaked earth filled my senses with memories of Nebraska. I walked back and forth, inhaling the aroma.

The night I went dancing with Barbara, I rubbed on some of Mike's deodorant before I got dressed. (Mike is the guy, another poet, whose room I'm renting. He keeps it as an office, which he visits once a month for ten minutes. I'm living in his bachelor room, while he prepares to marry and live with Judy, on the other side of town.) Later, at the dance, I thought, "Jesus, somebody's wearing perfume." I pulled out my shirt-front and musked myself in the nose.

Barbara looks great, sitting across the room with Craig. It's going to take me a while to get over Nanci, I think. Being with Barbara, the other night, has opened me emotionally. I'm vulnerable to the slings, arrows, and heartbeats. When she mentioned sadness, it got to me, and now I'm feeling sad.

There's poetry in them there feelings. I just re-read the line about the poet in New Jersey, who went to an asylum, so he could get some peace and write. It came out "peace and riot" in my mind, like the riot of color in a field of flowers.

MON/FEB 16

Dear Nadjadarosz,

Today is the last day I have left being 30. So far, so good. I got wrapped up in a long conversation, last night, with Dan, the bartender, at Yancy's. Dan is studying to be a shrink. We talked about the good and bad of shrinkery. He said I had the non-obtrusive nature of a good therapist. We talked so long and well that I forgot to eat, and I forgot to drink.

(Barbara gave me a big hug on her way out the door, just now, as I write, and that feels good.)

Dan described primary and secondary narcissism, and neither applies to you or me. I think I'm using the wrong term. Singularity is the term I kept using. What I mean is the pursuit of singularity, with creativity as the result.

A woman walks up to the counter and says, "I'll have five bi-sexuals to go."

John says, "You want those with mayonnaise?"

Lately, I've been seeing you moving rapidly into the cafe life with its political discussions and the passionate boudoirs of Paris. I imagine you've already made your first pun in Polish. Maybe you've gotten yourself into a real solidarity space. How many exiles are in your crowd? How many exiles does it take to screw in a light bulb? I imagine the Poles are bursting with radical, intellectual freedom, and I see you bursting right along with them. I envy you. Perhaps a dispensation from the Pope will unite us.

The only thing missing in San Francisco is a fervor, a sense of being AT something. Dan asked me, last night, if I could leave SF, to go to some other city. I told him about going back to Illinois, last year. I summed it up thusly; because of family and familiar surroundings, I never felt lonely there, but I always felt isolated. Here, I often feel lonely, but I never feel isolated. And, I feel less lonely here than ever.

Paris has always seemed to be a congenial place to me. Barbara, who was born in Brussels, also lived in Paris, New York, and has traveled extensively. (Her father lives in Columbia) She wondered if I'd ever been abroad. (Christine Jorgenson went abroad and came home a broad.) No, I

said. She said she thought I had absorbed some character of the world, anyhow. That's nice, but I'd like to go.

The women are coming and going in the cafe. There are boutique guerillas, students, doctors and nurses, ex-hippie housewives. In my non-obtrusive way, I'm ever-so-slightly flirting with them. It's akin to merely enjoying life.

Mickey and Joel came in. Both are writers. Joel gave it up for the 9 to 5. He acts ashamed, but he looks good. Mickey keeps plugging away, and he looks harassed. These letters have a life of their own, now. It's no longer crucial that you respond. In fact, as your life opens up, the other end of my writing opens up to you.

I keep wanting to say something about my 30s. Almost all were spent in San Francisco, going from grad student to writer/performer, from the poetry scene to seen enough, from married to fucking around, to obsessive-in-love, to singularity. From ambitious expectations to commitment. From passion to persistence. From depression, to breakdown, to breakthrough, to sanity.

I've changed, Nadja. I've actually changed. I don't wear masks, anymore, except for fun. It was a real bitch, Nadja. One thing I like - I know a lot of people, I always have, and they smile at me. Nice smiles.

There's a young woman, sitting near me, who is very attractive, and by all my experience, not my type. Barbara has changed my ideals. I've always gone for the flashy women. This woman nearby is wearing rounded glasses, a blue suit with a lavender-ruffled collar. She has an aquiline nose, expressive lips, open smile, soft, direct voice, high forehead, an innocence in her eyes. She's interviewing a young guy for something. She hasn't glanced at me, so it's probably him that has her so appealing, but it's nice to see. She's quietly nervous, plucking at her fingers, her purse in her lap, as she bites her nail.

He's vulnerable, because he's applying. She's got one pimple below her lower lip, pretty as her lips are. She's a micro-processor. Boy, I'd love to micro-process her.

(pause) I resolved that attraction by making the big move to a window seat. And then she left, to go live in Sunnyvale, I suppose.

Nanci's brother, Sal, came in and sat with me. He tells me that Nanci cracked her mother's rib, giving her a loving hug.

"Some pretty tough broads in your family, Sal," I say.

Sal nodded, sagely.

"And very competitive with each other."

He nodded again. I thought, "You live with one of them, and you check into the Nutcracker Suite."

Are you a ball-buster, Nadja? I think not. Mother called me a heartbreaker, last year. I don't think so. Without an ulterior motive, without suppressed rage, or without misleading advertising, I don't think you can be that harmful. Nanci's aunt Maria just came to the window and waved at me. Is this a conspiracy? If it is, I love the intrigue.

Sal said he was going to talk to Nanci, tonight.

"I'll tell her I saw you," he says.

Sherry's old roommate just passed the cafe. Roxan's friend Millie, who introduced us, called a few days ago. I ran into Debra's cousin, Jeff, on the 2AM trolley, last week. My vibes feel terrific, today. Hello, America. Hello, World. Hello, Paris. Hello, Nadja. I'm getting tired of your name. Nadja. Nadja. It deserves an explosion.

I worry about ball-buster women. It's a hard addiction to break. I think I became, for them and me, a cunt-buster, in self-defense. My fighting days are over. I told Paul, when I met Roxan, I wanted to take on the best the enemy had to offer. No more enemies. I'm more and more attracted to gentle women.

(9PM) The Mad Man of the Pampas is snapping pictures. This old fucker, who smokes with a long holder and then coughs, runs across the street and takes a picture of the window dressing in the Riding High boutique. He drinks Rainier Ale and stands in the middle of the room, until he picks out someone to harangue, in broken English, about God knows what. He wears brightly colored shirts and chain necklaces and a Greek cap. He rolls his sleeves up above his biceps. He's a Nazi, if you ask me. He loves little kids (I doubt it) and calls them "my friend."

Richard showed up, tonight, after two weeks absence, in fine fettle, and expansive as ever. He bought me a beer, sat down to converse with a new woman, and I went up to get my beer. He tells the girl that he and I have a love affair, and it rankles me. The guy puts me off as much as I like

him, and his loud voice inclines me to tell him to stuff it. Check out those allusions. I'm aroused, and I tell him to shove it up his ass.

I like Richard's willingness to talk in terms of love about people, but there's a perversity about him that's annoying. This is my last night to be 30. I feel like boogying down. I feel like booming.

WED/FEB 17

Dear Tiger Lily,

I boomed. I drank several Rainiers. I ran into Katie, at 10:30 when she was cleaning out the toilets, and I said, "You shouldn't have said I was teasing you. It made me stop."

"I didn't want you to stop," she said.

So, I didn't. I followed her into the storage room, and we "necked" for a while. Great fun. Richard and I went to North Beach, looking for Nanci at the North Star, where she hangs out. She wasn't there, and Richard got drunk enough to forget where he parked the car. I left him, after we'd circled dozens of blocks, and I went looking for Luc. (Luc turned forty this month.) I couldn't find him, in the bars and cafes of North Beach, so I walked down to Market and took the bus home.

Today's the big Four 0. I got a card from Mother. She wants to know if I'm looking forward or backward. Then she says, "You know, the best part about being a Christian is that you can start a new life, anytime, and you can even become a new person." She included a note saying that Mark has decided to divorce himself from the family. She says it's "his mother" that's at the bottom of all of his problems. She always refers to herself as "his mother" or "your mother." She says Dad "has cried tears."

I got a birthday card from Nanci. I called her, and she says she's doing well, but she's afraid of becoming hard. We talked about you. She liked you from the moment I began talking about you. I said I'd mentioned her in my letters to you. She closed off the conversation by saying if we talked any longer, she'd want to see me, and she couldn't let that happen.

I'm a little foggy, tonight. I expect this day will pass into the next without incident. Yesterday was enough, and tomorrow, I have to do a bid, and tomorrow night is party night in the cafe.

I don't understand why Mark wants to do Battle Royal with Mother. He's determined to kill her or die trying. She's blind to her psychosis, and he won't leave it alone. They are locked in a hopeless, downward spiral. "He doesn't love his Mother" and "She never loved me."

The thing that struck me about the family and the Midwest is the disinterest in self-knowledge. The Bible. A Job. Marriage and Kids. Be Nice.

That's all she wrote. Remember Christmas, two years ago? When Mother didn't want to be recorded, because she didn't like her voice.

"Then, change it," I said.

"I'm too old to change," she said.

Now she says, heavy on the hint, that if I was a Christian, I could become "a new person."

"Are you content with what you've done with your 40 years of living?" she asks.

Nanci said she'd heard from Miriam that I was happy these days.

I told her, "I'm not a tormented man."

It feels good to think that, to say that, to feel that. The wallpaper in the john has flowers on it, with their names. The two next to each other are Narcissus and Tiger Lily.

It's curious to me that I don't go on at length about the family. But, I'm glad I don't. I used to. It feels good to find out that one is beyond all that. Not above it, but past it.

I'm extremely jumpy, tonight. I wonder if it isn't bottled up emotion. When I was "a tormented man," I was very emotional. Now that I feel sane, it's back to that kid I was, affected by everything but unconcious of it's emotional impact. Wise to it, though. So, here goes.

Everytime I get one of these sad, veiled condemnations from Mother, I ride over it, but it hurts inside. Fucking Bitch! Stupid Woman! And talking to Nanci was strange. I told her it was odd to talk about my emotional well-being in a conversation in which we were both being cool. It all came out cool. She agreed, but we kept to it.

Sandy, behind the counter, said, "You're awfully quiet, tonight, for a birthday."

I've been concentrating on the positive so much lately, I've hardly given a nod to the unsettling aspects. Lee Strasberg died today at 80.

I thought, "I'm halfway to dead."

I'm starting to feel more alive. I'm reading "Lady Sings the Blues," Billie Holliday's autobiography. It's good, and depressing. What carries through her highs and lows (and a lot of her life was horrible) is the singing. It's not in the book. The book is everything but the thing that gives the book its reason to be.

I think about my books, my prose, my poetry, my life. Billie Holliday, that extraordinary human beauty, power, wisdom, accident, never had a moment's complaint. She never said, "I deserve." She felt rage, anger, misery, yes, but there's no petulance.

Last year, after Mom and Dad and I had gone out to dinner, after I had told them what parts of them I thought had gone to make up my life: his poetic sensitivity, her dramatic boldness, she had an outburst, sitting in the Cadillac Seville, in the parking lot of a fancy Mexican Restaurant.

"I haven't gotten what I deserve!" she cried, pounding on the dashboard, her head lowered, her voice bitter. She almost screamed it.

"My life has not turned out the way it was supposed to."

Then she caught herself and dismissed the thought. She brushed it off like it was a bumble-bee, caught in the car by accident.

I can't say I'm satisfied with my life at 40, but I'm content in a most satisfying way.

"I am about my Father's work."

Wow. Those words leaped into my brain. God, and my own father. I am doing what this particular human being belongs doing. Whether or not I'm successful or singularly remarkable doesn't matter anymore.

"This is it, folks!" I feel like crying out in joy, crying softly, with joy.

I am. Oh, Nadja, my lily, my sister, I don't deserve anything more than this. I've put in the work to get to this point, and now I am here. I've seen the future, and it works. On the radio comes Don McLean's paean to Buddy Holly, "American Pie", and "That'll be the day that I die. That'll be the day that I die."

But I won't die. I have died into life. My youth is dead. I'm young again, but from now on, I'm young in the accident of each new minute. In my spirit, which should never grow old.

SAT/FEB 20

Na-ja,

"I come here, every day, for coffee."

"I come here, every day, for hours."

What a weekend. Nowhere to begin. So, I'll put it off for a minute and write a check for cash. \$35 to crisis. Tom is a constant surprise. I'd been trying all weekend to get a car or a truck to haul my painting equipment and ladders, and Tom volunteered.

I just put the kids on the train. They're coming up every week, and I have discovered a very simple, wonderful "device" for having a good time with them. Love. I look at them with love, and everything we do is an easy pleasure. We spent the day at the park. Jack and Rachel, big as they are, waded and played in the kids' pool in the Children's Playground.

When Jack got out, he said, "Well, that's my twelve year old fun." (He's fifteen and a half.)

"I think it's great," I said, "that you kids play so easily. It's good to be able to play like a little kid."

Surprisingly, I did too. I got on the swings and ran about, and a description of play needs more than that. It's being caught in the play. Play, not playing at. Loving them, I'm led to play. I did it intentionally, but doing survives intention and becomes being.

I drank, each night, for three days. Then, I stopped yesterday and today, and tomorrow, I'll be healthy. And, tonight, my brain is returning to full strength. My thoughts quicken.

I had another quick thought about the intention of singularity. But first, I just remembered that when I slept with a woman on Thursday night, I did not, at any moment, mislead myself. I enjoyed it. Every occasional moment of flight was replaced by pleasure. As a result, we were both satisfied.

Even so, it was unsettling, over the last few days, to be estranged from my habits and my usual self. I was eager for the kids to come, and when they did, I felt centered (I believe is the word).

The guy sitting next to me borrowed my George Seferis collection of poetry and then told his friends he's begun writing poems. The problem is, he says, that you can have a strong feeling but not be able to convey it well enough to anyone else.

Intention. Doing. Being.

Noel just gave me bad news. The ten bucks I loaned him won't be coming in for a while. He got laid off.

Oh, as regards my quick thought on singularity, I can't remember what prompted it, but it came first as a feeling of guilt and self-indulgence, but quickly passed to resolve. The resolve is to continue to live this life. This life is a marathon, of say, 26 years, and I have just passed the point where the body wants to quit. I imagine death is the reward the king gives to the messenger from Marathon. I finished "Lady Sings the Blues," and one line affected my perception of Billie Holliday. She says, "I never did set well with women."

It reminds me of Roxan and Nanci and the girl I called Lisa in **Savage Amusement**. These are women who know many men but have few women friends. They are Women in Competition, or women who grow up caught in the competition. It's none of their doing, but they start doing it, and they keep doing it, until they are undone by it.

The women, who are seen as the great Warriors, in the Battle of the Sexes, are at ease only with their own "echelon," The Officers' Club of Actresses and Models, an uneasy alliance of the Hotsy-Totsy. Or they have a friend who's not in the competition, by any stretch of the imagination, or a mother.

It's 9:30, and for the first time in a long time, I feel alcoholic. The shit is in me, and as it surfaces, I feel unhealthy. I want to feel better tomorrow than I do tonight. Tonight is the night Mike and Richard were going to throw me a BIG birthday party. Not tonight.

"Perhaps, when I turn 50," I said, bitterly. My little bout with wanting a beer passed. I had a bowl of soup, instead. I talked to brother Mark on the phone for an hour and a quarter, the other night. He called and gave me his side of the Mother-Son battle. Have you talked to either of them, lately? Jesus, that's a silly question.

Hey, Natty, I read, yesterday, about 30 Afghans, who are seeking asylum in the U.S. "Seeking Asylum." That's what you were doing all that

time in Baltimore. Mother doesn't mention you when she writes. It reminds me of when I went to the family reunion in Ohio, last year. Dave's wife, Jana, asked me what I'd been doing in San Francisco, for the last dozen years. I said I was a poet.

"A poet! That's great!! How come your mother never told us?" Everytime anyone asked her how I was, she always said, in her tight-lipped fashion, "Fine," and that was it.

"I don't know," I said, "You'll have to ask her yourself."

Jana gave her a hard time when she walked past us, sitting in the parlor at Aunt Marlowe's house, just off the golf course in Columbus, one of America's favorite cities. Her probing had no effect, because Mother doesn't approve of Jana, any more than she approves of me or you.

She thinks Jana's not the right kind of wife. And of course, you weren't the right kind of wife to Benny. The World According to Mother. She's a male chauvinist. All women are inferior, except her. You and Mark and I have spent our lives surviving that sink-hole of a world view. Mark survives by fighting. I told him I was beginning to prefer gentle women.

"What?" he says, "You mean there is such a thing?"

These ball bouncers I've known have made me want to fight or to cure. But without intention on their part, they don't change. Mother must have been sweet to you for the first few years. I don't know. I suppose I'm apologizing or justifying. I'm trying not to accuse you of being like her. You're not, but there's no reason for you not to be. Were you adopted? Was I? Are the Parents why you didn't have kids?

Mark wants to blame Dad for not standing up to Mother. But we both like Dad. I told Mark I thought Dad only had a couple of choices. Divorce, a lifetime of fighting, or give in. He gave in. You and I and Mark did what? He battles, and we got divorces. Scott calls it love. That's good.

Mark told me a story. After an argument about Business, Mother said to him, "You hate me, don't you?" He's always said "Oh, no!" before, but this time he said, "Yes." Dad was leaning over the sink, and he seemed to sob. Mark looked at Mother, and the two of them smiled at each other. Mark said she smiled, because he made Dad cry.

