

# CHARLES BUKOWSKI

# the night torn mad with footsteps

**NEW POEMS** 

HarperCollins e-books

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other books by charles bukowski cover copyright about the publisher 1

like the fox
I run with the hunted
and if I'm not
the happiest man
on earth
I'm surely the luckiest man
alive.

#### one writer's funeral

there was a rock-and-mud slide on the Pacific Coast Highway and we had to take a detour and they directed us up into the Malibu hills and traffic was slow and it was hot, and then we were lost.
but I spotted a hearse and said, "there's the hearse, we'll follow it," and my woman said "that's not the hearse," and I said, "yes, that's the hearse."

the hearse took a left and I followed it as it went up a narrow dirt road and then pulled over and I thought, "he's lost too." there was a truck and a man selling strawberries parked there and I pulled over and asked where the church was and he gave me directions and my woman told the strawberry man, "we'll buy some strawberries on the way back." then I swung onto the road and the hearse started up again and we continued to drive along until we reached that church.

we were going to the funeral of a great man but the crowd was very sparse: the family, a couple of old screenwriter friends, two or three others. we spoke to the family and to the wife of the deceased and then we went in and the service began and the priest wasn't so good but one of the great man's sons gave a fine eulogy, and then it was over

and we were outside again, in our car, following the hearse again, back down the steep road passing the strawberry truck again and my woman said, "let's not stop for strawberries," and as we continued to the graveyard, I thought, Fante, you were one of the best writers ever and this is one sad day. finally we were at the graveside, the priest said a few words and then it was over. I walked up to the widow who sat very pale and beautiful and quite alone on a folding metal chair. "Hank," she said, "it's hard," and I tried in vain to say something that might comfort her.

we walked away then, leaving her there, and I felt terrible.

I got a friend to drive my girlfriend back to town while I drove to the racetrack, made it just in time for the first race, got my bet down as the mutuel clerk looked at me in wonder and said, "Jesus Christ, how come you're wearing a necktie?"

# beagle

do not bother the beagle lying there away from grass and flowers and paths, dreaming dogdreams, or perhaps dreaming nothing, as men do awake; yes, leave him be, in that simple juxtaposition, out of the maelstrom, lucifugous as a bat, searching bat-inward for a state of grace.

it's good. we'll not ransom our fate or his for door knobs or rasps. the east wind whirls the blinds, our beagle snuffles in his sleep as outside, outside, hedges break, the night torn mad with footsteps.

our beagle spreads a paw, the lamp burns warm bathed in the life of his size.

#### a smile to remember

we had goldfish and they circled around and around in the bowl on the table near the heavy drapes covering the picture window and my mother, always smiling, wanting us all to be happy, told me, "be happy, Henry!" and she was right: it's better to be happy if you can but my father continued to beat her and me several times a week while raging inside his 6-foot-two frame because he couldn't understand what was attacking him from within.

my mother, poor fish, wanting to be happy, beaten two or three times a week, telling me to be happy: "Henry, smile! why don't you ever smile?"

and then she would smile, to show me how, and it was the saddest smile I ever saw.

one day the goldfish died, all five of them, they floated on the water, on their sides, their eyes still open, and when my father got home he threw them to the cat there on the kitchen floor and we watched as my mother smiled.

### where was Jane?

one of the first actors to play Tarzan was living at the Motion Picture Home.

he'd been there for years waiting to die.

he spent much of his time

running in and out of the wards

into the cafeteria and out into the yard where he'd yell,

"ME TARZAN!"

he never spoke to anyone or said anything else, it was always just "ME TARZAN!"

everybody liked him: the old actors, the retired directors,

the ancient script writers, the aged cameramen, the prop men, stunt men, the old

actresses, all of whom were also there

waiting to die; they enjoyed his verve,

his antics, he was harmless and he took them back to the time when they

were still in the business.

then the doctors in authority decided that Tarzan was possibly dangerous

and one day he was shipped off to a mental institution.

he vanished as suddenly as if he'd been eaten by a lion.

and the other patients were outraged, they instituted legal proceedings to have him returned at once but

it took some months.

when Tarzan returned he was changed. he would not leave his room. he just sat by the window as if he had forgotten his old role and the other patients missed his antics, his verve, and

they too felt somehow defeated and diminished. they complained about the change in Tarzan doped and drugged in his room and they knew he would soon die like that and then he did and then he was back in that other jungle (to where we will all someday retire) unleashing the joyful primal call they could no longer hear.

there were some small notices in the newspapers and the paint continued to chip from the hospital walls, many plants died, there was an unfortunate suicide, a growing lack of trust and hope, and a pervasive sadness: it wasn't so much Tarzan's death the others mourned, it was the cold, willful attitude of the young and powerful doctors despite the wishes of the helpless old.

and finally they knew the truth while sitting in their rooms that it wasn't only the attitude of the doctors they had to fear, and that as silly as all those Tarzan films had been, and as much as they would miss their own lost Tarzan, that all that was much kinder than the final vigil they would now have to sit and patiently endure alone.

# the fish with yellow eyes and green fins leaps into the volcano

sometimes dogs
in the alley
play the violin better
than the privileged peacocks
who swim in butter.
I speak now of young
dogs in
old rooms of peeling wallpaper and
the bathroom down the hall—always with
somebody in there.

you should have seen that place in Philly, just 2 dollars a week, she said, and it was up under the attic roof.
just what I need, I thought, I can live here FOREVER and KREE-ATE.