I wonder, "Whose rejection has mother always anticipated, long before we were born?"

The shit you lay on kids always comes from somewhere else. I imagine her father did a number on her. She never talks about him. Grandma was a *saint*, or so she says, but Grandpa has disappeared from the record. And the credit, or blame, gets passed back up the generations like a daisy chain.

Enough of that. I was tempted, for a tenth of a second, to write Mother a long answer to her unquestioned misery, but I will not. You and I are family, and Mark is next of kin, and Dad is a decent man, like an uncle.

This is a turning point. You and I have both come out of our asylums. From now on, my voice broadens to include everyone of any readiness. Hey, I like that. Read-iness.

"Not of sufficiently wide appeal", huh?

Well, we'll see about that. I have had boundless energy, lately, suppressed only by alcohol. I asked a sixty-year-old professor in the Little Shamrock (a popular neighborhood bar, just across from the park) last Thursday, why I was so energetic, at forty.

"I don't know," he answered.

SUN/FEB 21

Sis,

It's a beautiful, sunny day. I went to the park and watched a semi-pro baseball game. One guy crouched so low the ball was bigger than the strike zone. In the third inning, when the centerfielder caught a high fly ball, the announcer said, "That's two put-outs in this inning for Brewer." A guy on the bench shouted out, "Yeah, one more, and he ties a record." Think about it. You'll get it.

I went home without drinking last night and woke up with boundless energy. I washed everyone's dishes, cleaned up the back porch, made a big breakfast, and cleaned up my room. I left the decorations up, from the birthday party that Jack and Rachel threw for me, yesterday. When I went to take a shower, they'd already been out to the store. When I got back to the room, there were red streamers strung across the ceiling, party hats, tootsie rolls all around like Easter eggs, and Perrier water they called champagne. They gave me a card and big smiles, and I hugged and kissed them and said, "You kids are great!"

"We know!" they both said.

Last night, I had a dream of opening a safe. Out came a long worm creature with two crab-like sections, front and back. I tried to "kill" it with my foot, and I couldn't. She was tough. I thought only drowning would do it. I woke up, resolute. I thought, "Well, now that I've convinced everyone, including myself, that I'm a recluse, with no interest in conquering the world, I think I'll do just that."

I thought about becoming a comedian, after watching "Evening at the Improv" last night. The comedians weren't funny. I go on stage and say, "I tell stories of youth, and that brings me up to the present. I read from notes, because I have a lousy memory, and I can't pretend this stuff just pops into my head as I stand here." That still sounds like a good idea.

I would like to understand what's wrong with America, the United States of. I read the local hot-shot columnist, Herb Caen, and one thing he either says, or shows, is "San Francisco has everything but"

America has everything, but... But, I'm examining this beast from inside its belly. I think I need to get out. My horoscope calls for a change of venue and a great burst of creativity.

The cafe is crowded, so it's likely someone will take the seat opposite me. Since I don't own the table, I'm open to the vicissitudes of patronage. First, the Madman of the Pampas hovers dangerously close. Now, Nice Lee is near. I'd prefer a total stranger. Uh, oh, sorry, Steve, you get Mr. Nicely. Why people, whose intention is entirely social, would want to sit with an unsociable bastard like me, is beyond my comprehension.

Maybe I'll become sexual this afternoon. Coffee, the thinker's drug, is not appropriate. Tea, the drug of meditation, is out. I'll have to make up a drug. An eyeball drug. The intoxication of attraction. The sensual secret that wanders in the body. I feel like writing a poem or two.

(Pause) No poems right now.

Lee harrumphed and whistled and sighed, as he read, waiting, hoping for my curiosity to get the better of me. It didn't. A cute girl sat down at the next table, and Lee said, "Nothing against you, Steve, but I think I'll sit over there. I don't care for these window seats all that much."

"OK," I said. I feel like a beer. I'd have one, except I really do *feel* like a beer. Lingered shades of beeriness.

(9PM) Whenever I try to imagine myself as a poet, in America, it is as a poet inside America. Not OF America. I certainly am American, and I don't mind that. There's nothing to make me believe that because I'm American I'm not a poet, but whenever I imagine the fulfillment of my life as a poet I don't imagine it here.

I can imagine going to another continent, country, city, and being recognized for being a poet and American. If that recognition, and I mean in the plainest way, allows me to return to the United States with my eyes clear, I would be satisfied, not in the achievement of my work, but in the knowledge of my existence as an American poet. (note: This happened on my return from India, in '92.)

I need a little distance. I need to come to Paris. The time is ripe and soon to be rotten. Something is rotten in the etcetera I'm surrounded by. I imagine ways of getting to Paris. I can only be alive to Paris, and see the route. My eyes are open to the passage. I can't emerge as poet here, except by continuing this growth.

Book me passage, my sister who does not exist, rent me rooms, prepare my way with introductions, regale your Polish-French friends with stories, both mild and wild, about your brother, the American Poet.

I need to sit quietly and anticipate.

Paris, I conjure you up out of the asylums of America, Dream City, more real than the real land of sleep, You are the woman I want, You are the sister city of my life, In You, I will be let out from imprisonment. Paris, I want You. Home of my new heart, I'm at that point in the life of a poet when I have to leave my homeland. Now is the time. The time is now. It is time. My head's in a turmoil. I spin toward Paris. I see foreigners, and they are American. I see a woman, I buy her dinner, She buys me dinner in Paris, I am alive, intently alive. Woman of Paris in Paris Woman, I want you, Home of my new heart.

Enough of chanting. It's turning, Nadja. The guy I work for suddenly has no work. A woman, nearby, says, "You create karma." She seems to say, at least, that we are responsible.

"What about the karma of others, working on you?" I ask, and she says, "The cafe is here. You created it. I created it. We create each other."

I'm reading Nazim Hikmet, a wonderful Turkish poet, in prison, and in exile. My world is breaking loose and apart, again. At least, the cafe is alive, tonight. Thank you again, my children, for my wonderful birthday party.

One sits, in the afternoon, wishing for,
like a picture in a magazine, a blood infusion,
hopelessly sanguine, that night, this one,
tonight, bloody, yes, blood red, infused,
infused, "Come to the Zen Center and
face the Wall for a while." And what if
one has been facing a wall for years?
I gotta get out of this place.

Joyce waves at me and says, "You were drunk in here, the other night, do you remember our conversation?"

I am manufacturing life. I am the karmic manufacturer of my Detroit. I sat with three ordinary American women, charmed by the movies, charmed by my drunken antic voyaging, looked out of my eyes from within my brain, I took excuse and removed myself, the charm, is it a dazzle only?

Nadja, are we just having fun from fear, like blindness in the darkness, before we dream out a fantasy? The only thing that keeps me from being a trickster millionaire is this notion of truth. Charmer, trickster, actor, poet, are you dying for lack of lying? Flying, bound, I won't get to Paris on the ground.

MON/FEB 22

Love, Nadja, where is love? Another question. WHAT is love? Between two people. Perhaps the one question I will be asking myself, all my life. All my life. I feel frenetic, today. I went to the Cafe Flore, Cafe Gitane, The Clarion, La Boheme, and The Owl. I had a cup of coffee everywhere I went and looked at women.

I ran into Stan Rice at the Flore. He asked me about the crazy stewardess I went to Monterey with. "That was seven years ago, Stan." He told me he was going to the nursery school to pick up his four year old son. "What four year old son?" I asked. As you can tell, Stan and I have fallen out of touch. I told Stan I wasn't able, anymore, to romanticize women. I look at them, and I see the next hours, days, weeks, months.

"The curse of Cassandra, the curse of prophecy," he said.

I need love. I need drama. Today, I think I need some more theatre. I mentioned my desire for Paris to Stan, and he thought I really ought to go. I proposed it as metaphor, but I prefer it as goal. I'm manic. I'm 40. Maybe I have TB. Fevered energy? This book feels bogged down in dissatisfaction, but it's an old truism that dissatisfaction precedes action.

I got a phone call from Grinnell, tonight, and I thought it was Jim Kissane telling me they had a teaching job for me. No such luck, although I panicked for a moment to think of being stuck in Iowa. It was a fund-raising drive. A freshman was sitting in a room, with 25 others, for three hours, calling out for money.

"I might consider it, if I had any money," I said, "Oh, well, I chose the life of a poet."

We chatted. At the end, he said there was a gorgeous blond saying "Hi".

In La Boheme, I read through my collection of poems called **The Queen of the Rhumba**, and I was struck by the thwarted love spoken, in many ways, all through the book.

I told Stan I was done with ball bouncers. He said I should quit going out with such beautiful women. I agreed, but added that it was difficult. I'm attracted to beautiful women. He agreed.

I said I was going to put an ad in the Bay Guardian, "Wanted, beautiful, brilliant, but gentle woman." Later, in an imaginary dialogue I

answered the question, "What would substitute for all those qualifications?"

"Funny," I said to myself.

"I don't know what star I was born under," Stan said, "I'm getting paid for sitting here."

He looked around at the cafe. Stan's wife, Anne, got rich off her first novel, and he's a tenured professor.

I said, "The progress of my writing doesn't have anything to do with my economic situation. Or the lack of progress, either," I added.

I'm so antsy, I want a beer. I stopped after a few, last night, and went home. Good boy. Smart boy. I found a bucket of fish, or burritos, or something, outside a restaurant, on my way home, and it looked like meals for a month. I dumped it in a trash barrel outside the Forest Hill Tunnel. Jesus, it stunk. It was making me sick. I shoulda quit one beer sooner.

Can you believe that story? I sat on the 44 bus with a bucket of rotten fish. It was covered nicely with aluminum foil, but as the foil began to rip, out came the awful truth. I was in that state of mind where I thought it all made perfect sense to find a bucket of good food sitting in front of me on the sidewalk.

I was talking to Not Nice Lee, yesterday, and we got to telling stories and cracking jokes. Funny how some people draw that out.

"This must be a funny table," he said, "It's funny how it inspires me."

It wasn't funny ten minutes before when Nice Lee was sitting at it. Nicely kept trying to join the fun, but it was like pissing on the crepe paper.

I don't feel so good. I feel cloudy. 100 years from now, some doctor will read this and diagnose my disease or deficiency. I call it dissatisfaction dementia. Inasmuch as my necessary isolation is over, and inasmuch as you, you dog, have made it to Paris, I want as much for myself. This fiction serves to satisfy only so far. Eventually, life must perform its reality purgation. I anticipate that my writing might stop.

(pause) I can tell when my writing has lost its central drive, and goddammit, this feels like "Dear Diary."

"Dear Mother, Thanks to your other son saying HATE, I have carried the talisman with me for days, Hate? Mother, do I hate you? How does one hate what is lacking, what's not done, called undone, unfelt, unsaid, how do I hate what you were not?"

I wrote a poem once (My wife said it was my best, at the time.) about the man who thought he was Jesus, who attacked the Michelangelo Pieta, who battered the Holy Mother about the breasts and eyes.

“You made me a charmer, Mother, and took away the love, never knew it, never showed it, never taught me, how can one teach what one cannot feel? Pass along all the rules without the heart? Mother and child did not fall in love. I know all about myself, Mother, but I always suspected something was missing, I begin to know, not from within, but from words and examples without. ‘Behold, Hamlet, your mother awaits without.’ How do I remedy this lack; this petty, not uncommon, experience?”

TUE/FEB 23

Blank tablet. Hours ahead. Half-carafe. The subject; anger. I read an interview with Ntozake Shange. Her work is based on her anger at men. It works. Anger is an effective tool for perspective. Words are spoken in anger. Adrenalin, verbal fluid, like a release of rhetoric. Anger is a great space for emotion.

Mark once said that the worst thing in world was anger. Now he says he is angry. The kids brought me his four-page letter, but they lost it on the train.

I had a fantasy. Write poems, play, based on anger at women. Get strung up. Tarr'd and feathered. Drawn and quartered. Vilified. Reviled. One poem, for starters. Fuck you, Nadja. You've always had it your way. Even insanity, your way. Benny wasn't such a bad guy. Couldn't handle you. So what? Poor slob. You knew it. You did it. You screwed him. Dumped him. Fussed over by fancy doctors in cushy asylum on Chesapeake Bay, fly to Paris, charm rooms full of men, order croissants, wave money, drink wine, dance, get your fucking hair done, chop it off, paint it blue, let your tit hang out your arm hole, even at 41, plenty of years left for wit, but where is wisdom, sister?

Julie used to ride me, mercilessly. I slapped her, once.

"You're a man. You're bigger than I am. You can't do that."

"OK, you're right."

I dropped my weapon. She kept hers.

Her mother said, "You beat on a man, until he breaks. If he doesn't break, he's a good man."

And, dear lady, when does the beating stop? Only when he breaks?

Richard asked Nanci what the problem was.

"Steve didn't love me enough."

When is enough? What is enough? Do you know?

(Loud noises.) Poor women. Innocent victims of centuries of male abuse. Bullshit. Jesus, it's all there, in the history, Steve.

Or, as Kathryn Z. said one night, "Do you just hate me, or do you hate all women?"

Uh, oh, watch out, Steve, you've just been conned. She locked herself in the foyer, as I lay asleep, passed out, broke a window, and escaped.

Became a call girl. Bought a yacht. Made midnight calls to Chris. Chris hates women better than I do. I am alone, again, I am alone. Peasants of soul, don't we always learn the same lesson?

WED/FEB 24

Dear N,

Gentleness. Dead broke. Write \$5 overdraft. Sun. Cafe. Sit. Just sit. Happy. Anger is not my motivation. Gentleness. Back to the source. Barbara says anger, intense emotion, is a good impetus for art. She says I'm not an angry person. I try, sometimes, but it doesn't work. Better to be gentle. I say, "How about intense gentleness?" He's an intensely gentle man. It's Keats idea of (intense) disinterestedness. We talk about not caring whether you live or die. These are the polar attitudes of the criminally insane and sainthood.

Gentleness is a great weapon, says Barbara. I think of years of trying to be tough. I don't want to be a wimp, and I want to be gentle. Last night, I realized Clark wants to humiliate me. Among others. After talking to Lee and then watching Clark talk to him. Clark has to be superior to everyone. I told Herb, I am Clark's equal. Herb says "superior."

Clark must humiliate. Hires me. Lays me off. He knows I'm dependent on him. Doesn't rehire me. Herb says, let him do it, take the money, and run to Paris. I say, fuck Paris. I like being humble. It's good for soul. Humiliation is bad for soul. Grunt.

As I was getting angrier and angrier at Clark. Full of wine, I decided to get out before any damage was done.

I said, "Clark, if you need me, I'm ready."

He nodded. On the street, here comes Barbara. Thank you, Jesus. Laughing, talking, loving night.

Life. Subtle. Currents. Slips by. Rolls up on you. Sneaks up on you, like subtle treachery, with a grin on its face. Good stuff is just as subtle. Time to take off the heavy gloves. In reaction to Clark, I went up to Herb.

"Herb, I'd like to believe that we are friends."

"Yes, of course," he said and held out his hand.

Day before yesterday, he said, "I think you want to be a poet as much as I want to be a musician."

Both of us are artist winos or wino artists. Actually, I think my drinking has changed. Consciousness remains. No hangovers. All life in every corner. No need to go to Paris. I want to go to Paris. The break-

through in my art will be gotten with love and gentleness. The world at 6 inches. I'm always amazed when I listen to old rock and roll, old explosive music, that at the time seemed to overwhelm - how unforced it is.

THUR/FEB 25

Nadha,

I signed on, yesterday, to do "The First Annual Blood and Turnips Poetry Festival", my one-man show, at the Second Annual Nova Artist Show, in Golden Gate Park. Good idea. I'm up for it. It's good to look forward to performing. July 17th. I immediately began worrying about the profanity I use in the satire. There will be kids wandering around. Will it be arrest time for Uncle Steve? Certainly the climate is right for a new round of censorship trials.

One idea. As the moderator, Dennis Lllewellan, I could announce, before the festival, that conditions of the show require self-censorship and leave it up to the poets I play. Then, the cops could arrest fictitious characters, but not me, because I had Dennis make a disclaimer.

I can hear Noni Lustgarden now, "When you gently bite my swollen (beep)", or Perfidio Vitus, who, I'm sure, would refuse. "My woman has great steaming TITS - great American Divide STINKING PIT." Charles Drunkowski would simply get sloshed and forget the whole thing. It could be very interesting.

I'm in the cafe too early. I'm going to the library and the park. A guy named Royce says he sees me in the cafe as much as he's here, and he says he's *a bum*. He's young. He says he just wants to write and ride his bike.

I went with Jeff Miller to see a Brecht play at the Plough and Stars, an Irish bar on Clement. The play started reasonably well and then sank to a sustained muddle. The actors were loud, without any projection. Pity them, though. The front of the bar was business as usual. Video games, pool, darts, loud conversation. In the middle, between 1919 Germany and 1982 San Francisco, sat the bewildered audience. The high point, literally, was when the cast performed one scene entirely on stilts.

Our gaze was uplifted, dramatically. However, the dialogue continued to scrape the floor. It provoked ideas of using the scene integrally. The Death of an Iceman Cometh on a Hot Tin Roof. On the way home, Jeffrey pulled a dog-eared essay from his pocket, concerning the plight of poets and other mongrels. Jeff has a care, but it crosses, all too kindly, into pity.

A current movie was made from a ten-year-old script, carried around by a successful screenwriter. Everyone, who read it, praised it, but refused it. "We can't do this, it's TOO TRUE! I can get this reality at home, for free." It took ten years, from the actual reality it portrays, to the screen, and it's still "too true."

What's the answer to this phenomenon? Do we require distance for intimacy? Must art be an alternate reality? Specifically, it seems this particular screenwriter, when he was being original, was too literal, but when reworking others, brought the right edge to it. I can sympathize.

For instance, one of the burning impulses I have currently is the annihilation of this so-called sister of mine. She has served her purpose, and I'll be done with her, if I can. A couple of chapters back disintegrated to note-taking, and now I'd like to crank it up, but on another level. From now on, dear reader, as real as my sister is unreal, I'm addressing you. In truth, I prefer you. In truth. I prefer you, in truth.

This is a transition worth considering. The relationship between writer and reader is real. It IS an intimacy, and a fruitful one, at that. Writing, at least my own, loses its drive when I can't believe there is, or will be, a flesh and blood reader. And, I think, you are a reader who is very much alive. Forgive me, posterity. Although it's a moot point. Even if I'm dead, you, reader, are not dead.

Self-preserving as I think I might be, by imagining a latent readership beyond the pale, I prefer to keep it closer to home. Another bind is this requirement of distance. A book of poems or a story that strikes us as somehow too true, or too close to home, seems not to have any art to it.

On TV, this morning, there was a 26 year-old woman, suffering from hygeria, the disease of accelerated aging. At first glance, she was difficult to look at, but TV lets you look long and hard at what you might otherwise turn away from, and within the hour's interview, her face became familiar and less obtrusive, less shocking, and her personality came through. Unfortunately, I didn't care much for her personality. Her "inner beauty" didn't conquer the visible. I met a homely woman, once, who had awful taste in clothing, who told me she was beautiful, on the inside. I wanted to agree with her, but I didn't.

I've met a couple of beautiful women who also told me that their beauty went to the bone. "Beauty is only skin deep" seems to bring out the

wish for inner beauty across the spectrum, according to my random sampling. However, true inner beauty is not so easily revealed.

Jeff pulled out his essay. He wrote it a month ago, and he's considering rewriting it. My advice to him was, "Write another. Don't write the same one, over and over." It seems to me that people don't want *advice* for living, they want *devices* for living. What's your device? How do you do it? Everything boils down to a device. Writing my sister is a device. Religion, politics, philosophy, art; they're all full of devices. "I'm a Catholic" is a device. "I'm a child of god" is not. Unless you capitalize it.

What's the linkup here between beauty and truth, device and advice, Brecht and Brooks? You are, dear Reader. You are the linchpin. If I'm honest with you, I can go to the limits of my imagination. The only requirement is that you are honest and willing to your own imagination. Intense disinterest. Living without devices.

But what protects us from each other, without devices? Probably very little. If we get scared, we can bale out. You can revile and vilify. I can talk to my sister. You can feign boredom. I can feign resignation.

At the play, I said, "Every time I come to the theatre, I wonder why more people don't come, and I wonder why I don't come more often, but I don't." Then the play fell apart. Still, I'm glad I went. Every time is a risk. One thing missing, last night, which made the talent mediocre, was projection. The play wasn't given to the audience.

I give this to you. At least, that's my intention. The first part of the book must admit to misdirection, which felt necessary at the time, but you were in the back of my mind. Nadja stood in your place, but I was in danger of taking up residence in a house of mirrors.

What a relief. What a difference a day makes. I'm still broke. I still don't know how I'm going to get through the weekend, but I feel good. Poverty of direction makes all life poor. One can be directed, at, by, toward, in, something, it doesn't matter. But no direction is going nowhere fast. Intense disinterest is directed.

I think having the show to do in July has helped clear things up. I can't disengage from the world, no matter how much I may care for my work and its work. I'm going to spend the rest of the afternoon editing my poems for publication. This period of abstinence is over.

FRI/FEB 26

Bob, a friendly psychiatrist, recommends "The Uses of Enchantment" by Bruno Bettelheim. Here's an answer to the need for things not to be true. Bettelheim says, for instance, that telling children the underlying symbolic meaning of fairy stories robs them of the release. Children. It reminds me of Mike Tuggle's perfect nursery rhyme, "Once upon a time, a long time ago, in a far, distant land, they lived happily ever after."

I read several poems, last night, at open-mike night. I noticed several things. It's amazing what a deep well of adrenalin I have. I became much more than my usual self. It feels satisfying to be asked to read. Several other poets read, and a gradual rumble went up, demanding I read. Phil came over and poked me in the chest and said, "You read."

Bruce said, "You should read, Steve, but you're too good for this place."

I don't agree. This place is as good as any other place. Several others prodded me, and I did read. I became high. I told Dan the Bartender, later, that one unfortunate byproduct is the feeling that I deserve better than my poverty and humble station, but no one deserves anything that we don't all deserve. Poverty and humble station are good things. (Humble Station is the last stop to Downtown Poverty.)

Being who I am has its compensations. When I was talking to Dan, Melissa put all the unfinished drinks and order mistakes in front of me. And then, Lori sat down, took me home, and turned out to have the kind of creamy body that men dream about when they look at airbrushed photography. I loved making love to her. I made love without apology, regret, or promises. What a life, sometimes.

It's alternating between rain and bright sun, this afternoon. Beautiful, clean light. Bruce's grade school superintendent is in the cafe. He says it's Poets' Day.

"What's that?" I ask.

"**P** iss **O** n **E** verything, **T** omorrow ' s **S** atur **D**AY," he says.

SAT/FEB 27

There's a small shrine outside the wall of The Mission Dolores. People place vases of flowers there, in homage to St. Francis. Often, it's a humble offering. Yesterday, there was a beautiful lily in a large jar. The jar had a paper label on it. STEWED ZUCCINI 2/24/82.

Last night, I stayed home and washed my jeans, sox and underwear in a plastic bucket in the bathtub. This morning, I took them to the Washomatic to dry them. I had strung them up on the back porch, but this morning they weren't any drier.

The night before last, I dreamed I was stuffing baskets, playing basketball, while flying high above the rim. The ball was mushy, and I realized, at that height, all I had to do was drop it gently through the hoop. A bunch of people wanted to see my wondrous leaping ability. I demonstrated, but first, I had to clear all the furniture off the court.

Last night, I was driving in a pouring rain, dark and romantic. I nearly missed hitting an attractive woman who was crossing the thoroughfare, carrying a suitcase to a bus. I was glad I was sober and alert. There's no pressing business in my head. I have all day to sit here and welcome the world. Welcome, world.

Jeff calls the Madman of the Pampas "The Colonel". He's in attendance, this afternoon, coughing and wheezing, drinking Rainier Ale. He's writing a letter, "A ROSALINA." Spread in front of him are his camera, with a glittering decal on it, a small jar of Jojoba Creme, sunglasses, 2 cigarette holders, 2 packs of Chesterfields, a bound volume of poetry, and a yellow Bic lighter.

He's wearing a double-breasted jacket, white shirt, blue tie, black double-knit pants, and cowboy boots. His thin hair is slicked back, and he's staring at two very tall women. When Kathleen, the owner, came in, she got the Colonel's hat off another table and returned it to him. It's a Stetson, with a feather brim and a cut-out photo of The Colonel in the front. His body is a bloated, jerking bag of rot. Mine is not. I prefer mine. My mouth is clean. I taste the silver and gold in my teeth.

Dangerous Dan just handed me a newspaper ad. A place called Samadhi, a Buddhist term meaning temporary nirvana, is auctioning off its inventory, by order of the U.S. Bankruptcy Court.

Gene, the other owner, has been in bed for 4 days, with the flu. Bruce took Gene to the hospital, this morning. He comes in the cafe, and I say, "How are you doing, Gene?"

"I'm a little shaky," he says.

Oh well, that's the price you pay for living right and working hard.

Jeff and Deborah went to a play at the Women's Center. It had been advertised in the Wine and Cheese Bulletin. No one there had heard of it.

They went downstairs to an Irish bar, where a play was about to begin. The director thought Jeff was the replacement for an ill actor. The play was written by a Dutchman, who died of the Spanish Flu. Then, Jeff told me he made that all up.

SUN/FEB 28

Barbara: I like you.

Steve: I like you.

Barbara said a funny thing, when I described the philosophical opportunities of this kind of writing. First, she asked, "Do you learn about yourself?"

"Yes," I said.

"Yeah," she said, "whenever I'm asked, by someone, what's been going on in my life, I'm surprised to find out what my mouth has been thinking."

MON/MAR 1

What about my poor sister? If she communicates with me, in any way, I'll tell the tale. Still no work. The cafe is closing tomorrow and Wednesday. The last time I was broke, and the cafe closed, I went back to Illinois for 6 months. I feel a little panicky today. It's the first day of the month, and I don't have a fast-pass for the buses. That means I've lost my ease of mobility. It means I have to have fifty cents every time I want to go somewhere. It's started raining again. That kills the painting business.

I wrote a letter to Czeslaw Milosz, the Polish poet who teaches at UC Berkeley, and that's exciting. Whether or not he replies, his poetry has touched me and challenged me.

I used to play basketball with Father Miles O'Brien Riley, the Director of Communications for the Archdiocese of SF. He does TV spots for a variety of good causes. One, the other day, prompted me to write him. He said, in a nice homey close-up, "People are not made to serve jobs. Jobs are made to serve people."

I told Miles I'd love it if he could help me find a job that would serve me as a writer. Barbara says she'd like to translate my poems into French, and then we could send them to French publishers, and maybe, I could get to Paris. Then, we'll see what's what with Nadja. It's odd how much happens when there's no work and no money. I've been to three plays, this last week.

My mind does not feel prosaic, but poetic. Anarchic, sensible, i.e., of the senses. It makes it difficult to talk. My head is full of stories of the last few days, but my vision of these eventful days is poetic, momentary. I'm afraid I will have to pursue the poetic today and let the stories come when this sensibility passes. You, dear reader, won't notice the time, because pages turn quickly, but I'm struggling to say even this much. The descriptions BY a poet are rarely descriptions OF a poet.

WED/MAR 3

Dear Nadja, Dear Reader,

One day without a coffee house, and today, I walked all the way to North Beach to sit in the Trieste and look at a young girl's dyed black hair and sparkling black eyes. Tonight, I'm in the Clarion on Mission, nursing a couple of cups of coffee.

I talked to Nanci, on the phone, Monday evening, and Tuesday, I thought she and I may love each other, but it's a love without a future. I called brother Mark and cried for his anger. I called Scott and tried to explain Mark and myself, to some small success. I say that out of kindness. I believe that however much Scott may talk of love, it's pretty weak stuff. Scott called me a genius and took pity on me, but called me down for drunkenness.

Goddammit, the same thought keeps recurring. This kind of writing is without pictures. I mean the pictures of poetry. As I was walking today, these words came to me, "Without an image, I wait for the truth. Without an image, truth won't come."

I'm faulting myself for not being the kind of writer who works hard at creating finely honed works, with fully fleshed characters. In other words, the fiction of truth. The truth of fiction. I'm thinking that I'm capable of being that kind of writer, but I like things that come from honesty, first. On the other hand, I want to go back to addressing Nadja. And then I don't. I'm struggling with concepts that precede change. I don't know yet what the outcome will be, and this writing is my vehicle for change.

I caught a glimpse of a line, as I was flipping through Milosz's book, "Native Realm." "My own regular subject of contemplation was the devastating process of change - in individuals, in countries, and in systems. Perhaps, all poetry is simply this."

So, then, this is poetry-time prose, the prose of change, and it takes a whole book to make a poem of all this changing. I spent three and a half hours walking today, and moving, as I walked, I moved into a walker's high, from image to thought, to image to thought, without effort at analysis.

I watched a documentary of Carl Sandburg, intermingling actual film of him reading, singing, and talking, with interviews and history, with an actor impersonating the poet. As I walked the urban streets, I saw again and again, the images, faces, dramas, traumas, tragedies, miseries, and occasional comedies of human life. I remembered the early Sandburg of the moral indignation against poverty and the uplifting song of courage, and I see that it's the same today, if not degraded to something far worse. The relentless indignity of society upon the souls of its citizens.

Sandburg was a moralizer, a lyric poet with the device of morality. And finally, in my sense of him, a bore. I couldn't bring myself to imagine any more poems of Walt Whitburg from Galesburg, Illinois.

In a conversation with my roommates Tom and Michael, we joked about being The Old Poets Home, all of us 40 or about to be. Tom called me Old Young Mr. Brooks.

We talked about Anna, who's a friend of Tom's, a very appealing woman, but a dedicated communist. Mike suggested we write Reagan and apply for a U.S. Government grant to fight communism on our block. We would each take several hundred thousand to keep each other from going Commie. A la El Salvador. No chance. Being a poet is a political statement, a political life. Any world imagined better would be a world in which poetry would be better imagined.

As I sit here, my left lower wisdom tooth is bleeding. God, how frightening, on a banal level of mortality. It's not gushing blood, but it's damned red. There's a hole in the dike. There's a repository of herpes three inches above my dick and it's blossomed, and now it's gone scabby. Otherwise, I'm healthy. Otherwise, I'm healthy.

I like this cafe. Not a lot of people, but spacious, comfortable old furniture, a variety of people, no familiar faces.

I told Mike the story of Nadja, and these letters, and when I got to the part about dispensing with her, I thought he winced. Then I thought I was the one wincing. Having created that woman, I keep imagining her. However, I have had no communication from her for weeks.

When I ask my mother the names of my ancestors, so that I might write them a letter, she looks at me, a beggar at the back door, and says, "Why do you want such a thing?"

What she means is, "Why must I let them know that you are my son? I would be happier if you were to move on, young man, there's nothing here for you."

I am sad, because I can hear them singing, and I believe that, on reading of my sorrows, they would answer with dancing and a fire in the snow. On hearing of my anger, they would weep and wrap arms around my soul. I believe these things, but I look to the road.

THUR/MAR 4

Nadja is in Sweden. She went home. Not to the Sweden of socialized welfare and intellectual self-examination but the Sweden of our ancestors, to the shamanistic Laplanders. She's gone back to the roots of language and mythological lore.

I'm sitting on the back deck of the Acme Cafe on 24th St., taking some sun. The conversation is muted. There's a fellow speaking Mellowese with heavy hints of deep anxiety. He's talking to two professionals whose conversation is Shallow Mellowese.

I'm afraid, once again, as always, of letting go of my toe-hold on social ease. Two ideas link up in my mind, release and real ease. I am still afraid that full attention to the life of the poet will turn me into one of these city nomads, always witnessed with the jaundiced eye of the liberal conformists, a sort of polite scorn, an embarrassed sympathy.

Last night, I watched the English eccentric, Quentin Crisp. He recommends being oneself, entirely. It's the only gift you have to give to the world. Your self - a true eccentric.

A small boy approached a man nearby. "Newspaper, mister?"

"Nah, I don't want to know what's happening," he barked at the kid. When the kid left, he turned to the woman next to him and said, "Now the Aspen Times! I'd pay a dollar for the Aspen Times. What if you could get the Aspen Times anywhere you went? Wow!"

Now, I'm in La Boheme, with all the La Bohemians. I've just plopped down my last 64 cents for a 64 cent cup of coffee. I found 8 cents in my drawer and two cents on the street.

I passed the poet Robert Duncan on the street, and while I don't care much for his poetics, I felt I ought to have said something to him. I could have told him that when I was in high school, when we played basketball in the alley, everyone would call themselves by a famous ballplayer's name, Ron Gindy called himself "The Big O", after Oscar Robertson, and Larry Houser called himself "Earl the Pearl," after Earl Monroe, and I called myself "Robert Dunkin'."

Milosz says, "I could invent a fictional character and put together a biography out of the observations I have made of myself and others. But, involuntarily, I would choose details that suit a preconception; that is, I

would reject what seems to me atypical. Without the controls of reality to inhibit me, I would be without a ballast, like a balloon."

On Monday, before I read that image in his autobiography, I wrote this, "Milosz' poetry is like an anchor flung down from my balloon."

Lars Forssell, the Swedish poet (born in 1928) says, "There has to be room in the poem for the whole human being. You know - they say that Tchaikovsky is sentimental, messy, full of bathos; but if you could remove exactly those flaws, you wouldn't have Tchaikovsky any longer."

But Milosz warns, "There is nothing degrading in our fundamental incapacity to lay bare all the particulars of our fate."

I read an article about Jerzy Kozinski the other day. The interview said, "If Kozinski has any fetish, it is his inclination to an excess of self-analysis." I think his "fetish" will become a trend toward use and value. Is the biologist accused of being overly biological? I'm reinforcing myself. Perhaps after this, or the next, or the last book, I won't need to advertise this premise.

FRI/MAR 5

Dear Nadja,

Inasmuch as I've imagined you into a reality, I will now describe to you the woman who has come into my life, the woman of my total dreaming, of body, of mind, of heart, of soul, of life. Inasmuch as you are real to me, by the mere accident of my imagination, so will she be made real, and then in that magic called reckoning, the reckoning of our lives, she will be no dream, but real.

She's gone for the time being, as you have gone, but she'll be back. We talked in the cafe where she works, simple, quiet talk, off the subject of emotion and intuition, but necessary for two coming to know each other. She's gone to be with her many friends, and I'm going home.