#### god

it was HOT that first afternoon in there trundled away from the world in my artistic sanctuary (Lawrence had Taos) but my Taos was so HOT I drank my way through it, thinking, I will write at night.

but when night came I passed out. and I was to find that mornings were the worst: sick, I would be awakened at 5 a.m. by 20 or 30 pigeons walking on the roof—making their terrible sounds: "koo, koo, koo..."

and I'd go to the little window and look out and there they would be strutting about, shitting little white dots, their dumb rubber necks

#### jerking.

but I still knew (despite my 2-bit cheap insanity) that there was an awful lot of bad writing out there being called great, which really was no better than what I could do under that Philly roof

but I decided to get out of there and find another place to live and write and maybe some day give the haters something real to hate.

# 1966 Volkswagen minivan

there goes Bach again but one wonders how much longer we can hold on? it's good music great music but I mean and I wonder: how much longer will we be able to hear what he has to say? question marks are sometimes discouraging. as we become more and more dispossessed giants like Bach will vanish from our thoughts and lives and the taste and touch of his music will be like finding my love dead just dead eyes closed her body still soft still warm her hair spilling over my forearm.

I listen to Bach as often as I can and my love is driving over here this evening in her 1966 Volkswagen van as I chill the wine and wait.

her hair is the strangest color: red mixed with gold as conquering armies smash snails smash daffodils.

she has small hands small feet. we fight we often laugh.

I am listening to Bach now. the music stops.

she drives that damned mini-bus like a rowboat over the rapids

if she would listen to my heart she'd go slower much slower.

please let me die first because I am older

much older.
listen Bach, your god and my god
are real but
helpful only in spurts.
I want you to
tell me that everything is all
right
and that her red and gold hair will be
spread
upon my pillow again.

her small feet her small hands her fingers stroking my eyes and my ears and her laugh comforting me.

# his cap

there was an old guy used to walk his dog in the neighborhood; the dog wasn't particularly interesting and neither was he. the dog was black-and-white, spotted, medium-sized and the old guy wore baggy pants and a sweater, but most appealing was the small cap which he wore flat on top of his head almost like an afterthought. I used to watch him walk his hound (they were both medium-sized) just as evening was slipping into night. they gave the neighborhood a sense of peace and predictability and an old-school stability that we needed.

they made the neighborhood.

the evening finally came when the old guy and the dog were walking along the sidewalk toward me as I walked toward them.

as they came closer I hesitated. the hound was sniffing, moving forward, jerking at the leash and the old guy followed neither leading nor being led and since it was such a pleasant evening I wasn't afraid to speak:

"hi there!" I said.

"good evening," he said.

the hound moved on past me and the old guy followed him along. he and the dog went off down the street, the dog stopping now and then to examine the lawns.

I watched them as they went to the corner where they made their turn and were gone.

it was not long after that that I moved out of the neighborhood.

personally, I might stop writing stuff like this someday if I can find a way short of death and/or senility

but, personally, things like that old guy, his cap and his spotted dog make it hard to stop.

#### luck from a kitchen

what matters is still being here in this kitchen with my small radio, this rolled cigarette and with a two-foot stack of fresh blue laundry. I'm sure I've sprayed the last of the roaches and what matters is that this tabletop is littered with new poems. two drunks fight in the apartment to the rear, the cats walk up and down the courtyard and around the corner girls sit in massage parlor doorways dreaming of love.

what matters is that I still have after all that has preceded poems left me left and these walls that I have always loved in all the cities and in all the places I have lived, these walls are still here and my radio plays. this Royal Standard typer (which I have had for 7 years) sometimes doesn't work for 2 or 3 days and then my hair begins to fall out, I have trouble pronouncing a simple sentence, I break out in an itchy rash and then

the Royal begins again almost by itself. that matters much more than those two drunks fighting in the apartment to the rear or the flame of heaven locked tight inside my coffee jar.

my radio gives me good, kind music tonight.

# it was just a little while ago

almost dawn blackbirds on the telephone wire waiting as I eat yesterday's forgotten sandwich at 6 a.m. on a quiet Sunday morning.

one shoe in the corner standing upright the other laying on its side.

yes, some lives were made to be wasted.

# the fight game

a new boy:
he runs off 7
straight wins and
they put him in with the
old tiger.
a 2-to-one
underdog
he gets a split decision win
over the
tiger.

then at even money he knocks off the #3 challenger.

now he's seen in the nightspots always a new girl on his arm and there are whispers of the needle.

he's no longer angry in the gym and each new girl on his arm is sexier than the last.

then it's in the papers: he punches a cop who pulls him over for speeding. he gets in a fight something about a guy who cut him off in traffic.

but he's bailed out smiling and confident.

then he signs to meet the #2 challenger

and against #2 he has no punch no speed no footwork and he's k.o.'d in the 3rd.

next they put him with a guy from Philly who hasn't fought in 3 years.

the guy gets him in 1:59 of the first.

they put the guy from Philly in with the old tiger and

the old tiger gets him in 1:33 of the second.

and where do the sexy girls go? from Rome to Hong Kong where do they go?

they too go back finally to the semi-finals and the 4-rounders.

it works that way for almost everyone. sorrow is not always quick to arrive but it's always waiting there.

# a lady who wants to help?

Chinaski, she says, sitting in the chair across from me her dress pulled up around her fat legs the varicose veins peeking at me like little blue snakes her dirty garter belt tugging at stubborn flesh her full mouth heavy with lipstick like an animal mouth in a dream gone bad her breasts like water balloons gone mad with sagging

Chinaski, she says, you think you write great stuff but it's all only a pisspot full of dirty words!

then she leans back and lights a cigarette inhales exhales a stinging cloud of vile smoke at me and then asks, well?

I don't think you've ever really read my stuff, I tell her.

bullshit, she says, recrossing her legs, now what I wanna suggest is that we form a writing partnership.
we'll work together

as a team and publish everything under your name.

you mean, I ask, that you'll clean up my stuff make it respectable move in here with me and scratch my back with yours?

exactly.