In Munchkin's at midnight, 50's rock and roll on the jukebox, kids playing PacMan, young couples, gay and straight, ice cream for lovers, 27 cent deal on the coffee, Filipino gigolos, Leslie says it was slow all day, and I got tired of TV, so I came out to spend my 27 cents, with two Canadian nickels, no problem, I bum a cigarette, stick matches won't strike, I try and try, a girl steps across the small room, drops a matchbook on my table, a witness of struggle, the rescuer of fire, I try for words to describe a young girl's simple-eyed confidence, late at night, her two boy-friends, a man's whipped cream and cherry topple in slow-motion to the table top, I groan, laugh, no matter what I say or think or notice, it is colored by my attention to Leslie, last night she said, out of the blue, she couldn't imagine marriage, I said nothing, but I thought, in terms of the ultimate match, I must stay away from her, but I came here fifteen minutes before closing to see her, a woman I can imagine to the end of her days, character deep, she warns her suitors, asks if I warn mine, I do, even if it's taken me more years to catch on to essential wisdom, she may not be my woman, I don't know what it would take to make it so, show her this or show myself to her in little ways of midnight intentions, in this satisfying

calm, in awareness of good feelings for her, for the honor roll of intuitions, in the recognition of truer loving, truer lovers, a nod to Charles Aznavour in "Shoot the Piano Player," falling in love with the waitress, and finding life anew.

SAT/MAR 6

Nadja,

What's missing in brother Mark, as far as making up an artist goes, is his apparent inability to surrender to the inner life. All of his brilliance is gotten by force. Surely, his fear of mother is connected to his wanting to control what can't be controlled. He's like a man who's built a solid foundation on uncertain soil. His house's foundation is too heavily laid and gives him the false base for all his understandings. Its inevitability is that it will sink to the grave, an admirable sarcophagus, but a lousy boat.

I say that after reading Milosz describe his extreme receptivity to external stimuli, and at the same time, being a "passive instrument of another power that operates from somewhere inside, that was at once me and not me. There was nothing to do but submit."

Well, there's something else to do but submit, and it is to block, to refuse to submit. I have two brothers, and they live polar opposite lives around this central figure, mother. My quarrel with them both is with their way of living with that difficult woman. One submits, one blocks. The one that submits has lost will, independence. The one who blocks has rigidified himself. This woman and her boys obscure, through their aggressive-passive equation, the better world where a healthy combination of willful independence and passive acceptance produce fulfillment of our dull natures.

When Sami Farhat wrote a few words of appreciation about my surreal poems, **The Azure Blizzard**, he said, "The words of a poet who traveled the roots of the heart and captured the word, sometimes by force, and other times, it was given him by the hidden muse."

(5:30) I called Nanci this afternoon to see if she'd care to buy my bookshelf and rug, for thirty-five bucks. She said yes to the bookcase. She's going to put six bucks under a rock, when she goes out, tonight. I felt an anger and, particularly, a disgust at my poverty. Perhaps more to the point, at me. Being this poor gets to be like quitting drinking or smoking, one tends to make it the mead of conversation. It appears I'll be back to work on Tuesday.

(7:30) Emotion clouds my eyes. When I got to Nanci's, there was no money under the rock. She was home. Her friend claimed sickness and begged off going out. Nanci decided to go to a movie and then to a coffee house. I petted the dog and the cats. She swore profanely, casually, too much. Then she told me a parable.

The other day, she parked in a yellow zone, in front of her favorite check-cashing grocery store. When she came out, a drunken man, on crutches, carrying a beer can, began abusing her for parking illegally and blocking his path. Then he went to his car, parked in a red zone, and Nanci returned the abuse. She drove home and, either by accident or design, the man drove by her, as she got out of the car, he yelled at her and took down her license number.

He yelled that he would see to it she got hers. She yelled back. She started to go in the house, but, on impulse, and in a rage, she jumped back in her car and chased him, screaming at him to pull over, so she could get his number.

"I've got your number, so don't fuck with me, you bastard." The man was intimidated, and Nanci went home, triumphant, over-adrenalized, and prepared to defend herself.

"It's been a bad week. I'm not crazy."

She's been laughing, hysterically, at the falsity in the world, as she approaches her 27th birthday. People who haven't seen each other for a while will often conjure a story that is a parable for their feelings for each other. I am that drunken cripple who abused Nanci, for whom Nanci felt defensive rage, and I was all men, all humanity.

MON/MAR 8

Dear Other One,

Happiness, for me, is not something I imagine achieving. It comes, when it comes, as if by accident. I'm sitting, surrounded by all that pleases me, with the sun irradiating everything and warming my arms. I'm not happy. I carry a hesitance, a watchfulness (the word I used to describe, for Jeff Miller, it's also my sense of the Jews.) Happiness, as an attitude, is smug, I think. And yet, I'm pleased by so much that I ought to call it being happy. Perhaps it's the equivalent to saying, "That madman on the bench is content with himself, warmed by the same sun that warms the czar."

Several things are bouncing around in my brain. I'm thinking of an idea for another satirical one-man show. In a TV studio, it's taping day for **Free Speech Messages**. The variety of volunteers for that event would be fascinating. It would be my ticket to satirize every manner of American self-expression.

I got a strong hit about Nadja. I imagine my sister is contemplating moving to Havana, for the sun and the chance to see if a socialist society can actually be joyous and humane. I'm struggling with the lingering images and feelings of a long and bizarre dream, which I will eventually try to describe. I'm preparing to mull over the drunken night I spent with Bob at a party and afterwards with two women.

And, besides all that, I'm thinking about how much or how little Nanci truly needs my loving, apropos brother Scott's suggestion that Dad has stayed with Mother, for forty years, because of "love." Nanci, for my needs, must crack, open up, break down, confess, tell me, in the gentlest of terms, in a way that she won't retract or forget, that she needs me.

That may happen, but it will take time or a miracle. I'm not optimistic. She has to tell me why she needs me, in a way that opens up kindness and forgiveness to all people, men and women. Good luck, world. I'm going to circle around this mound of anthropological diggings and sort and pluck at a few prominent bones and jars.

Bob declared his friendship, Saturday night, after we'd been circling each other for several months. Bob is a writer of fiction and an occasion-

ally maniacal bird, like I am. He cleared the air, beautifully, that afternoon, when he said he like to get together and argue.

"Why argue?" I asked.

"Because we have absolutely nothing in common. Our perspectives on the world are opposite. You think the world is real, and I think it's all made-up. Besides, I don't understand that poetry stuff."

I laughed in relief. I always try to find something in common with everyone. Later, at the party, with a pint of Jack Daniels under our belts, he said, "We're either going to get into a knife fight, or we're going to be best friends." I laughed again. I don't foresee any knife fight. Parenthetically, knife is a funny word for what that means. It's like a meaning, with a sheath wrapped around it.

"Let's divide up the world," Bob said, "you and me."

When we first met, Bob and I felt the opportunity for a special friendship, but our differences broke open when he fell in love with Nanci, just as I was breaking away from her. He told me, Saturday, what an impossible woman she is, and I felt the challenge, once again, to tame her.

In the dream, I boarded a train for Los Angeles. It was the NJudah streetcar line. It ran to LA but did not pick up passengers in LA and did not bring passengers back to SF. The train was filled with poor people, poets, down and outers, the wretched refuse. Laura Beausoleil was in the car and in fine spirits. (She recently got a grant from the NEA for \$12,500.)

I mentioned to a man on the train that the worst smell I have ever known came from people who never wash. He told me there was a man on board who had not bathed for six or seven years. I panicked. That man pursued me for the rest of the dream. I stole a glance at him, and his body only vaguely resembled a human's. His face was a crusty oval, with vacuous holes for features.

His eyes were the eyes of eternal damnation. I say that, not knowing what I mean. I didn't know where to sit in the car to avoid looking at him or smelling the stench. I settled at the front of the car with another man, who wisely knew we were upwind. The train stopped for an on-foot tour of some historical site of spectacle and ruins. I wandered in a labyrinth of rooms, until I turned a corner and saw this creature, now little more than a heap of rags with burned out holes for eyes. I turned and began to walk away, quickly. He pursued. I walked faster and faster. He followed.

I almost ran, from room to room, afraid of being trapped. I couldn't believe how swiftly this awful apparition followed me. I found refuge in the top row of steep bleachers, seated among a few dozen happy spectators. I would like to remember that I confronted that fearful apparition; that it became a harmless pile of tissue, but I can't. I don't remember.

Bob and I found two women at the party, and we went to the house of one of them, where we danced, and I felt as if I was dancing madly, wildly, through the Twenties, just before the Crash.

At the party before, Betty, her name was, said, when we met, "Oh, you're a poet! How romantic!"

"It's not romantic to me," I said. "To me, it's reality."

Bob and his partner fell out, to make love, and I went to the front room and sat sleepily on the couch. Betty began to make a pallet of cushions for me on the floor. Resigned, I crawled in, and she went to her bedroom. A short while later, I got up, crawled into her bed with her and began to make love.

"Where did you come from?" she said and submitted. It was good lovemaking.

Then, she said, "Are you going to hurt me?"

"Of course not," I said, and I was gentle, I think, and persistent.

In the morning, it felt as if a very ordinary San Francisco professional, corporate woman had, for a few hours, submitted to basic animal virtues, and then had closed back up. She became cool, caustic. I went home and slept it off. Then, I read an article about acquaintance rape, and I felt guilty. But, it was a momentary time of real humanity. She had admitted her willingness, just before dawn.

"You're someone who needs to be hugged," I said.

"Yes, I am," she said.

We embraced innocently for a brief hour. Her mother's picture stared down at us from its perch above the closet doorframe, a frightened, austere woman of the 20's and 30's.

That death-mask man in the dream comes from several occasions on which I've been near human beings whose lives, on the streets of this postcard city, have deteriorated to horror. Death-camp, bloated shells of

pus and crusted skin, here, now, in this Nirvana by the Bay. (I don't like to write that description anymore than you like to read it.)

Lately, I've compulsively imagined trying to save these creatures of humanity. I've imagined sitting in my cubicle at the Central Bureaucratic Humanity Office, when one of them comes through the door, and what would I do? Do I have to do anything? I have to absolve myself of this image of horror and responsibility.

I think this is not my dream, my projection - this is real. But Bob says it's all made up. And Bob is a brilliant man. Bob is an honorable man. Has he come to bury Caesar?

I have the idea to combine **Savage Amusement** with this book, perhaps to save the end for later. **Savage Amusement** is about what Milosz calls, "one of those thresholds - when we finally begin to become the person we must be, and we are at once inebriated and a little frightened, at the enormous distance yet to be traveled."

And, I think, there's a need for drama, for fictions. All that time between books. Even the events described in this book are powerful in a way that is not realized in reflective prose. My god, the thought just crossed my mind that I'm wrapping this book up. With Nadja on her way to Havana? And me on my way to what? One thing for certain, at the end of **Savage Amusement**, I said I hoped I was still a poet. And what is Nadja to me?

Milosz says, "But what fiery sword protects the artist? Only his faith in an objective value. For those who live passively, values melt away; they wane in the encounter with what is called the 'real.' Herein lies the secret of their impotent lives. And hence the traditional alliance between artists and revolutionaries. Because revolutionaries, with or without success, also search for objectively grounded values. They are saved by their violent *yes* or *no*, by their upsetting the somnolent routine into which spiritual heaviness imprisons us. Their deed is equivalent to the creative act of an artist, it lifts them above themselves, by demanding full surrender. No one puts words on paper, or paint on canvas, doubting. One does so, five minutes later."

Nadja is my value objectified. She is the one who puts the intentions of my poetry at risk. Nadja is real. I think there's a letter left to be written.

WED/MAR 17

Na,

Yes, and that letter will be the rest of the book. It's a month since my 40th, two months since I began to write. I made a vow, yesterday, to try something new, to work the alcohol out of my system. I dreamt, last night, what on the surface seems like a nightmare, but became more, the more I thought about it.

The clearest indication of drinking I give to the world is my ruddy face going beet-red, puffy and characterless. My face is bonier, today, and my hair greyer. The clearest indication I give to myself is that when I'm exhausted, the night after a night of drinking, I try to sleep, and my heart or my lungs stop, my body jolts awake, and I pace, in fear of sleep, or death.

The two things I dislike about drinking are when I'm disparaged by others for being an alcoholic and when I myself feel weak and stupid. Years ago, I thought that my father ought to have been a drinker, because he acts like one, in his apologetic life.

In the dream, I found my face encrusted in a mask, like a scab. At first, I tried to disguise it with oil and makeup. Then I peeled the whole thing away and began a healing process.

The argument for and against drinking is its effect reducing inhibition, getting rid of controls, opening up to unpredictable influences, and demolishing boundaries. That's the good AND the bad. Its ultimate effect is the total elimination of inhibition, control, and boundaries, and then NOTHING is possible.

Alex Shelaketinsky came back from Boston, and Dan said, "Now, there are two observers in the cafe." Alex is a heavy beer drinker, a morose, Russian born, thinker-translator.

Drinking is a tool I've used to end observer status. I'm curious to test the limits of my observer withdrawal. Without inducing sociability, what will I do? I fear scorn, anger, shyness, but I'm tired of believing that one of the salient results of drinking is the humbling of my self.

I went to a Russian movie last night, "Moscow Distrusts Tears," and I was moved by its simple message in the midst of urban noise, "Life begins at 40, go after what you love, wait for what you'll love, be what you are."

The problem with having this poet's perspective is my demand for truth, constant revolution, sensuality, AND love. It's the best and the worst of all worlds.

THUR/MAR 18

Nada,

The other dream I had was being at my father's funeral. I was upset, because I had left the two stories he wrote, years ago, back in California, and I wanted to read them to the family. I couldn't, and I had to speak for myself. There's the clue. Wrapped up in all this father-dying, masks, drinking, is another skin-shedding, another emerging.

One of the things that stopped the book, for ten days, at what seems to me two-thirds finished is that I proposed a heightened vitality with the invention of Nadja and then tried a third without her, and it stopped there. Well, she's here. In San Francisco.

Cuba was OK. She got a tan. Cubans cannot understand the U.S. fear and loathing. They also know that their other influence, merely by offering support to rebels everywhere, is immense. They know they will never overthrow the U.S., but the weaknesses are there to be exploited. Or, to put it in human terms, there are millions of lives uncared for in the hemisphere, and the U.S. is not caring. The nourishment race has to be won before the destruction race is.

Nadja is here, somewhere. I haven't seen her. She may be shadowing me, dropping in and out of the cafe, as I come and go. I feel her influence. Something is happening.

Coincidentally, I ran into Nanci, last night, on St. Patrick's Day. She was wonderful and loving, then teasing, then withdrawing. I went over and sat with some friends, and she went home with Miriam. I ran into a woman who's attracted to me but thinks I'm "annoying." I chatted a bit and then said, "Goodnight."

Buster was pissed at me, at himself, and told me to stop playing martyr. I got him a roll of toilet paper.

"Here's something for you to write your complaints on," I said.

Mike demanded I recite, since he doesn't believe I'm a poet.

"I'm not a dancing bear," I said, stealing a line from Keats.

Nanci was very sweet, it's the Nanci I love, but her bitch training took over, and I took off. Bob says Nanci's idolized older sister, Tina, is a

woman who sorely wants to be killed. No wonder her husband is a drunk-wimp.

Bob and I are becoming confidants, partners, intimates; a team. Bob is the first writer I've met who has chosen to use me as a character in his stories. It's about time. I'm getting tired of being both character and writer. We are joined in a war on wimps and bitches, a war in which the victory has already been gained and remains only to be celebrated and re-enacted.

Some people tell great stories. Paul Vane, a poet I've known for many years, is one. (His wife, Carolee, also a poet, was going to be my agent, after my first one-man show in '75, until I turned away from a career on the stage.) Paul says he writes "deathless prose," which always seemed to me to mean deadly or morbid, not immortal, but anyway, he told me how he got dressed up and went downtown, today, to look for a job.

He drives a cab, but it's strictly hand to mouth. He told me a story. First, he said he stood in the unemployment line with all the real-estate salesmen. (We're in a housing "downturn.") The people around him were moaning and groaning, back and forth, and finally someone turned to Paul and asked him why he was there.

"I just came in to see what life was like for all you out of work motherfuckers," and then he turned and walked away from their dumb-struck faces. Then he went to the Employment office.

TUE/MAR 23

Dear Nadja,

I'm trying to write a big something, a long serio-satiric poem piece, a performance piece. I see it, I feel it, but I don't know what it is or how to do it. I'm set to do a show in June, and it's a fine opportunity to do my version of Ginsburg's "Howl." One of the things standing in my way is this absurd notion that I'm a favored son of the nice people who brought you the current edition of Imperialist America.

Chris Blum came in, yesterday, and told me an idea he has for a long piece about a poet who's a cafe-sage. It begins with a poem he reads to the cafe, which appears only as another decent poem. Then you see people sitting down to his mirror, one after another, and revealing themselves, projecting themselves on the poet, then the piece concludes with the poem read again, with the same cafe response, but with the reader's overview. I left out a scene, in which the poet drinks beer and goes privately, publicly insane.

It's a wonderful idea, of course, based on his idea of my situation and experience in this cafe. I got to thinking. What if I wrote that piece for my performance? I imagined it as a long surreal-real narrative, and then I saw it with two chairs, and me as poet, and also as all the characters, moving in and out of the second chair, and then as one chair made of mirrors, and then the whole idea stymied me.

When I woke up, this morning, I saw it as dreams, with each one telling his dream. "The American Dream Cafe." I like the title, but it got away from me, becoming too broad and epic when I tried it out as a poem.

Needless to say, I don't know how to do this thing. Yet. I'm still stuck, reluctant to take on "real" people and expose them. The satires I've done before have included people who chose to be public; preachers, singers, directors, mimes, and poets. Partly, it's my Mid-West nice-guy background.

These are the ingredients, the desire, and the hesitance. I must rid myself of my bourgeois attachments. Of course, one way I do that is by getting drunk, but I want my health. I need to risk something equivalent to going to jail, to risk condemnation, because it's my own internalized fear that blocks my freedom.

All societies succeed in repressing people when the people internalize the repression. The society makes the repression seem better, in its safety, than to take the risk of our impulses and feelings. I succeeded, in my first two shows, in breaking free, by remaining within the poetry world. It protected me. That's fine, but I need to put everyone at risk and not just poets and performers.

I need to go back to those ideas I had before the first show, of being more serious than funny. That sounds wrong. Funny has always been a tool for freedom, but I need to risk myself. I need to take on these so-called real people.

Bob has been convincing me that my dramatic public reputation is no hindrance to my poetry but an aid. The public demands a drama to stir its curiosity, and then the attention to the inherent values is stimulated. I'm not so concerned, and not as sunk in guilt and embarrassment, as I was before. It's time to render unto the Caesar of Popular Imagination what is Caesar's and keep to myself and to poetry's children what is poetry.

It's my business that I love language, poetry, truth, and beauty. I don't have to proclaim my intentions and demand the world take me seriously. It can be a secret between me, the muse, and you, Nadja.

Peter called from Denver, and I told him all that's happening between me and Bob and the world. It's Bob's contention that writers, from time to time, have secretly compacted to create a scene that would draw the world's attention. He wants me to keep the secret, but I have a better secret. Writers have always tried, but it only rarely works.

The meeting between me and Bob, as polar opposites who need and desire each other, is accidental or fated. Anyway, our collusion is revealed to your ears only. Those people, who think this book is being written for anybody but you, are eavesdroppers, projecting themselves into our mirror. Orpheus lives.

You and I are creating a living theatre to perform our work within. When the world comes to the theatre, we will have our lines. That's that, but that doesn't decide my course. That's between me and the muse, with you as my object, my true believer and true perceiver.

It's strange to think you are here in San Francisco, and I haven't seen you yet. I will trust it, though. I did meet, serendipitously, in the Cafe Flore, yesterday, a woman with whom I enjoyed a complete ease of talk.

(7PM) Paul and Carolee came in and sat for an hour. Paul is the kind of man I like to call a madman. He's quitting driving a cab, after 7 years. A few weeks ago, his body went into a fibrillation, a coronary incident, a shedding, a shucking, a shaking off.

All the years of abuse from the city finally came out, and he's become calmer and happier. Except that all his allusions are to death. He asked me how Nanci and I are doing, and I told him. He suggested, hopefully, that she and I get back together, because, he said, "Steve, you're no spring chicken." I didn't think I was bothered by that notion, the idea that I'll grow old alone, and I'm still not, but something about it threw a disquiet into me. He always does that to me. Damned poets.

WED/MAR 24

Nadja,

When I first met him, he picked me up and looked at me, as if someone had said, "table", and he decided to see for himself. He put his big hand on my face and pushed, like a blind man, but more. He put his hand on my head and ruffled my hair, like a parent, but not. He put his arm around my shoulder and shook me, as if I was a fruit-tree. He went away and came back later and balanced his body against me. He looked in my eyes, each time, looking for something, looking for essence. I saw him do that with others, and within minutes, saw them become their essential selves, or disgusted, unsettled, belligerent, missing, always missing, the act of faith, the act toward faith, that has made us friends ever since that night.

That's a story Paul Vane told me, this afternoon. It's a story about his first meeting me, years ago. I didn't remember that I had done that to him. It is true that I have always believed he and I were friends, without ever sitting down together for longer than twenty minutes. And it's true that I've always done that to people, not knowing why I did it, or what it meant. Now I understand. Bob calls it drilling people. Sounds awful, but, once in a while, you strike oil. Outrageous behavior that cleans house, outraging the casual bullshitters. And risking life and limb in the process, I might add.

I was walking down the street, today, and, in my head, I heard, "I like being Steve Brooks. It's very interesting being this person." I laughed. It's true. Friends are showing up, one by one, people in pursuit of substance, commitment, and a great party.

"Years ago," I told Paul, "I sat down in this cafe and I decided to sit still and see what would happen. Maybe the world would come through the door."

A big chunk of it has. A lot of people go nuts watching a man sit still. People get sarcastic, nasty, and bitchy. It brings out a range of essential discomfort with themselves.

Paul was talking, today, about the virtue of apocalypse, revolution, disruption and economic depression to shake things up. I said that one can't just wait for the revolution. I have to write here and now, in this place and time. And, the hard part is to be able to recognize substance, essence, intention and energy, even in this upholstered marshmallow delusion, two steps removed from reality.

One has to pull off one's own revolution, and then look around for others busy at the same task. I feel like falling out of my chair. I felt it this afternoon, at 2PM. It's a wonderful impulse. To take a dive onto the floor. To drop off the plane of social reality.

I mentioned to Paul that his wish for me and Nanci being together was nearly hopeless. He said he was only sad that we weren't. I'm sad, too. I'm sad tonight, and I was sad, last night. My sexuality is turned off. I miss love. I drink, because I do not have that love. You know how someone's love fills your heart with joy. When that love stops, or goes away, or turns cold, or is not there, your eyes turn to look for fire, for heat, for warmth, to bed or bottle, the arms that embrace you from inside, or full love from one fully loved.

Paul says he has that love from Carolee. His love does not make me jealous or envious, it only makes me aware of what I do not have. Love in a bottle guarantees a quarrel in the morning. Intoxicating lovers do the same. Jeff is fat, because he needs a lover's embrace, so he's built one in.

(much later)

Dear Nadja,

I am, at this moment, in the midst of sensation. A frightened bird, beautifully plumed, is perched near me, and I have made what I hope are gentle gestures toward her, but her fear runs so deep, so trained is she in flight, that I have no resources to manage a quiet. An olive branch does not provide enough refuge for her. She darts looks at me, and the darting eyes do not reassure me, but tell me, in their way, she will fly. Her fear has not made her weak, but wary. Tight sinews of anticipation and tense nerves of experience have prepared her for quickness, a quickness easily mistaken

for vitality, a vitality easily mistaken for life force. She is a bird used to birddogs.

THUR/MAR 25

Nadja,

Earlier, I described going into Munchkins and sitting with coffee, late at night, while Leslie finished her job, bussing dishes. Then I proposed describing my ideal woman. It's really quite simple, someone who stirs in me a feeling of their presence on this planet, a significant person, a compatriot, someone with whom I feel no inequalities.

I start this up again, because Leslie is in the cafe, and I think of her in that way. We ran into each other, a few days ago, waiting for the streetcar. We talked, and I was impressed with the strength and independence of her thinking. Self-insight is no exercise in egotism. However, she doesn't follow my lead toward romance.

Tonight, it occurred to me she's so used to men being attracted to her that she's mistaken me for another one. I feel attracted toward her but not in awe and not as a boy-suitor. I suspect she'd like it if I ignored her for a while. Or, I suspect, I don't know anything, and she's just simply not interested in romance with me.

As I sit, she goes off with Richard, in his car, with his wallet and his distracted desire to do things, go places, and spend money. His lack of substance is matched with her youthful curiosity to check things out before committing to substance.

That may sound high hatted, but I don't grieve or condemn. He's frightened of his wish to shed his managerial life and become an inventor, as he says, and she's young, and youth is time for suspended morality. The taking in and taking on of a great variety of experiences, without prejudice. It was surprising to me when I changed out of that attitude. I hadn't realized I had it, and I didn't understand its uses.

As a pre-moral person, and as a post-moral person, I didn't know I was creating my own moral sense. In the same way, early in my poetry, I wrote in every accessible style, berating myself for not being myself, until, lo and behold, I began to emerge.

Tonight is music night in the cafe, but there's no music. It's raining, and the crowd is quiet. Clark, the painter, who got me the job I started this morning, is here with his nice, pretty, bright girlfriend. I warned her once,

at 3AM, at a party, to get away from Clark. She must not have heard me.

Clark is the most competitive, egocentric man I've ever met, with the intellectual tools to play the game well. He always gets in a lick. He got me a \$300 paint job, slightly better than wage work and too small for his business. It's going well, and the man, who dabbles in income property, likes my work. He owns hotels, I was told, hint hint.

The guy was curious why I was the only painter, and I told him that Clark's two crews were probably busy with two big buildings. It was meant to impress. I told Clark what I'd said, and he replied, "Oh, by the way, I didn't tell you. I take 25% off the top."

I said, "Oh, I didn't tell you. I don't give 25% off the top."

Now, I'm responding to his one-upmanship. He laughs, and I think, "This poor girl. She has to live with this shit." I'm still in the hole, as Clark tells me how powerful this hotel guy is, and maybe he'll get big jobs from him, if I do a good job.

"Oh, I didn't tell you," I say, "I take 25% commission on all subsequent work."

Now I feel equal, but I didn't want to have to go through with the game. I can play it, and with Clark, you have to play it, or he'll manage, one way or another, to make you feel subordinate.

The other way is to act subordinate. Then he's a swell guy and benignly paternal, with a smile and a pat on the back. Our beloved President Reagan comes to mind. Reagan cuts \$200 million in aid to the handicapped, and his darling wife Nancy makes a PR visit to the Easter Seal Child of the Year, with a gift for the tyke, under her arm. Cut out the substance that enhances peoples' lives and give them a box of chocolates shaped like bunnies.

People who are like Clark are difficult, because they are charming, intelligent, amiable, engaging, solicitous, and attractive. The perfect image. Gee, isn't that what poets are striving for, the perfect image? Yes, but one born of, fertile with, and evocative of, substance.

FRI/MAR 26

Nudge,

The guy at the next table is sitting across from two women. One is a plain, scraggly, droop-shouldered, hippie type. The other is a casually attractive blond, visiting from Germany. The guy has a beard, a fake-wool, sleeveless vest, yellow t-shirt, and a dirty, Greek sailor cap.

He drones, sincerely, when he talks. He's talking to the blond about how hard it must be for her, since she's so attractive. She could never live in his rough neighborhood, in these bad times for women, etcetera. The dumpy girl is watching him. The blond, politely, tries to understand.

"Have you heard of the Moral Majority?" he says, smiling greasily, smugly.

My pens are running out of ink. My feet hurt. Bruce is playing the harmonica like a Confederate soldier in a Yankee prison. The cafe is not full, but a crescendo of voices surges, all of a sudden. (Don't crescendos always surge?) I don't feel comfortable in the shirt I'm wearing. Nothing bad is happening. I took a nap after work, and I'm groggy.

Walter Matthau says he likes being an actor. There's a toxic spill in the Russian River. The man I'm painting for owns a hotel in Kentucky. He prefers to hire women, he says, because they smile more easily than men. Uh huh. Especially, when he writes out their checks for \$400 a month. He's from India. A Patel. He knows his place. I imagine he expects others to know theirs.

Ozzie Osborne didn't mean to bite the head off a real rat. He says he thought it was rubber, when someone threw it on stage. Sandy is working behind the counter.

"I think the world is bizarre," I whisper to her.

"You just noticed that, huh, Steve?"

I've detailed about one percent of the image input I seem particularly stymied by, tonight.

Where is my significant other? Nanci is undoubtedly frolicking at the North Star with her friend, Tina, even as we speak. I wanted to tell her, the last few days, "I'm sad. I'm sorry it didn't work."

There's a guy sitting in front of me. He rides his bike up to the door; he comes in, sits down, buys nothing, and stares at the females. I want to say to him, "Hey, buddy, get out of my line of vibes." The best I can do is blow smoke in his direction.

And Nadja?

Tonight, I think she's taken a job at The Bechtel Corporation. A very pretty girl is now talking to the schmuck. She's from Ohio. She's trying to be friendly in the big city. Yellow Springs. I just tried to crank up some sexuality, but it's no go. Yellow Springs looks like Kathleen, who owns the cafe. Kewpie doll face, beret, and small town niceness.

I went up to the counter. "Give me a beer, this is ridiculous."

Sandy and Beth suggested the problem was the guy playing the harmonica. They wanted him to stop.

"Oh, no, you've got to go with the flow. Life is life," I said.

I added, "So flow right over there and tell him to shut up."

I went over and said to him, "I feel like I'm in a Confederate Prison." (slight revision) That got a laugh from the table.

Yellow Springs says her hat is new, and she's not used to it. God, I'm a sucker for a pretty face. I'm automatically posturing for the pretty girl from Ohio. And when I'm not posturing, I feel like a tired, dreary, impotent housepainter. My blue plaid shirt feels like a blanket, and my green corduroy pants feel like thick, worn out pajama bottoms.

Of course, none of this would matter if I had any energy. Sexuality is a strong ingredient in any man's revolution. Working for a living is an effective tool in counter-revolution.

And the beer is making me sleepy. The bike-schmuck told the girl he's writing a book. Oh, lord, save me. I'm sitting here, writing a book. Can this be worth anything?

"Tell us, Chicken, exactly why DID you cross the road."

"**CHICKEN TELLS ALL.**" Read this exciting revelation, translated from the original, "Across the Road," the stirring new autobiography, written from the other side. "I got here, and I'm glad I took the did," Chicken says. "At first, I wasn't sure I wanted to, but now I'm glad I did it." Forthcoming sequel will ask the question, "Will the Chicken be satisfied with his notable

success on the road? What about the Garden Path? Will the Chicken go down it, or will the Chicken cross it, too?"

Now I'm feeling sexier, more alive. I'm looking at Yellow Springs. "Man Who Upsets Apple Cart Due to Stand Trial." I think the girl from Yellow Springs is, get this, a Black girl. She refuses to look at me. Is it my deodorant? Only a fool would talk to the schmuck for half an hour and not wise up to his vacuousness. Or, she's someone who wants to talk without risk.

And as I say that, she says, "Walking around here is safe, at least." Then she glances at me. Jesus, I love sexuality. The joining of imagination and animality. And writing is more fun than a bucket of chicken livers. This is great. I'm beginning to feel slightly crazed.

Yes. She is a Black girl, all right. I'm certain of it. I admit it. Being Black lends an air of the real seriousness of a human being to any cute girl. There's no way that any intelligent person, growing up Black, cannot help but be a little more tempered by it.

She's finally getting bored with the schmuck, casting off lonely glances to the corner of the ceiling. And I'm feeling more and more energized. Starting my third beer, I slop a little of it on the upper left corner of the page. See it? However, she's still giggling.

Nadja, where are you, when I need to bridge the gap between my shyness and one of your species. Normally, in this situation, I'm content to let it ride, let her show up in here, some other time, and if there's an interest, we'll say hello with the essential hint of recognition.

Rationalization, thy true name is fear. I feel good, now. I feel filled out, alive, busy, free. I don't feel less than my desires. My clothes don't matter. The schmuck has shrunk to his limited significance. There's no barrier between me and the world. The light bulb above my table just blew out. I'm now bathed in shadow. Time to recede. Goodnight, dear reader. I'm on my own, now.

MON/MAR 29

Phil just came in the door, waving his arm, and said, "Ladies and Gentlemen, Steve Brooks, The Academy Award for Sitting in the Owl and the Monkey, Biding Time." I'm having doubts, mixed with determination, and I think I'll write, tomorrow.

(later) Nadja, do you WANT to read my poems? Does anyone? Do you know what it's like to be very good at something you believe in, and no one particularly cares, one way or the other? It's like being a lover in a dull marriage. Do you convince your partner to love you? "Yes, I love him, and I know he loves me, but he doesn't turn me on." Do you get a divorce and go hang out with other singles, other poets? Be celibate and marry God?

Steve Schutzman said my problem with Roxan, with women, with people, was that I needed to be loved too much. That hurt, so I decided to believe I needed to be loved 'very much'. How the hell do you live with needing to be loved too much?

I said the hell with it, and I stopped courting the world. I quit the pursuit of love. Maybe that's what Chuck was saying when he questioned my failure to understand that publishing is not the pursuit of love. And certainly, when I get love from a woman, it becomes no big deal to publish and perform. Or is it? I accuse myself of still wanting to be loved. How do I get out of this trap?

Persistently, I do not believe anyone truly loves me. Do I ask too much? Those women, whose hearts are supposedly broken by me, I took their love as wonderful, but slightly suspect. And they were women with whom I felt incomplete. My love was never enough.

Mother, do you love me? Do you accept me? When I was living with Nanci, there were two days when I was entirely at home, in love, in myself. Then, she reminded me that I couldn't be that. Homeless, I wander, living nowhere. Home is where you hang your hat. I hang my hat on my head.

Whenever I go home with a woman, I search the room to see if I am home. I never am. I will know it when I find it, and the woman will not send me away, in word or deed. Then, I will not leave. I will no longer search the eyes of a nation for love.

The shmuck who was talking to the girl from Yellow Springs has brought his manuscript into the cafe, tonight. My heavens, it's almost sweet. But, she's not here. She's so attractive that I'm grateful when she leaves.