I think not, I tell her.

well, fuck you then! she screams.

thank god, I think, as she storms out of the room thank god you never will.

#### **Carson McCullers**

she died of alcoholism wrapped in a blanket on a deck chair on an ocean steamer.

all her books of terrified loneliness

all her books about the cruelty of loveless love

were all that was left of her

as the strolling vacationer discovered her body

notified the captain

and she was quickly dispatched to somewhere else on the ship

as everything continued just as she had written it.

# a happening

he was always a first-rate jock, I've watched him ride for many years on many an afternoon at Del Mar, Hollywood Park, Santa Anita.

early this year his wife committed a terrible suicide.

those who knew him well said that he would never ride again.

and he didn't ride for a while.

then one afternoon he accepted a mount and as the horses came out for the post parade and he rode into view the applause began—a gentle steady applause—it continued for many minutes and many a sentimental horseplayer had to turn away to hide the tears.

then in that race he came driving down the stretch just to miss at the photo finish.

all he said later to the reporters was: "it seems to strange to come home and not find her there."

since then he has been riding with a style and an abandon that is unbelievable: driving through small gaps between horses or dangerously along the rail.

he is now the leading jock and he continues to win.

people have not seen such riding in decades.

he's the tiger in the sun.

he's each one of us alone forever fiercely ignoring the pain.

### albums

I sat in my cheap room, a young man totally out of place in the world. I hardly ate, just wine and classical music sustained me.

I lived like a god-damned fly, or maybe like a confused rat. where I scrounged funds, I no longer remember.

but I do remember the record store where you could exchange 3 used albums for 2.

by buying the occasional album and by continuously trading I gradually listened to almost all the classical albums in that store.

but since I was broke most of the time I was often forced to play the 2 albums on hand over and over and over.

I drank and listened until each note and musical phrase on those albums became part of me

#### forever.

now
decades later
I sometimes hear
one of those familiar albums
on the radio—
the same conductor, the same
orchestra—
and I immediately
turn the volume
up

and fondly remember that distant melancholy time.

#### makeover

it's not hard to tear up a bad poem. it's much harder to discard a woman who was once good but has now been destroyed by drugs and has become something harsh and fragmented.

where did she go and why?

it's not hard to tear up a bad poem you can probably write a better one.

but when a human being is destroyed is there always a reason?

of course, of course, of course.

but the grief is just the same and the joke is one of the dirtiest ones in this town or in any other town where the dead deal death to the dying.

### centuries of lies

an acquaintance writes from Paris to say that they are still talking about the time I fucked up on French prime time TV some years ago.

it's all a laugh to me now because I remember so very little about it but it manages to sell a few extra copies of my books over there to some intellectuals for all the wrong reasons.

it was the same with the critics who thought it was great that I didn't want to visit Sartre.

the critics believed that I was putting him down when it was only that I didn't know what to say to the old man who I thought was a very fine writer.

it seems that when things get rolling your way you get more and more credit for accomplishing great things than you never even thought of

and soon an extra layer of myth surrounds your work that is not to be believed but it is believed nonetheless and that is why so many so-called geniuses are really assholes and why so many assholes are so-called literary critics.

# too tough to care

there's this great big guy who comes to see me, he sits in my big chair and starts smoking his cigars and I bring out the wine and we pour it down. the big guy just gulps them down and I gulp right along with him. he doesn't say much, he's a stoic.

other people say, "Jesus, Hank, what do you see in that guy?" and I say, "hey, he's my hero, every man has to have a hero."

the big guy just keeps lighting cigars and drinking. he never even gets up to piss, he doesn't have to.

he doesn't bother.

he smokes ten cigars a night and matches me drink for drink.
sometimes he drinks even more than I do.
he doesn't blink.
I don't either.

even when we talk about women we agree.

it's best when we're alone because he never talks to other people.

somehow I never remember him leaving.
in the morning the chair is still there

and all the cigar stubs and all the empty bottles but he's gone.

what I like best is that he never disturbs the image I have of him. he's a tough son-of-a-bitch and I'm a tough son-of-a-bitch and we meet about once every 3 months and put on our little performance. anything more than that would kill us both.

# funny man

Mr. Geomethel liked to give parties on Saturday afternoon at his home. we always got an invitation. I think it was my 3rd or 4th wife, she always wanted to go, and she'd keep at me until it was more miserable to stay home with her than to go there. so that day she won, we drove to Echo Park, parked above on the hill, stared down at the small grey house, the people standing in the yard looking as dull as last week's race results. however, she seemed to be excited to see them. I suppose I kept her too much away from that sort of thing, she was a country girl, honest and healthy and full of fondness for people and fun. (me, I liked to eat candy bars in bed alone with just her as she had the most marvelous dark brown eyes.) we went down the path to where many people were standing in the sun with Mr. Geomethel beside the little grey house with the many chuck holes in the neglected lawn and everybody holding tight to some odd impulse, some mysterious reason for being there (but when you looked hard into their eyes you could see just a shadow of doubt in the back of their brains), my country girl liked everybody, not only Mr. Geomethel but Chuck and Randy and Lila and Creasefoot (the dog). she, my 3rd or 4th wife, went from this person to that, from this group to that, finding intense and interesting things to discuss. I drank what I could of the very bad wine. I vomited secretly behind a bush as she suddenly vanished, wanting me to search for her, puked again, drank a bit more, waited and said yes or no to a few questions passing by in the air. then she appeared once again to tell me that Mr. Geomethel had taken her to his bedroom to show her his paintings, and she was surprised, she said, because they were *very* good.

every man, I answered her, probably has some kind of talent if you look long enough. Mr. G's talent, I continued, was probably his *very* good paintings.

she seemed angry at that, showed me her back and walked up to 2 young men leaning against a collapsing wood fence. they seemed happy to see her.