(later) Here we are, new and different, at least in a different setting, sitting at the Big Table in Yancy's, once again in romantic, imaginative pursuit of a woman who is sitting nearby, a woman I've seen before, who reminds me of Keats' girlfriend, Fanny. Not pretty, but elegant.

I saw her, a little while ago, in the cafe, looking studious and a little pissed off. Arthur sat down with me and said, "I'll bet all the women say, 'Who's that handsome guy striding back and forth in this cafe?'" I thought, "She might be thinking that." I enjoyed the play of the imagination.

Her boyfriend just showed up. He's the same boyfriend who was in here when I first spotted her. She languishes with a brown cigarette, against the settee, her nipples hard. She glances down at her low-slung breasts and approves.

I think how constantly amazing are my peregrinations in search of that for which I claim I have no interest. Well, this will be my last glass of wine, and then I'll head for home, where I toss my non-existent hat.

Thank you, Richard Hugo, for writing a poem praising self-pity. When She appears, she will say, "Oh, little boy poet. I know it's hard to be a poet, but you're so good at it. Will you stay with me and take refuge? I offer you my breasts, my vagina, my mouth, my bed, my food, my heart, my thirsting intelligence. Of course, you drink too much. You need to be made warm, one way or another. I don't care how many ways you try to be warm. I'll make you go home and throw rocks at your solitude."

That's a variation on a line that Bob told me tonight. A Texas whore said to him, "I'll make you go home and throw rocks at your wife," and his ecstatic response was, "Who do you want me to kill?"

Fanny's boyfriend just jumped up, threw on his coat, and stormed out of the bar. When I went to the toilet, I thought I heard a woman crying on the phone, but she was giggling, laughing.

Fanny is staring blankly at mid-distance. I am, I accuse myself, here, writing at mid-distance. What is writing anyway, but breath on a winter's day, clouds with images in them, whisperings of gods, taken into our lives

and made manifest. Or like Teddy Roosevelt charging up San Juan Hill to act out a newspaper headline. I think, therefore I am thinking.

Phil and Alex came in. Phil asked Fanny to join us. She said no. He said she was pissed at me for not being the one to ask her. I said I didn't know how to do that. (a slight misdirection of the truth) She went home. I went home. Ate macaroni and cheese.

TUE/MAR 30

I talked to a man who said he no longer believes in suffering, and then, today, he called me "Stevie."

(later) First, there was no one in the cafe. Now, it's begun to fill. This afternoon, I read Robinson Jeffers, who said, "The ephemeral has only news value. I decided not to lie in verse - not to feign any emotion I did not feel, not to say anything I did not believe myself, and not to believe easily - to reclaim substance and sense - to reclaim old freedom."

Dan, the bartender, came in, and I tried to explain to him how I had come to those same conclusions. How my highest goals were fame and fortune, until I found myself at that level of capability, with proven talent, and then even without wanting to, I saw higher goals. Those people who wish success for me, and resent me, because they can imagine no higher goals, are only seeing as far as they can.

Jeffers describes his own nature as cold and undiscriminating and his great good luck marrying Una Jeffers, a woman "...more like a woman in a Scotch ballad, passionate, untamed, and rather heroic - or like a falcon - than like an ordinary person."

Jeffers also describes the accidental luck, driven from Europe by the First World War, of finding his home in Carmel, "...contemporary life, that was also permanent life; and not shut from the modern world but conscious of it and related to it; capable of expressing its spirit, but unencumbered by the mass of poetically irrelevant details and complexities that make a civilization."

I beg to differ. I like the city. And, fondly, I can't help remembering Nanci's best spirit as like that of Una's. A woman came up to me who heard me read poetry here, in September. She wanted to tell me what she remembered. In "A Poem for Czeslaw Milosz," after much concern about the life of the poet, I describe Milosz, at his reading in the city, four years ago, with the simple line, "He came with friends."

"I've been trying to write that simply," she said. (That line came after many other, less simple lines.)

I've been waiting, for days, to describe my experience, over the weekend, painting the house for the Indian hotel landlord businessman.

The first day I went to the job was miraculously fluid. The day I came home was equally easy, but in-between was a bucket of rocks, so I concluded I was led into and out of a lesson.

I saw one man degrade another. I saw the owner degrade the old painter, John, who worked outside, as I worked inside. The landlord had promised him his money on Saturday, but when John asked for it, the boss grinned, walked over and pointed at what was still unpainted. He was saying, without saying, "My word counts for nothing, because I don't trust you to keep up your side of the bargain." He pointed at a small section of wall as if it had shit smeared on it and John hadn't finished licking it off.

That was it for me. I thought to say, "Keep your money, keep the work I've done, (I was three hours from finished) and keep my equipment, I don't want it, anymore, but I finished the job, got my money, and walked away. This morning, I applied for another kind of work, and I imagined a more humane way of painting. And I returned to a deeper resolve to make poems. Oh! And I told John I was glad to have made his acquaintance.

Why does Jeffers speak?

"For power, after the nerves are put away underground, to lighten the abstract unborn children toward peace...."

My body is riddled with horrors to be expelled. I'm going through a cellular explosion of old thinking. I remember seeing a drawing, back when I was suffering what I called brain fever, what I later saw as an emotional breakdown, after I lost Roxan, and in the drawing, sickness was forced from the center of a cell to the surface, and only at the surface were its ill-effects felt.

At that point, because of the pain, most expulsion is retracted, and the sickness returns to the center. It must be forced to break the surface. I have a glimmer of my current sense of breakthrough. Change almost inevitably creates crisis. But it must be carried through. The cleansing must be completed.

I have proposed two things: to release my image as the Poet to the world's desire for icons, and to push further on in my own private sense of purpose. Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. Render unto Caesura what is Poetry's. I feel better already. Dan, the psychiatrist bartender, was praising me, for being the strongest, freest man he knows. And, at the time, I felt like last weeks' diarrhea. I said, "Then why don't I feel free."

Jeffers says, in a poem called *Point Joe*, "Walk there all day, you shall see nothing that will not make part of a poem."

Dan was describing my life, sitting in the cafe, talking to all manner of man and woman, finding that part of them that was worthy or critical. Jeffers says that one must "love the coast opposite humanity", and I agree. He says, "I admired the beauty / While I was human / Now I am part of the beauty." This is the most beautiful poetry I've ever read. I told Dan, "It's like reading the Bible." My Bible. It's the worship of the extraordinary life of the ordinary. I believe that one's will, to extend Jeffers, turn back, finally, to embrace humanity.

That is my legacy from Jeffers, and that is my life as a poet among men and women. Even though they may walk by my table and think, either, "There is the too sexy, too violent poet," or "There is the bum, the failure, the wastrel."

WED/MAR 31

What's going on? I think I lost \$20. I was overdrawn at the bank, so they charged me \$12 for three checks. I put my boots on the heater to dry them, forgot them, and burned them beyond use. It's supposed to rain for ten days. On the positive side, Chuck says he wants me to share his apartment, near the cafe.

And, I devised a painting scheme. "Paint Your Own House With Professional Help; Learn and Save." Also, I left a resume off with Rev. Miles O'Brien Riley, for new work. On the permanent level, my reading of Robinson Jeffers convinces me that my thinking and writing of the last few years is good. I made up a song, the other day. "Say, kids, what time is it? It's Heavy Duty Time." (After Howdy Doody, the famed TV puppet.)

It's wonderful to find a poet whose way of seeing the world reinforces my own. It's validation, confirmation, recognition. I trust that Jeffers knew I, or someone like me, would come along to honor, love, respect, praise, understand, and emulate him. As I trust, Keats did, also. The goal of the disillusioned is this level of belonging, in quiet joy, to a brotherhood of the friends of life.

Jeff Miller comes in and mentions narcissism to a full table, then gestures to me, "There's a prime example, right there." I just read through my poems and found a thread I never knew to see there, before. A fear of being called something (In Jeffer's life, it was 'too bitter') that has always inhibited the release of my poems.

Stephen Vincent, who published my poems, rejected many of the poems from **The Queen of the Rhumba**, because, he said, they didn't have my earlier spirit. A manner, I would call it; that allowed apology, and was, in a way, ambivalent, with some innocent sympathy. I have always felt a quality of entertainment, of dancing and grinning in front of the firing squad, not in the poems themselves, but in my thinking about them. I think public opinion is nothing other than the lowest common denominator of informed ignorance.

I sense I'm declaring myself, more and more. I remember lines that have occurred, such as, "Compassion does not require an action." "*I know what you mean* closes the mind, *I am the same* opens the heart."

Religion attempts to imagine a sympathetic and vengeful god. God must be compassion and empathy, because spirit is in everything. I am the same as you, bird, rock, wind, wave, human. I feel so much better than I did, yesterday. Last night, in Yancy's, with a few people, I was joking, laughing, and welcoming. All night long, dreaming. This morning, telling dreams and jokes.

I dreamt I could fly. I flew, by walking above the ground, and then above a river's water. I moved from rock to rock in the river, each one with clothing drying in the sun, until I came to a giant fish, dead, under water, beautiful. Around it was another fish, wanting to take it away, and a City Fish, waiting for official word. On the shore was my father and a friend of his and mine, or a brother, both men with long hair and beards. The friend wanted the giant fish and was waiting for approval.

I leaped across the water to the shore, but I had to avoid a large crab, which snapped at my feet. I was, in fact, in bed with a woman, at the time of the dream. Am I afraid of crabs?

What does all that mean? Damned if I know. I also dreamt of my new apartment, with a wonderful window-on-the-street view. I'm recovering my painter's eye way of seeing the world. Remarkable to wake up in a woman's bed and explore her body with my eyes. She seemed somewhat surprised, but pleased, by my hungry perusal.

This old/new six-inches-from-everything way of seeing, that I've spoken of, I began to do it fully with Barbara. I remember, trying it with Nanci, over a year ago, and seeing her balk at it and hide from it. I remember her telling me not to tell her the truth. My god, years ago, I was unable to look at anyone. Stolen glances. Not when there are those who are willing to be seen and I'm willing to see.

THUR/APR 1

I'm overwhelmed. I found my master, that master poet whose vision will carry me beyond the popularity contest of styles and attitudes. I can now release my poetry to the judgment of time. This is a goal I've long sought. It's a goal toward which I have felt faint-hearted, at times, because I had only my ability, measured against its achievement. Now I have a vision to join, like a religious conversion. My faith is free, now. Thank god, I don't have to embrace some religion or politic ideology.

Years ago, I went to my son Jack's therapist, and she put me through his sandbox-play-therapy routine. She had a wall of small figures, which she asked me to draw from, as I wished. I buried a toy church under a deep mound of sand. I told her it was my faith, buried. Now I can toss the church and stand on top of the dunes.

Chris tells me Robinson Jeffers and Henry Miller used to hang out together. That's perfect. Two heroes, together. The temptation, when one has heroes, is to imitate them. As William Everson says, in **Fragments of an Older Fury**, "One may, for a time, imitate an art; to imitate a life is fatal."

I'm grateful I came to Jeffers after I had struggled to discover my own vision. On the other hand, I wonder at those long years of self-doubt and self-denial. Could I have been saved that much unhappiness? I'm so excited I can barely sit. I must admit that, perhaps for the first time, I have a volume of poetry before me that doesn't have me feeling the tiniest bit reluctant.

I'm faced with a gold mine. Like facing the discovery of the Mother Lode. I'm Sutter, in 1848, facing the entire Sierras, his mind exploding with visions. Now, I feel what Keats felt reading Chapman's Homer, what he described as Stout Cortez, facing, for the first time, the vast Pacific. And this; after 20 years of panning for gold, rejoicing at each precious nugget. I'm more amazed than ever at my persistence.

How could I have known, except by example, in the lives of others, that such realms were discoverable?

The entire life process of this search for vision is entirely discouraging. It has nothing to do with material success, and, the success of vision itself is discouraging. As in the life of an explorer, Magellan couldn't

take an airplane from London to the Far East. His accomplishment couldn't have been gained by hearing about someone else's accomplishment.

The idea, the wish, the hope, and the attempt are all worthy, but none is complete. It crosses my mind that I'm being foolish, imagining that I've arrived at vision. I have not. I've only begun to believe. My faith, long buried, has only broken the surface. What follows now? I imagine what follows is the adventure of confidence in a world of adversaries. No more paranoid apologies for a life.

Stephen Vincent once said that my poetry was an attempt to name my enemies. I was disturbed by that, and I said, instead, that I was naming my loves. Any one of us, who declares what he loves, can be assured that his enemies will declare themselves. And in the naming of loves, the naming of enemies is clearly joined.

It's Thursday night in the cafe, regularly the most social, usually with music. There may be none tonight, and it's cold and blustery. A few voices are droning away. The mediocre paintings of romantic nature and cruel nature adorn the walls like polarities of adolescence, and I will drink beer and enjoy my own nature.

Fools had better be prepared for contumely and lovers for embrace. It's fun to write with such delicious excess. It's powerful. Jeffers is an example of excess, as Everson says. I remember Dr. Johnson, described by Boswell, as living a life, not greater than others, but more.

Everyone wants more in their lives, and they mislead themselves by accumulating things, or by decadence, or by complaining in shallow rage. More is now akin in my mind to a line I wrote, without understanding it, years ago, "I will put myself inside a self larger than myself and watch it fit." It's not a self of position or hierarchy but a fulfillment of humanity. There is no need in this overcrowded world, for a birth control of soul.

FRI/APR 2

SPECIOUS: seemingly fair, attractive, sound, or true, but actually not so: deceptive. "Daydreaming bears a specious resemblance to the workings of the creative imagination." (Cyril Connolly) Having the ring of truth or plausibility but actually fallacious. (American Heritage Dictionary)

Curly Bruce said to me, last night, "Steve, you are more of one thing than any other man I've ever met. It has eight letters and starts with an S." He finally told me he meant I was specious. I must decide what I think about these human beings.

Know that when all words are said, and a man is fighting mad, something drops from eyes long blind, he completes his partial mind, for an instant at ease, laughs aloud, his heart at peace. Even the wisest man grows tense with some sort of violence, before he can accomplish fate, know his work, or choose his mate. (Wm. Butler Yeats)

The other day, I told Leslie I was in a pre-decisive state. I realize that what's going on here is a move toward decision. Clarity is the word. I have presumed that I like people, and I still think so, but I've been waiting for them to return, in kind, my love. However, my love, on the gregarious level, is one issue, played out in an ebb and flow, little different from anyone's.

I'm used to hearing it said that people are sheep, morons, idiots, etc. and I hear that sort of judgment everywhere I go, on many levels of society and intelligence. Rarely does anyone confess to such a naming of themselves. And I find intelligence everywhere I go. It seems as if "everyone" is always "everyone else." I've been disappointed in human beings. What I need to be is no longer prey to disappointment or expectation.

Michael Shorb, the guy whose room I've been renting, who shares my appreciation of Jeffers, had an idea what Jeffers would say if the human race obliterated itself in a nuclear holocaust. "My, my, isn't that a shame." I take comfort in that attitude. The human race may obliterate itself, and I, as a poet, will be unable to do anything to avert it.

And why should I rage against human folly? This is a feeling akin to my revelation, during the Vietnam War, that it wasn't my job to convince the President that the war was wrong, it was his job to convince me that it was right, and I was not convinced.

Nor is it my job, as a poet, to convince the world to love poetry in its truth and beauty. It is the world's place to convince me that it shares the same love. I am not convinced. I am about my father's work, whoever or whatever that is, and whether or not I am good, bad, or indifferent at it, it is work in the best interest of the human animal.

I've been in this cafe for five years and barely a half dozen people have spoken a desire to read my poems. That's no longer a call for disappointment. That's merely the community of beings. It's known, and widely believed, that I'm a good poet. The same people who don't seek out my available work are the same ones who think I'm a failure for not publishing. Surely, everyone else will rush to embrace my work, if only I tried a little harder.

This world is a fool's paradise, is, and the more paradisaical it professes itself to be, the more foolish it is. It's strange, is it not, that I've come from Bob's scheme for hoodwinking the masses, to loving our theatre and canonizing our lives, to wanting to join Jeffers in his monastic remove?

Everson, using Jeffer's words, says, "If civilization is rich and vulgar and bewildered, it is because men of the mind, like Jeffers, have withdrawn the force of intellect from it and left it in the hands of egomaniacs, aggressive belligerents and entrepreneurs. Jeffers has not withdrawn the force of intellect from it, but rather gave that intellect to its critique . . ."

I've come from Keats to Jeffers, and seeing how the world has evaded their truth, should I expect any different than what was their reception? The saving grace, from defeat, is the love I have for these great men (and women) whose lives are given, beyond the call of duty, to tell their hearts, like carrying a whisper into a cacophony.

I'm learning, finally, from my adventure as a public poet, a market-place poet, the cafe sage, living daily among regular people. They have accorded me a role, not without its perquisites and amenities, not without its debilitations and degradations, with occasional encounters of genuine beauty, and truth.

What surprises me and separates me from Jeffers is how much I like people. I have to ask myself why. Is it fun? Is it entertaining? Does the accumulating applause for my life give me pleasure? Can I rouse, in myself, an anger to deny these banal pleasures?

Jeffer's hawks and embankments, his Junipers and sea lions, do not care a whit for his poetry. He glories in their coloration, their interplay, their integrity. I attempt to glory in these human animals. But there's another human to whom I'm speaking.