I went inside to the kitchen, opened a cupboard and found an almost full pint of vodka. I poured a ¾ vodka and ¼ water. I found a Pall Mall in the sink and lit it. I knew that my 3rd or 4th marriage was over because of my jealousy and envy and many other horrible things. "you lack self-confidence," she often told me. I knew that and I was glad that she knew that. I had a bit more of my drink then went into the yard and when she sneaked a look at me she knew that I had passed over to the other side and that I would not be coming back to her because of all the terrible things. I felt wonderful, like a mallard rising from the marsh, with the hunters too drunk in their boat to shoot me down for their dogs to swim out and drag back. still, she walked over and tried:

"well, I suppose you want to *go* now, just when things are starting to be fun?"

I'd like to go, I said, but this party is as good as any. I can stay.

for me? she asked.

for us, I said, as finally I was no longer bored and when Mr. Geomethel came up and asked me how things were going I told him that I liked his party. "I thought you were a *recluse?*" he said. I am, I told him.

now my wife #4 or #5, she doesn't like parties but, of course, there are numerous other problems. I still get these regular invitations to Mr. Geomethel's parties. I toss them away neither in hatred nor in joy and wife #3 or #4 phones me sometimes, weeps,

says that what she misses is my humor, it's such a rare thing, and I wonder about that because I can never remember her laughing except with other people or at Mr. Geomethel's parties.

### a fan

Harry the Horse used to write me from jail and I'd write him back. he said that of all the writers he had written only Ginsberg and I had written back. he purchased my books and passed them around. that jail like anyplace else was full of writers and critics and like the rest most of them hated me. Harry the Horse defended me. he told them that even though I couldn't write a decent sentence I had done time.

Harry came to see me when he got out, he came with another x-con who had gotten out a bit earlier. I was then living at my girlfriend's place and they stood in front of the fire-place looking at my girlfriend and mentally running their zippers up and down. I never asked what they had gone in for but that gave me an idea. they didn't stay long, they had their old ladies with them and their old ladies wanted to see Disneyland. they had jobs as carpenters and made more in 3 days than I made in a month. we shook hands and said goodbye.

I got a letter last week. Harry the Horse was back in. he said it was a parole violation. I believed him. a con once told me: "nobody's guilty in here."

Harry wants to know where he can get my latest book. he's typing 12 hours a day in that cell. that's one thing about prison: you don't get many interruptions. I suppose Ginsberg will answer him again and I will too. I'd rather have readers and friends in there than in Paris or heaven. now what the hell did I do with his letter?

# Christ in his manger

it was an Irish mother and daughter from New Jersey. they lived in back and peeked from behind the curtains and watched all the action in our apartment building. the girl was 28 and the mother was in her 50s. they saw no men. they walked the streets together at noon. they were on relief of some kind.

then ownership of the apartment changed hands and they were made managers at \$2 a day. it must have been the first job for either of them.

they had my phone number. my nights became more difficult. the phone would ring: "say, we hoid screamin' down there! is somebody gettin' killed?"

"no, no, it's all right."

"we gotta have *quiet* in dis building!"

as the nights went on they called the police several times. the police would come to the door and I would send them away.

the ladies had 2 cats which they never let outside.

the cats would sit in the window numbed and crazed while the ladies watched daytime TV.

each morning I was awakened as they dragged a large tin tub down the walk. they raked and swept and put the leaves, papers and refuse into the tub which they dragged along by a rope. then they watered.

most nights I went to bed about 3:00 a.m. they began their operations at 7:00 a.m.

the girl used a nozzle with a thin hard stream and she liked to hose down the large banana leaves. the sound was unbearable. she believed she was washing away the plant lice.

one memorable night the girl came over and with her mother standing behind her she said: "say, we hoid loud *laughter!* we can't have loud *laughter* around here! it's afta ten p.m.!"

the owners finally moved the ladies into another building they owned half-a-block away and the ladies managed both apartments for the same \$2 a day. it was better for me with them down there. I didn't have to hear them complain: "de owners say you can't pick de flowers!" "no shoppin' carts allowed on de property!"

or read their signs:
"brake up cartons before putting in trash!"
"do not step in gardens!"
"no parking! cars will be hauled away!"
"do not pick flowers!"
but best of all
the police calls stopped.

I had to walk half-a-block to pay the rent.
one Jan. 15 they still had a cardboard Christmas tree on display and a cardboard fireplace with cardboard logs and a little cardboard Christ in the manger. the mother had bought the daughter a 5-foot stuffed giraffe.
I stood and waited for the rent receipt.
I got it and then the girl handed me a soiled piece of paper.

"some people don't like us. couldja sign this petition? it's fa' the owners..."

and in the girl's handwriting:
"I hereby agree that Lucy and Betty are
good managers and doing a good job and I
want them to stay."

I signed the paper. they thanked me and I left.

there was a drought in the city and it continued. the city put restrictions upon cosmetic watering. the ladies didn't come down to sweep and water any longer. but they were busy with the other place which was littered with bottles, rocks, all manner of garbage and debris. a wild bunch of party-givers lived there. they were mostly unable to speak English and they liked to listen to the music of their native land at more than full volume so the ladies were kept busy. meanwhile, I didn't have to stop typing at 10 p.m. any longer. I went on merrily typing my poems and stories until 3 a.m.

but one night they were back. they knocked on the door, there was the girl with her mother standing behind her.

"say, who planted dese little plants out here?"

"my girlfriend planted those."

"well, de owners say ya can't do that!"

"why not?"

"well, we have dese seeds and we're gonna landscape in da spring!"

they had bought a few packets of seeds the year before, stuck them in the ground, put up little string fences but nothing had grown.

"you're going to landscape?"

I was in my Japanese robe and smoking a

mangalore ganesh beedie. it was 7:30 p.m. and the first drink was waiting and the first poem was in the typer.

"yeah, we got seeds. we're waitin' until spring. so de owners say meantime ya can't plant nothin'."

"ladies, please tell the owners that I will protect each plant until death. that is final."

they just looked at me.

"what kinda plants are dose?" the girl asked.

"hell, I really don't know."

they turned and side by side they walked away together in the moonlight.

it was rather cold for them to still be out on the street. as I watched they came to a shopping cart halfway down the block. they pushed it off the sidewalk and left it near the curb. then they headed east together I presume to attend to their other responsibilities.

# the priest

we saw the priest in the ice cream store.
he saw us and he smiled and said, "hi, boys!"
he was eating a double-decker vanilla cone and he left while we were getting ours.

we went outside to eat our ice cream. the priest was gone. we talked as we ate.

"he's a nice guy."

"yeah, he spoke to us."

"he eats ice cream."

"he's a real guy!"

"I wish all the priests were like him!"

"I'll bet he even goes to the movies."

"sure, we've heard him talk about them from the pulpit."

"he doesn't like most of them."

"but he likes ice cream!"

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"that's something."
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"sure!"

we had finished our cones. we stood there.

"what'll we do now?"

"let's go visit the priest."

"naw!"

"o.k., then what?"

"anything..."

we finally decided to look for returnable bottles.

the priest was a nice guy but we didn't want to jinx our summer.

### 1810-1856

one day Robert Schumann threw himself into the Rhine and was then committed to an asylum for the remainder of his life.

his wife, Clara, angrily held back his musical compositions and refused to permit them to be played.

one might think that she was his greatest protector and critic.

one might think many things, I suppose, but I'm glad I'm listening to Robert instead of to Clara tonight.

# back to the machine gun

I awaken about noon and go out to get the mail in my old torn bathrobe.
I'm hung over hair down in my eyes barefoot gingerly walking on the small sharp rocks in my path still afraid of pain behind my four-day beard.

the young housewife next door shakes a rug out of her window and sees me: "hello, Hank!"

god damn! it's almost like being shot in the ass with a .22.

"hello," I say gathering up my Visa Card bill, my Pennysaver coupons, a Dept. of Water and Power past-due notice, a letter from the mortgage people plus a demand from the Weed Abatement Department giving me 30 days to clean up my act.

I mince back again over the small sharp rocks thinking, maybe I'd better write something tonight, they all seem to be closing in.

there's only one way to handle those motherfuckers.

the night harness races will have to wait.

# love dead like a crushed fly

in many ways good times had finally arrived even though I was still living in a bombed-out apartment just off the avenue.

I had climbed my way up through many layers of terrible adversity.

being an uneducated man with wild mad dreams—finally many of them had actually come true (I mean, if you're going to try you might as well fight for the whole enchilada).

but almost at once (as such things occur) the lady I loved dearly took off and began to fuck around the clock with male and female strangers imbeciles and (to be fair) probably with some fairly

#### decent folk.

but
(as such things occur)
it was without
warning
and I was left with
a pitiful dull languor of
disbelief
and
a painful mindless
clawing at my
heart.

also
as the tide
turned
I broke out
with a huge boil
on my back
nearly the size of an
apricot, well, a
small apricot
but still a
monstrosity and a
horror.

I pulled the phone from the wall locked the door pulled down the shades and began to drink just to pass the time of night, and I went mad, probably, but in a new strange and delicious sense.

I found an old recording of *Careless Love* and played it over and over—the hopelessness of that blues record fitting exactly into my cage my place my own disenchanted mood: love dead like a crushed fly.

I reached back and wandering through my recent past, I realized that as a human being I could have been much better, nicer, kinder, not just to her but also to the grocery clerk the corner paperboy the uninvited visitor the ragged beggar the tired waitress the stray cat the sleepy bartender and/or etc.

we keep coming up short again and again but then we think that ultimately, perhaps, we are not so terrible after all, and then we find ourselves with a girlfriend who fucks around the clock plus we get a boil nearly the size of a small apricot.

ah, remorse! ah, grief!

and that record of *Careless Love* played as loud as possible over and over again!

what a time it was as I stumbled over the beer and whiskey bottles the discarded laundry the unread newspapers the regrets and the memories all scattered across the room.

I finally came out of it a week later only to find her standing in my doorway on a 9 a.m. Sunday morning

her hair neatly done, her face carefully made up, in a fresh dress, smiling, as if the slate had been wiped clean—

she stood there just a dumb game-playing bitch—

having tried the many others and finding them (in one way or the other) insufficient

she was back (she hoped) as I poured her a beer and tilted the Scotch into my nearly empty glass

all the while hearing in my mind the never-to-be-forgotten song about Careless Love.

but if my love for her had ended something else was about to begin as she crossed her long legs flashed her radiant smile and said, brightly, "well, what have you been doing while I was gone?"

### it beats love

I like symphony music but the first thing on waking she turns on the radio and we have nonstop Brahms or Ives or Stravinsky or Mahler or Beethoven or Mozart. She slices the grapefruit and boils the eggs, counting the seconds: 56, 57, 58. she peels the eggs, brings everything to me in bed, including the coffee. we feel like we're man and wife. after breakfast it's the couch, we put our feet on the same table and listen to more classical music. now she's on her first glass of scotch and her third cigarette. it's been two nights and two days like this. I tell her I want to go to the track. "when will I see you again?" I ask. she suggests that that might be up to me. I suggest next Wednesday around one p.m. she nods. I nod. we nod. Wagner plays.