Sister Nadja? You, the reader? It may be that we are humans reporting back to the angels what we see, and the angels do not need to hear what's angelic, but what is true, both angelic and demonic, and animal, in us humans.

(a bit later) That last paragraph about the angels does little to impress me. We are human, speaking to what is human, for human ears, ears that need to hear as much as we need to speak. If poets are thought to exist, then what is it, in us, that is poetic? And how long can people exist that don't allow life to be poetic.

SAT/APR 3

For years, I've felt, that I'm an empty man. I despair, to think of "the emptiness incorporate in the last man." I see soul as a wind that whistles through me. "I wait for god, like the wind through the hollow in a stone wall."

It isn't being shallow, or hollow, or weak, although I will accuse myself of those, too. I'm also solid, thick, strong. It's being human.

Kathy said, last night, she thinks I have a very old soul. I never wished to be so caught in this flesh, that it appears all I am is to be dead soon, and in the meantime, a self-centered fool. I am a human being, no different, but I am one, in extremes.

It occurred to me, last night, that I cannot manufacture myself back among the better people, who give themselves to human use. I am insane, or hopelessly trapped, or I am one who is different. Jesus did not abolish his self but offered it, and offered it not to some few men and women, but to all, and to god.

I understand what it takes to be among the better humans, to give away your work in such a way that it becomes the property of those who want it as property, but I find that inadequate. I am so extremely self-centered, and at the same time so extremely out of myself.

Kathy said she wasn't sure if she was angry with me, because Thursday night, I told everyone she was a "hot woman." She said she felt as if she had been "staked out as territory and pimped for, at the same time." We talked about the habit of people to want to possess. She thought it was a desire to fill up an emptiness. My early reluctance with her was with her possessiveness.

Death is the proof of how much we possess nothing. To possess is to defy death. How foolish. To possess nothing is to embrace death. Even soul. We do not possess soul. We are soul. Soul passes through us. If a hawk can fight death, until it is overcome, then what difference is our organ-brain in its struggle to fight death?

I have to remind myself that any of this I think, I feel, I am, is only what is human. It's not as if I'm to apologize for exhibiting, more noisily, what everyone is. I want to love somebody. I love so many women, it's as if

I don't love anybody. Keats sometimes sat in the darkness, pouring over his language.

SUN/APR 4

I think I won't be able to go fully into Jeffers, until I'm finished writing this book. When I'm finished here, I want to give myself over entirely to his work. I crack his poems, and every time I do, I'm astounded. I feel restored when Bob tells me, by being who he is, not to let the guilty/petty concerns get to me.

Sensitivity, in and of itself, will be drawn toward any quirk of emotion, real or false. To be sensitive is as worthy a goal as being able to catch diseases easily. Anyone who tries to be sensitive will be as successful as anyone one who tries to be intelligent. Sensitivity and intelligence are only valuable when they are being applied. Sensitivity and intelligence are potentials, un-mined resources. One doesn't dig up a mountain merely to expose its resources.

I was thinking about the differences between Jeffers' creatures and my humans, today, when I took the kids to the zoo, watching the sea lions cavort. One can stare joyfully, restoratively, at a sea lion, all day, and never think, "What an asshole." And, my children restore me. I love them. They love me.

I ran into Bob, on the streetcar, after I had put the kids on the train. I told him what I'd been thinking about nature and humans. Humans are so exasperating. I stood watching a Kodiak bear, feeling the camaraderie of flesh, but finally, all I thought was, "I'm glad that big fucker can't get across this fence." I remember a poem my friend, Michael, wrote about Indians calling the horses their brothers. I can't feel that brotherhood, beyond imagining it.

Bob said, "The Indians sat around the campfire calling the bear *brother*, but when they met one in the woods, they ran like hell." Jeffers says, "I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk...." Because you can call a man an asshole, you can think less of him, you can demean a man. If that Kodiak in the zoo, today, decided to slake his thirst on my flesh, I'd sooner kill him than write a poem.

I don't believe Jeffers enough, as an ideology. I do believe he is in truth when he admits that, as a human, he has "sooner than" ideas, that hawks don't have. No hawk will ever write such a line. Would Jeffers

approve, now that I'm broke again, and hungry, if I went out, in a few days, and killed a man for food? With no motive but survival.

What are wars but actions out of the idea of survival? Human life looks like slowed-down, drawn-out war. Daily life is wartime in slowtime. Peace is gotten by getting ready for war. We have *War* and *Ready for War*. We have war with departments. Jeffers is right, nature is cleaner.

I'm sick of my room, my diet, my habits, my situation. Nothing looks well to me, tonight. I drank Bourbon all day Saturday, woke up this morning, feeling quite good, knowing Jack and Rachel were coming. Last night, I cried. I prayed. This afternoon, I had love, in me, around me, from me, toward me. Tonight, I am tired of what is not love.

MON/APR 5

I woke up this morning, a couple of hours early, and wrote these lines. "Jack, you are my son. You are doubly strong. I am your reserve. Whatever the challenge, actual or in spirit, your call will have me at your heart's side, on the side of your seeing, inside all of your doing. You are the owner of your self, and I am here to proclaim it."

I got into a long rap, last night, in Yancy's, talking to Dan and a guy from Scotland. The gist of which is that audiences feed the performer. A performance, which needs fifty people, cannot be sustained by five, no matter how much the five might wish it. A readership sustains a writer. Is a painter fed by those who see his work?

I was asking myself, "To whom am I playing?"

This morning, I read an article, which was an attempt to explain the deaths of famous people from booze and drugs. The writer, Bob Greene, contended that fame isolates them into the idea that the extraordinary high they feel while performing ought to be theirs constantly, that it grants them immortality from ordinary rules.

I know the feeling; to know that high, and to know the notoriety attached to it, and to feel the addiction for it, and to feel the obligation to sustain it. And, intuitively, I've been smart enough to refuse it or to drop out of sight, to remove myself, even to the extent of invisibility. Fame is a killer, and there's peace in anonymity, silence, withdrawal. Who killed the cyclops? No Man did.

In other words, it's not my failing to refuse fame, but my salvation. But I am more addicted, surely, to being known and projected upon, than I am to alcohol. I was talking to Bob and Gita, last night. Bob is giddy over Gita. Gita noticed how young my son is. I said he hasn't matured, yet. No body hair, no voice change, not interested in girls. She asked if he's gay. Who knows?

"He's not goosy around girls," I said.

"Maybe he's over that," Bob said.

"Do you know any men who are?" I said.

"Yeah, I knew a 45 year old guy once who was."

I confessed, "I'm not goosy around girls, because I have a trick. I pretend that poetry is the most important thing in my life. More important than everything else."

"It works," said Gita.

"And I've met some pretty good poems, too," I said.

Whenever I have, or imagine I have, truly desired a woman, the game is blown. But it sure cuts down on goosiness. I told Bob what Kathy said, "You made me feel staked out as territory and pimped for, at the same time."

"That's perfect," he said, "She'll be around for a while."

There was a letter in Playboy from a guy who described himself as a sensitive, nice guy, who gets along well with women, but has noticed that the bastards get the girl, that women will put up with just about anything but niceness.

Playboy said he must be hanging around with the wrong women. That reveals Playboy as what it is - a chance for wimpy guys with a couple of bucks to imagine getting women they'd never get in a million years. What sort of man reads Playboy. The average man, that's who. You don't get rich selling things to only a few people. You go for the great masses of wimps, dip-shits, and nice guys. Nice guys finish last, with a copy of Playboy rolled up in their back pocket. Those playmates are bought, not taken.

I've been wondering about this charade. Women like men who appear not to be domesticated, because most are so easily had. Men prefer women who appear loyal, because they imagine the opposite. When I imagined that Roxan might actually marry me, I became elated and calm, at the same time. She dumped me because I was, as she said, "too weak" for her. I was willing to give up my freedom for her. What a joke. I kept her for two years, by being, occasionally, a real bastard. It was a terrible dilemma. I wanted her so much, I was weak.

For days, I've been wanting to tell Nanci that I did my one-man show last November, at Intersection, for her. I did **The Blood and Turnips Poetry Festival**. It released me and released the audience. The quantum leap in pleasure was real. I'm a small town boy, a human-size poet. I don't write for large audiences. When I try, I turn rhetorical.

The woman I write for, the muse, my sister Nadja, Nanci, whoever, is no different from any woman. She wants all of my attention but secretly prefers me to be free. The less I court her, the more she desires me. I must be sexy and violent, without doing damage.

Mother called me a heartbreaker. I told her, "I don't see any dead bodies," when it feels like my own heart that's been pummeled. Bob says all he wants is to make one tiny crack in the corner of a woman's heart. Ah, I've just gotten the window seat. It must be my lucky day.

WED/APR 7

"Loveable Larva," Deborah called me. "Yeah," I said, "Maybe, it's time I broke out of this cocoon." So, here's my second book about an un-emerged man.

At work, this morning, I proposed an idea to Mark, who is a sculptor. "Can you imagine going your entire life without New York ever knowing who you are?"

He responded, enthusiastically, "Absolutely!"

FRI/APR 9

Call the Hawks

The poet, who wishes not to play games with words,
His affair being to awake dangerous images and call
The hawks - they all feed the future, they serve God,
Who is very beautiful, but hardly a friend of humanity.

(from **Triad**, Robinson Jeffers)

SAT/APR 10

The Fact of Dying

Ants crawl
across the table
in the corner window
overlooking the seacoast
in relentless wash
under a steady rain.

Spilled wax from a green candle,
beer cans with ash remainders at the lip,
conversation comparing voice quality from
opera to Bobby Short to the Rolling Stones,
Prokofiev on the cassette.

Janice, who turned 23, last midnight,
has gone with two cars full for more liquor,
an urban expedition to witness whales passing
in their migration, turns exploration of crowding,
people drawing owls and carp, people drawing
the rocky abutment offshore.

Waves relentlessly wash,
ants crawl, do not crawl,
it is merely their relationship
to our lives that makes them
appear to crawl.

I blow an ant from my arm and remember
my childhood fear of seas, one cough
in the throat of the Pacific, and we are
drowned, what distinguishes us, that
does not also extinguish our belonging?

Sandy calls the rock bridge, from
the near ridge, by the porch, to the
great rock in the ocean, a connector,
"There is a connector," she says.

WED/APR 14

Nah Ja,

So much to tell and, as happens, I wish I had notes, a verbatim recording, of the last week. I do have the poem preceding. It is the poem of this book, as "My Friend Flew in From Denver" is the poem of **Savage Amusement**.

I'm back in the cafe, after being out since last Friday. The guys at work have been treating me strangely, the last two days, I think because Clark told them I was suicidal on Sunday. I didn't think of committing suicide, but when we were coming back from an exhausting three-day, drunken explosion of feeling, and dealing with twenty-five people and the Pacific Ocean.

As we crossed the Golden Gate Bridge, Jeff, Fred, and Richard were joking, yelling at the pedestrians, "Jump, Jump! Jump!"

I opened the car door to spit tobacco juice, thought for a second, and said, "Hell, if nobody else will, I will."

Jeff grabbed my arm, but for a split second, I imagined the incredible joy of diving into union with being, the joy of final release. I told Clark I wouldn't commit suicide. "A poet, who commits suicide is saying to the world, 'I take it all back. I didn't mean what I said.'" On the other hand, Sunday, I understood Keats saying that death seemed sweet to him. At work, Tuesday, I was hopeless. I must have seemed suicidal.

Last night, I went to hear a wonderful poet read, and a healing woman took me home to bed. (There are stories here that need another kind of book.)

Tuesday afternoon, I thought, "I've been living out Keats' life and death. This afternoon, I thought I was living out Jeffers' sense of life and death when I was up in Mendocino. The poet, last night, Robert Sund, is a back-country poet, who left the city because his particular kind of poetry couldn't stand there, and therefore didn't need the pace, noise, and the compressed humanity of the city.

I love Keats, Jeffers, Sund, etc. I've been in an altered state of consciousness. I felt, at the reading, "I'm ready. I want to read." I took my

amalgam of voices, recognized my own distinctiveness and my worth, even by comparison, and said, "Now is the time."

I went up to Jim Hartz and Jack Davis, who run the place, and said, "I want to read." I had a manuscript with me, and I gave it to Jim.

My antics, my obsessiveness, my being in clairvoyant drunkenness, over the weekend, I'm sure, have been the subject of much gossip in the cafe. Dan told Clark all about it. "King for a Day," Dan said.

One woman at the gathering told me, "You are a mirror."

"I'm looking for someone to crack my mirror," I said.

"It's bad luck," she said.

"But, it's a good life," I said.

"Don't stare at me," she said. I couldn't mirror her.

"You don't want to break," I said, "I give up."

She was the only woman there who seemed to be a Eurydice. I began to think about Orpheus and his wife. She followed him through the mirror, but couldn't come back. (I refer to Cocteau's version, "Orphee," which I've always wanted to update.) Yesterday, I read a Cocteau quote in the paper. "A mirror must reflect a while before giving messages." I gave messages all weekend. I have no idea how my mirroring went. I would like to be able to live with a woman, without losing my mirroring. She would have to be un-mirrored. I couldn't remember the name of the woman who talked to me on Sunday.

"What is my name?" she said.

"I don't remember. It's Spanish or Italian."

"No."

"Maybe your name is not your name. Maybe you have another name."

I can't even think of it, now.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No."

"I think you have an imaginary boyfriend, so far unknown to you."

A moment later, I said, "I think your boyfriend just died."

She was deeply troubled and wouldn't approach me. She was a painter and very much removed from the group. On the phone, Sunday night, I told Clark that my poet was alive, but my ordinary man was starving.

Joe Vennerucci just called me "The Man of the Hour."

"Everyone out there wants to shoot you," Joe said. He said I insulted everyone.

"That's what I'm afraid of," I said.

Joe grinned and touched me, gently. So, it's time to pay the piper. Fortunately, I was loved, last night, and today, Clark gave me a \$400 painting job.

Luisa. That was her name.

Pay the piper. For whose dance, mirror?

"I'm surprised you're still alive," Joe said.

I may not be soon. A teacher at City College, who presumed to test the minds of his students, a teacher loved and hated, was shot to death, in his classroom, yesterday.

Could Luisa have been you, Nadja? Could she have been Eurydice? The poet, Robert Sund, wrote a love poem about the failure of loves endurance, about its brief moment. "I saw your face/ fading from me/ like a round stone/ sinking slowly/ in dark water."

He also used the line, "I am the father/ who cannot reach for/ his children."

I thought that this book writing, this poetry, in its extreme, in sublimation, has blocked my Eurydice. My body has been infected for two weeks. It's time to stop.

"You have too many women," Gita said, Friday night, when she took me to bed with her, to collapse, in the trailer she took up the coast.

"I'm infected, "I told Sarah, last night, "I thought I could make love to anyone."

"Nonsense," she said, "I will take it away."

Going to her house, we ran into an old, drunk Indian, panhandling on the street. He said his name was Running Water.

"So is mine," I said. He didn't care.

"I think Indians are like poets," I told him, "People either don't listen to us, at all, or they listen too much."

He nodded. Standing in the street, he sang us a beautiful song. He called me and Sarah "partners" and said I should be good to her.

Dan Markowitz came in the cafe. He was up the coast. I asked him if I'd have to pay the piper. He said that Phil, who was not there, is spreading

the rumor that I ran around with my cock out. If Phil imagines anything, it ends up having something to do with his cock. I need a beer. I laid off for two days. But this anxiety is highlighting that my nerves are still ragged.

(pause) I came to Yancy's, to escape and fuel up.

"Dan," I said, ordering a second glass of wine in as many minutes, "It's tough being an alcoholic. Making a public spectacle of oneself is exhausting."

"It's entertaining, though," he said.

I told him, "I'm this close (holding up two fingers, almost touching each other) to experiencing everything, but it's as if there's a glass wall between me and everything. I can see everything, but I can't be there."

Jeff came in the cafe.

"How dare you show your face in here," he said. Then, he sat down, and complained about the rumors. But you could tell he liked being include in the wild surmises. I told Kathy about the rumor of my cock hanging out.

"Probably true," she said, with calm assurance.

"It was my brain hanging out," I said, "Blown out, actually."

Of course, dear Sister, none of this explains what did happened.

I think I told the group, Saturday night, something like this, "Can you imagine that I have written a poem, and there is no one here who wants to read it, or anyone here who can read it?"

Luisa told me she knew she could. She was the only one who thought so and said so. I'm reminded of my blunt pronouncement, an accusation, if that's what I said, that was answered by one woman, in kind, and the rest have chosen denunciation, loaded guns, the noose, and wild rumor.

I remember holding it in until it burst out of me, as if it had been held inside for these forty years. I remember that it wasn't about me and my poems, it was about something deeper that only shows up as poetry, something in me, as it is in everyone, that I don't understand, and I don't think anyone else understands, either. Something that seems more important than everything we do understand, so everyone avoids it.

THUR/APR 15

Last night, I went back in the cafe and had a wonderful time. I jumped up on top of my role in this theatre. Today, I'm fighting arrogance. No one else minds, but I do. The cafe is jammed with people to hear the music. I'm only making false starts in this writing.