# the automobiles of DeLongpre

how dare I sleep from 5 to 7:30 p.m. while probably somewhere soldiers fight to the death for a mountain or a road and while in this very city many housewives bend wearily over the supper dishes.

frankly, there isn't enough to understand or dramatize in this life; that's why great poets go sour and the average poet remains a bore. poets simply make up more than there is.

the phone rings and somebody asks me if I want to hear Ginsberg read tomorrow.

no no, I say, Ginsberg's all right but-

would I like to hear Creeley read the next day?

no no, Creeley's all right but-

I go back to bed and listen to the cars driving along DeLongpre. someday I'll write an epic poem about listening to the cars on DeLongpre from my bed at 7:25 p.m. will I be making up more than there is? it's certainly a literary conceit, those automobiles of DeLongpre, and the wives, and those troops taking a mountain.

death is not the problem; waiting around for it is.

### 40 years ago

in our cheap hotel room near the Union Station, at 3 a.m., Jane and I had been drinking cheap wine since noon. I was walking barefoot back and forth across the rug, picking up shards of broken glass (in the daylight you could see them under the skin, blue lumps working toward the heart). I felt powerful in my torn shorts, ugly balls hanging out, my worn undershirt spotted with cigarette burns. I stood before Jane who sat in her drunken chair and screamed at her:

"I'M A GENIUS AND NOBODY KNOWS IT BUT MF!"

she shook her head, sneered and said, "shit! you're a fucking asshole!"

I stalked around the room, this time picking up a piece of glass much larger than usual. I reached down and plucked it out: a lovely large chunk dripping with my blood. I flung it away, turned and glared at Jane:

"you don't know anything, you whore!"

"FUCK YOU!" she screamed back at me.

then the phone rang. I picked it up and announced loudly, "I'M A GENIUS AND NOBODY KNOWS IT BUT ME!"

it was the desk clerk: "Mr. Chinaski, I've warned you again and again, you are keeping the other guests awake."

"GUESTS?" I laughed back, "YOU MEAN THOSE FUCKING WINOS?"

then Jane was at my side. she grabbed the phone and yelled, "I'M A FUCKING GENIUS TOO AND I'M THE ONLY WHORE WHO KNOWS IT!"

and she hung up.

I walked over and put the chain on the door. then Jane and I pushed the sofa in front of the door turned out the lights and sat up in bed waiting for them. we were well aware of the location of the drunk tank: North Avenue 21, such a fancy sounding address.

we each had a chair at the side of the bed, and each chair held an ashtray, cigarettes and wine.

they arrived right on time. "is this the door?" "yeah, this is 413."

one of them beat on the door with his night stick:
"L.A. POLICE DEPARTMENT!
OPEN UP IN THERE!"

we did not open up in there.

then they both beat on the door with their night sticks: "OPEN UP! OPEN UP IN THERE!"

now all the guests were awake for sure.

"come on, open up," one of them said more gently, "we just want to talk to you, nothing more."

"nothing more," said the other one, "we might even join you for a little drink."

North Avenue 21 was a terrible place, 40 or 50 men slept on the cement floor and there was only the toilet into which nobody dared to excrete.

"we know that you're good people, we just want to talk," one of them said.

"yeah," said the other one.

then we heard them whispering. then a few minutes passed but we didn't hear them walk away. we were not sure that they

were gone.

"holy shit," Jane said, "do you think they're gone?"

"SHUSH!" I hissed.

we sat there in the dark. there was nothing to do but watch the neon signs through the window to the east. one was near the library and said urgently in red: JESUS SAVES. the other sign was more interesting, it was a large yellow bird which flapped its wings seven times and then giant letters lit up below advertising SIGNAL GASOLINE.

it was as good a life as we could then afford.

### the counter revolution

waking up in a motel room having slept in your shorts alone after a fight with the girlfriend.

getting up peeking through the venetian blinds

you're in Hollywood the east Kansas City of nowhere

slowly you slip back into your body thinking

I'm glad I had the money to pay for this crap-hole in order to sleep off the argument.

it beats waking up

hungover in a holding cell with a phone on the wall with 3 Mexicans in there with you who prefer to be called Chicanos: 2 of the Chicanos on the floor with you the 3rd on the telephone

he's been talking for an hour and 30 minutes

what is there to say that takes so long?

he's been talking to his mother.

you need to make your own phone call

but you're white you're spoiled

you'll wait. it used to be just the Blacks who concentrated on your white skin

now the Chicanos and everyone else of color is concentrating on it too.

so it's not so bad right now being in a motel room shower while your car keys and your wallet are safe under the mattress.

you step out of the motel shower wrap a fat white towel around your fat white body

step into the other room

dripping wet

you see it now in the dresser

#### mirror

why they distrust you

the Chicanos and the Blacks.

just be glad, man, you're not in the exercise yard at San Quentin right now.

meanwhile, at the moment your problem is easy and sweet: a) dump the broad b) go on trying.

meanwhile you towel off get dressed get your stuff from under the mattress

leave the key on the dresser get dressed get out

walk down stupid staircase to the parking lot where your auto is still there

you and your white skin get into the auto

fully paid for it starts backs out

travels down the boulevard finds the freeway

the driver thinking, yes, it's o.k. that I am white—

it might be the result of divine circumstance or it might be the curse of the devil

but that's just the way it is

and suddenly he thinks: white is beautiful, I'm tired of apologizing, I like my paint job.

#### a definition

love is a light at night running through the fog

love is a beercap stepped on while on the way to the bathroom

love is the lost key to your door when you're drunk

love is what happens one year in ten

love is a crushed cat

love is the old newsboy on the corner who has given it up

love is what you think the other person has destroyed

love is what vanished with the age of battleships

love is the phone ringing, the same voice or another voice but never the right voice

love is betrayal love is the burning of the homeless in an alley

love is steel

love is the cockroach love is a mailbox

love is rain upon the roof of an old hotel in Los Angeles

love is your father in a coffin (who hated you)

love is a horse with a broken leg trying to stand while 45,000 people watch

love is the way we boil like the lobster

love is everything we said it wasn't

love is the flea you can't find

and love is a mosquito

love is 50 grenadiers

love is an empty bedpan

love is a riot in San Quentin love is a madhouse love is a donkey standing in a street of flies

love is an empty barstool

love is a film of the Hindenburg curling to pieces

a moment that still screams

love is Dostoyevsky at the roulette wheel

love is what crawls along the ground

love is your woman dancing pressed against a stranger

love is an old woman stealing a loaf of bread

and love is a word used too much and much too soon.

#### Gothic and etc.

I heard from two fellows who each are going to write a thesis on Chinaski. one is from Louisiana and the other from somewhere in the midwest. they both type careful letters on expensive paper. they sound young but interested and I answer their letters, but I don't say too much.

I feel that I am the geek in their literary circus so even though I don't say much (so as not to disappoint them) I do throw in a few strange lines as if my mind was properly unattended.

some years back another fellow mailed me his thesis. there were pages and pages wherein I was given much praise: I was the Whitman of Los Angeles and I was *Gothic* in addition to being any number of other strange and sundry things. I was given credit for knowing much more than I do and he concluded by saying I had written a few pieces that had unmatched psychological insight.

this is what they finally do to you after you've failed for

the first 50 years of your life trying to get something going: they want to give you credit for much more than you ever intended.

the students want it to be mysterious and important.

I want it to be easy.

which is what it is.

#### **Brando**

talking about
Marlon Brando
in bed
at ten thirty in the morning
I see bamboo stalks through the window
bamboo outside the window to the north

me naked her in a pink nightgown

the ceiling is white the walls are white

it has stopped raining the sun burns in from the east

we are talking about Marlon Brando at ten thirty in the morning

and the entire world holds still like an orange

like a huge orange

all holds still

me naked her in a pink nightgown

we speak of Brando then we forget him

and he doesn't think of us at all.

we get up and eat breakfast, satisfied.

# rogue's gallery

saw this photo of T.S. Eliot as a young man and damn if he didn't look just like the fellow who used to talk and brag all night long on the swing shift at the L.A. post office telling me how many times he'd gotten laid that day or that week and how many women he'd had to turn down.

saw this photo of Ezra Pound and damn if he didn't remind me of this skinny guy who I once saw catch a cat in the railroad yard bang its head against a boxcar kill it skin it in a minute-and-a-half and then hold the wet fur pelt up admiring it. this guy and Ez looked alike and had the same goatee.

saw this photo of F. Scott and he reminded me of

the guy who told me he used to spend his free time watching the little boys through a hole in the crapper wall at the Y. "if they can't see you watching it don't matter," he told me. I maintained that it did matter, somehow.

and H.L. Mencken's photo reminded me of the guy who for some years had been climbing through the windows of homes in our neighborhood during the 1930s depression stealing radios, waffle irons, cans of beans and so forth. I watched the cops come get him. I was 13 years old it was high noon and there were 4 or 5 cops and they had the handcuffs on him and the sun glittered on the cuffs.

the photo of D. H. Lawrence reminded me of this sex fiend high school kid: he got little girls he got big girls and then he got caught and they took him away only I didn't know what he was like until after they got him. he was my friend. we used to play handball against my garage door and he seemed to me to be about like anybody else.

the photo of Hemingway I couldn't connect with anvbodv. no, come to think of it, he reminded me of the old bum I gave 50 cents to the other day. his head wasn't quite as round but he did have the same white scraggly beard but maybe I was only thinking that he looked like Ernie because actually he had pointed red elf-like ears that quivered as he spoke, very fascinating you could see the sunlight through them and then he took the money and walked away.

### media

we sat around her plush pad and she asked me, "how come you never got any media attention? you've got all this talent. how come you wasted all those years as a common laborer?"

and I just sat there with that rich and educated lady—
I couldn't answer her right away—
but I thought, what could you do? knock on doors? what could you say to them then?
I'd often failed even to land a job as a dishwasher.

so I told her,
"it never occurred
to me one way or the
other."

"it should have," she said. "it would have saved you a lifetime of agony."

soon there was a

knock on the door, and soon another, and they started arriving all of them famous: a famous cartoonist, a famous columnist, a famous actor...

soon they were all there, especially in the patio where food was being served.

I'm lucky to be here, I thought, I could never afford a place like this.

I told the lady that
I wished to retire
early
and I took a
fifth of imported
whiskey to the bedroom,
had a few drinks
in the dark
then got undressed
crawled into her bed
switched on
the cable TV
and watched it
and waited.

after the lady went to work the next morning I got into my car and drove slowly down out of those Hollywood Hills knowing I'd never go there again.

I went back to town to my apartment with the busted front window and I went inside locked the door got a tall can of beer from the refrigerator opened it had a hit sitting there at 10:30 a.m. on that derelict couch and

it was one of the best beers I ever tasted.

# I was wrong

I bet the wrong horse.

my girl is on the rag and my beard is turning white.

tonight I walked across the room and ripped the nail off my little toe. a thick mahogany chair leg did it.

I laughed then with the temple-burners and the polishers of prose.