Chuck say he has to fly to Chico, tonight, on law business, but he doesn't want to. I'm out of messages. Time to absorb, draw back. I keep thinking how Robert Sund has to live in the backwoods, on Invisible Lake, next to Shit Creek. That's literally true. A poet has to live where and how he does, and no matter where it is, or how it is, it has the same conjunctions and contradictions.

Oh, good, the arrogance is falling away. I'm writing, and I've put my blinders up to the world. It's wonderful to be quiet and removed from any public role. I told someone, last week, no one knows that, at heart, I might as well be a contemplative monk.

Nanci supported my public role, wanting me to perform, but she thwarted my writing. She wanted it published, i.e., performed. When I went to the cafe to write, she assumed I went to party. When I began to write at home, she interrupted me and finally told me to get a job.

Where is my Eurydice? I just told Mike I'm ready for her, as I become, more and more, my Orphean self. A Eurydice is a special woman. A woman whose fulfillment is a poet's work. A homemaker for poetry. It'll taken me twenty years to release this Orphean presence.

I walked past a table in The Little Shamrock, last night, and a guy said, "Steve. The overwhelming presence."

Kathy said she loved me. She said she could tolerate my comings and goings, but she wanted more. Chuck had told her, "If you want Steve, you have to take the whole thing, not just the parts you like."

I told her, "I love you, but I'm not in love with you. And if you think of it, you'd realize I'm not a particularly good lover."

I need Eurydice to fulfill this man as a lover. The guy singing sang a half-dozen notes, and everyone quieted down. Isn't it amazing? I'm dragging on in this writing, because of the pretty woman, nearby. I mentioned her a while back, sitting down with me and saying she liked to

be incognito. She's smiling at me, these days. This guy singing is wonderful.

The girl left. Her beauty was drawing flies. Bob, Joe, Lee, and Phil.

(Addendum) I get sick every time I write a book about my life as a poet, if two books is any evidence. I've got bleeding gums, herpes, and a rash on my arms, indigestion and farts that require a gas mask. Sarah said I smelled like a man. Imagine. That's a compliment. Chris said that the body has grain, like wood. My rash has come out like lines in the grain.

This guy singing is losing the audience, because he doesn't sing TO them. He's very good, but he's singing to himself. I'm going to stop, now. I told Mike, when he invited me to the center table, that I can come out of my corner whenever I want. It's true enough about tables in corners, anyway.

FRI/APR 16

Women, Nadja, women, There are hundreds, thousands, dozens of women. It's a quiet night in the cafe, but there are at least a half-dozen attractive women.

I should be asleep. I'm working, everyday, even on the weekends, and at night, I'm working my role of poet. My body is being overrun with rashes. My rash is not stopping but mounting to epidemic proportions. Epidemic propititions? Guilt? Approbation? It's nerves. I'm exploding with toxins. I read an article about the organ skin and its propensity for dispelling toxins.

I'm living the kind of life that might make good romanticizing. But, shit, I'M doing it. Where does the boy get his energy? He doesn't. I'm exhausted, working loose a toxin. I do, though, have energy. At my age, I don't have a problem drinking. I have a problem stopping. "Stay drunk," said Baudelaire, and look where that got him. My mind sees the sexual world, but my body is in cruel limbo, working loose a callus on the red, red rose.

Raoul called me to mirror him, last night. He bought me a beer, and another, and then, after an hour of his own private, personal angry demand, he spoke himself, and the talk was finished. I went to the Shamrock, and Gene wanted to talk. He did talk, but I was worn out. I couldn't carry it to the end. At work, today, I was slow and hurt, and my brain, heart, lungs and nerves jerked around in my body like a riderless horse.

These young girls, with their boundless energy. This old horse, in need of a gentle rider. This is the kind of night in the cafe that I love. No one puts upon me. This is the kind of writing I love. I'm so tired. I don't put upon myself. I'm drunk, for myself. I'm mirroring myself.

I tried to explain to Tom, last night, at 2AM, how tiring it is to be a mirror, and he responded by talking about being a human, with human love, in a relationship, a sharing caring blah, blah, blah.

"Yes, Tom, yes."

I've been getting a little nuts on Tom, lately. Shit! On Tom? On everyone. On myself. Everyone wonders what my problem is. Someone mentioned that my first book was rejected, and someone else said, "What

happened to The Great Brooks?" and some girl said, "Who's The Great Brooks?" I've always known this was my problem. If I ever let loose my spirit, it would reek wonderful havoc, and I'd be hard-pressed to survive it. There's only one way to achieve your greatest fulfillment in this life, and that's if you have a vision beyond it.

On the other hand, I was watching part of a tribute to Jerry Lee Lewis, who was near death, six months ago. He spent 62 days in intensive care. His eyes have a far away look. His music hasn't changed, but he has. He's seen death.

John Keats said, "I'm living a posthumous existence." Jerry Lee looked like that. Samuel Coleridge said of the only meeting he had with Keats, "He had the look of death on him."

I'm afraid of that, Nadja. Nah Yah. No Ya. No Yes. I'm afraid I have seen too much, and yet I'm so alive, fueled by alcohol, like a corpse, pumped full of formaldehyde.

"My, he looks so alive."

This is exaggeration, but it makes a point. Am I nearing the end of this book, yhis life of a book, this book of life? Am I changing, growing? Are there parts of me that are dying? Yes, to the above. Where are you, Nadja?

Has anyone ever written a chronicle of the jungle crawling and mountain climbing of this internal adventure? I heard a guy on the radio, today, talk lovingly about the human difference. It seems a large portion of our cerebral cortex is unknown, and that's what does our human thinking. We imagine and live from that source.

This shall be it all,
And the river,
That fills our brain,
Is the pot of earth,
From which we will never be satiated,
And which we cannot ignore.

I'm nearing a conclusion. Whenever a conclusion is in sight, it's a time of fear and wonder. I'll survive this book, but a certain "I" won't survive the book's end, and the "I" of the book ends with it.

Nadja, one of the joys of writing is that human joy of imagining and then attempting an action equivalent to the imagining.

Bob said, last night, "Apologies are not called for when you go crazy and offend everyone. Only if you hit somebody or break something."

"It's stupid to hit somebody or break something," I said, and then I thought, "Shit, I stayed, cringing in my room, for three days. Isn't that enough of an apology?"

An old man appeared in my dreams, years ago, and said, "Can't anyone see that this man is in distress?" Later in the dream, he said to me, "You do your best work when you're exhausted."

Nadja, you are my mirror. I need all these pages to get to the breakdown point, the breakthrough: truly, the breakaway. I need your support to keep it from breaking me. How can I know I will break free into spirit and not be broken into pieces of earthenware? The metaphor of dying is that, as the body dies, the spirit is set free. What's the presumption of that? That spirit is held prisoner in the body. But the body is the earth that feeds the heart that rivers the spirit.

I can't know whether I'll live or die. On the bus today, coming home from work, I saw more new rash on my right hand. I saw it overtaking my entire body, and I was afraid. I looked at my ravaged arm and said, "Come on, toxins, take over, if you can."

When you're young, and your breasts are sexy bumps, and you have a motorcycle at the curb, you look at the room and you see scenery flying by, you think about hands that cup your innocence and kisses like sweet breath. You go over and talk to the madman, or the sad man, or the bad man, with only a faint glimmer of the crash and how the heart beats like a wild animal when it's trapped by death, when your eyes are in the gravel, and the gravel is in your flesh.

Jesus, Nadia, poetry scares me, like everything that invents life.

SAT/APR 17

And, as surely as it comes, it passes. This afternoon, I became calm. After two weeks of madness, innocence returned. The nice lady, whose apartment I'm painting, told me how happy she is that I'm doing it for her. I realized how much I've slowed down in the last years. I can't paint fast. There's no use to speed. Speed is the boss's word. I feel peaceful. I slept well. Chuck told me I have hives. What's the cure? Relax. Stop writing, tonight.

WED/APR 21

I'm sitting in the Cafe Flore, after going to the clinic to find out about my rash. It's either syphilis or a final allergic bail-out from house painting. I'll know in a week if it's the devil or the deep blue sea. The clinic cost a dollar, and the coritzone ointment cost nine.

Chuck doesn't want me to let my remarks and phrases get away. Therefore, out of a sense of friendly duty, here's three;

At the root of every alienation is a virtue.

Life is like sitting in the front of a roller-coaster,
thinking you are in the driver's seat.

Slow down. Go slower. Stop.
Now you're getting somewhere.

I said something in casual conversation, and Chuck stopped me.

"Write that down," he said.

"It's only a remark. It's just conversation," I said.

"You're a writer. Write it down," he said.

"But Gertrude Stein says remarks aren't literature," I said.

"Fuck Gertrude Stein! Write it down."

Peter wrote, offering me board and room in Denver, in exchange for work. I need a ride. Hitchhiking has its appeal. Getting loose, for a while, has its appeal, but getting loose is possible here.

I haven't been in the Owl for several days. A cafe is like a lover. I have the habit of breaking free of lovers by making them kick me out. My outrage factor has been rather high lately in that staid cesspool of middle class dreams gone awry.

Bob's encouragement prevented my normal embarrassment from keeping me balanced, but no amount of weighty words can keep a sheet of paper down in a breeze. I'm sitting in the direct sun, 80 degrees, in a long-sleeve white shirt, because of my weltered body.

"Scabies," the nurse said. Not a pretty affliction.

Here's the inside dope. I jokingly said to Chuck, as I showed him the outbreak of the rash in its dots, blotches, and lines, "I expect to see the face of Jesus, any day now." I haven't seen Jesus, but I've seen something.

Last Tuesday, when I went to work painting, after the weekend up the coast, I took my tools. On all my scrapers and brushes, I made an X at the head of the handle, to mark them as mine. Each painter made up his own marks.

The weekend before felt like an eruption of my being as a poet. Going back to work as a painter seemed like cruel denial of a violent declaration. Anyway, a few days ago, two configurations appeared on my right arm that I read meaning into. On the back of my right hand, just like the markings on my tools, an X appeared. And on my right forearm, a large, dark, well-defined question mark. ?

"Why am I turning myself into a tool for someone else's advantage?"

I still haven't settled on a satisfactory answer to the question posed by my right arm.

On my last job, Clark told me to hurry up, and Christie said, "He's cracking the whip."

"That's his job," I said, "He's the boss."

I believe it's quite possible for my brain and nerves to write a message on my skin. My brain and nerves are writing these words on paper. I've committed myself to poetry so many times. It doesn't reduce the difficulties of living in this alienating world. Alienate or accommodate, that's the query.

"To be or not to be, that is the question. Whether to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous persecution or take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing, end them."

Here is Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. What possible slings and arrows could he suffer? He's rich, talented, handsome, educated, with a beautiful girlfriend and loyal buddies. So his uncle killed his father? It was probably no more than a quiet, relatively bloodless coup. Was Hamlet's old dad such an innocent angel? Outrageous persecution? By what or whom? Take arms against a sea of troubles? Slash the relentless wash? Order the waves to stop? End troubles? Is he naive?

The mind is like a field of daisies, against which is thrown a sea of dangers, from which the flowers draw sustenance, but the worst danger is the plow and the bomb, the blade and the fist of man, that cut and tear the living beauty for the glass vases of distant decorated rooms.

A flight of fancy, like bees, a hawk circling in the sky, in the heat of the afternoon sun. In defense of Hamlet, he lived in a Denmark that was a war zone of bleak aspects and bleaker dreams. By opposing, accept them. Define them. End them in the mind. The world is beautiful. The world is ugly. I'm in a cafe I seldom visit, and a guy just came up and said, "You're sitting in exactly the same spot you were in, when I saw you in here, yesterday. Did you leave?"

I guess, when you find your spot, it gives out an sense of inevitability. Have I found my spot, from among all these on my spotted body? There was a story in the paper about the local teacher-guru who was shot and killed. A student told him that he was greatly disappointed in the last lecture he gave for the year. The kid came back later and said, "I get it. Your lectures have no beginning and no end, they just go on."

"You've learned a great deal," said the teacher.

A search for, a demand for conclusions, is always fruitless. Even death is no conclusion, but an awful transformation. To die from this intensity of awareness into dust, worm's meat, electric dispersal, etc., seems like such a reduction. The newspaper describes a super-nova explosion due in the Milky Way, soon, next week, or in a thousand years. And so it goes. It doesn't end, it merely ends. I have to go back to the Owl & Monkey. Right now. Take a last look, before I return.

(later) I ran into Sybil Wood on the streetcar. She was zoned out. She's on a three-month meditation journey at the Zen Center, culminating in a week-long sit, in June. She described sitting on the Mission bus, in a clairvoyant state, seeing everyone's life messages. I said I achieve that with alcohol, and it's stimulating, and addicting, and that clairvoyance is true, but it comes at such a cost. The cost to her is a kind of spacey lethargy. I said that when I feel normal, I miss so much, strolling through life, noticing but not seeing.

Sybil and I have an easy friendship. I showed her the X and ? on my arm. I told her I might be allergic to paint, or maybe I just think I am.

"Well, whether you are, or you aren't, you are," she said.

"That's clairvoyant," I said, jokingly. She laughed and rolled her saucer eyes. I got off the trolley, and when it passed, we waved.

I'm back in the window seat. At least I was, for a minute. It was too hot in the afternoon sun. This chair is the polar opposite of that one. Back corner table, by the kitchen. Good seat to watch the cafe from. I told Sybil I felt like a broken man, last Tuesday, when the rash came. The weekend, before, broke me down, and going to work, I thought, "This is lost, this is hopeless, I am a slave."

Here are Gene and Kathleen, the owners of the cafe, smiling. I imagine them asking if I had left the cafe, and I said, "Yes, for a while, but I'll always come back." This cafe means humanity. This is the camp, the tribe, from which the borderwalker springs. I must leave. And, I must return. I can't expect these people to be borderwalkers.

I wrench myself loose from the community I love, to walk the stone borders of our land. When I return from my dangerous walk, I see their lives with cruel clarity, and then, gradually, I'm taken back into the life stream, until I'm a member. Then the awful, wonderful cycle begins again. I'm normal, today, calm, peaceful, no words but kindness for my fellows, but sooner or later, and it's inevitable, I will certainly and suddenly disappear from the circle, to walk the border, circling the borders of this life.

Only the borderwalker who survives can serve. Only the borderwalker who has not broken trust will be heard. This book is at an end. I've tried to show myself at both ends of my cycle. If I'm to be trusted, I need to continue.

Nadja? Perhaps, she is the woman who meditates, whose clairvoyance is other than mine. She's the one who shows the community that this wild-eyed borderwalker, with his strange lies, is to be believed. Sybil and I laughed at our strange ways. It was like husband and wife, sharing a cup.

THUR/APR 22

Last night, I ended up in Yancy's, talking to Phil about Joe Miseraka, the self-styled General of Poetry. Dan and Phil think Joe's a good poet. I doubted it, because I couldn't imagine any compassion in him. He's been 86'd from the cafe, for a series of mildly psychotic outbursts. He's on S.S.I., and his parents pay him to stay away from them.

Phil convinced me to take another look at Joe's work. I did, and it's not as bad as I thought. Joe tried to read at The Rose Tattoo Cafe, last week, and the patrons drowned him out. One guy got up and began playing the piano loudly.

Lee sat down and started to chat amiably, but he gradually became angry for what seemed to him my arrogance about being a truth-seeker, when, in fact, I'm an asshole, like everyone else. I told him my interest was in the intentionality of those people I care about, and he wondered what that was. Then he said something which didn't register, until today. He said that, at first, my poetry scared him, but when I included some poems about people in the cafe, he relaxed, because they were kind and not cruel.

Later, I ran into Joe Miseraka in the Shamrock, and I asked him, since he was a General of Poetry, what was I? He thought about it for a while. He gave it the utmost consideration. After a while, he came up to me and said, succinctly, "Captain." I was flattered, and I told him so.

I've changed. I have always meant, at every point of my becoming a poet, to address the general reader. My demeanor, my life in the bourgeois cafe, the way I dress, have all been affected by my wanting to belong in the community. Lee was telling me, without knowing it, and in anger, that I owed it to him not to break away. I had the feeling he wanted me to accommodate him, despite his life of avoidance and benign denial.

Keats and Jeffers. The Nightingale and the Hawk.

It is a gift to the human soul for a poet to love a thing enough to show that love, in its beauty and truth. Not one person's beauty, not one person's truth, not THE beauty, and not THE truth, but, simply, beauty and truth.

All I know is; there's a life to be lived and poems to be written. The hardest lesson, and the most joyful one, is that no matter what I may learn about my incidence of life, I have no choice but to enact it, and when I do, all of life's anguish and realization become one with me.

Nadja is in me. I am Nadja.

Postscript

In **Borderwalker**, written seven years after **Dear Nadja**, the liberated self of the central character, called Walker Thompson, whose life dramatizes the incidents described in **Dear Nadja**, is called Angel Rider, who seems to be an angel, but I realize now that Angel is not that different from Nadja, a projection of what remains when the attachments of this life subside in the surrender to the inherent reality.

A year after writing *Dear Nadja*, I quit drinking. It took me two more years to realize that my drinking was not a choice I made in the fulfillment of my life as a poet, but a deadly block to its fulfillment. Throughout my life, the voice of the poet has been clear, and it's been my job, as a man, to match my voice to the voice of my inherent reality. I am the same as Nadja, Walker Thompson is the same as Angel Rider, we are all the same in being who we are, and we are all the same as the source of who we are, in our being.

Steve Abhaya Brooks