I bet the wrong horse.

the hawk got flushed down the toilet.

the pimp scratched his fleas.

the cook dropped in celery and carrots and potatoes and a bone for the dog.

I bet the wrong horse.

I'd rather be in Jamaica than to be sitting here tonight typing fawns into hard fact.

2

an apology is no more than a weak excuse so I'm not going to apologize because this poem is so short and has no title as I sit drinking steamed coffee from Switzerland while listening to that old crybaby Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky.

# up, down and all around

I sometimes get edgy wonder where I'm at, miss a step or two, feel lost.

everybody I know seems taller more intelligent kinder than I am and of course not as ugly.

but that mood never lasts very long.

I take a good look around, a straight hard look around and then I know better

but just for a while.

#### the main course

Jesus Christ, he tells me, Rita and I have split, just general attrition and general unhappiness. anyhow, I've been eating out and it's like having the same bad dream over and over again.

whatcha mean? I ask.

I mean, he tells me, I keep going to different restaurants but it's the same everywhere, the same dim lights and empty tables. I go in, you know, but no matter where I go the same man gets up from his newspaper and comes to my table...

hands you a menu? I say.

yes, and I am pleased for him: I am bringing him money, I am bringing him trade...

he might fail otherwise?

I don't know, he continues. anyhow, I order a beer, soup, salad, shrimp and fries.
I make a small joke, hand him back the menu. he walks off to the kitchen. outside, it rains; inside, music plays on the radio.

then? I ask.

the soup arrives. not too bad. I read the paper, spoon the soup and the paper says things like: WOMAN STEALS BABY FROM MOTHER FOR 3 MONTHS.

HORSE MEAT FROM AUSTRALIA BEING SERVED AT NATIONWIDE CHAIN OF FAST-FOOD RESTAURANTS.

MAN KILLS ESTRANGED WIFE, 3 CHILDREN AND STRANGER WHO HAPPENED TO BE READING THE GAS METER.

then? I ask.

then the salad comes, it's not bad.

the only good salad, I say, I haven't eaten yet.

I finish the salad. then comes the main course. fair. somewhat dry and tasteless.

you eat it? I ask.

yeah, he says, only I need help. I call him over again. another beer, please.

then?

he brings it then goes and sits by the cash register. he waits.
I am finished eating.
I nod.
he comes back and lays the bill on the table.
he goes back to the register.
he sits down.

he is not important, I say. why do you think about him? you're letting him rob you of your peace.

I leave him a tip anyhow, he says.

and then?

then I get up. pay. leave.

well, you've eaten.

yes. and when I go to another cafe and then to cafe after cafe, this same man gets up from his newspaper, moves to my table and takes my order!

sometimes things never change, I suggest. sometimes things stay the same.

he'll always be waiting there in the dim light, he says, waiting for me! pretending to be someone he's not!

but he doesn't love or hate you, I say, he doesn't even know your name.

but it's like having the same nightmare, he says, over and over again! when is it going to stop?

when things get dark, I say, even after we awake, sometimes things are worse than ever before.

I gotta begin eating in, he says.

#### it's all music

the girl in the fish market stands with her back to me.

she's dressed in a brown smock and has long golden hair.

I'm down at the docks and there are fish everywhere. many of the fish are large and seem to be almost alive as their eyes look up at me.

a man steps out of an ice locker holding a huge silver fish by its open mouth as the girl in the fish market turns and looks at me. I ask her to cut me a swordfish steak.

driving back to town the fish is on the seat next to me wrapped in pink paper that is only a little lighter than the color of the pink fish.

I drive back to my house up the driveway and park the car in the garage.

I walk into the house where the woman I live with is talking on the telephone. she spends her days talking on the telephone and it's best for both of us that she does.

I take the fish out of the pink paper and put it carefully in the refrigerator. then I go upstairs to where I can be myself and listen to the *Mass in* B *Minor* by Johann Sebastian Bach.

# my cat, the writer

as I sit at this machine my cat Ting sits behind me on the back of my chair.

now as I type he steps on the edge of an open drawer and then out on the desk itself.

now his nose is dangerously close to the flying keys as he watches me type.

then
he backs off
goes
over and sticks his nose into
a
coffee cup.

now he's back his head brushing the edge of this unfinished poem. as he sticks his paw down into the guts of the machine.

I hit a key and he leaps away.

then

he just sits and once again watches me type.

I've moved my wine glass and bottle to the other side of the machine.

the radio plays bad piano music.

Ting just sits and continues to watch me type.

do you think he wants to be a writer? or was he one in a past life?

I dislike cute cat poems but now I've written one.

suddenly there's a fly in here and Ting watches its every move.

it's 1:45 a.m. now and I'm sleepy.

listen, relax, I'm sure you've read worse poems than this

and I've written worse too.

#### one for the road

It's not sad to think of Socrates taking hemlock; in those days it was a simple choice: in or out. in our time, within this confused superstructure, I can see him as just another old drunk at the bar on a Saturday afternoon, far more interesting than most of course but just as helpless as he confronted the compounded wisdom of the centuries. he'd probably just go out and get laid the best he could and like the rest of us try to survive the coming night.

#### room 22

I've always liked old hotels with stairs that squeak old hotels run by indifferent managers who enjoy renting you, for example, room 22—

opening the battered window for the first time the fumes from the avenue below rush up deadly as you stand at the window and watch the traffic signal change: red yellow green green yellow red.

the second floor is best: in case of fire only two broken legs and another chance at life's game.

old hotels like old women become better more mellow more human because there's nothing else left for them to do.

it's the same in St. Louis, Kansas City or L.A.

sitting down on the sagging mattress you think of the many people who have lived in that room who are now probably dead, and you wonder how many people actually died there in that room.

but there's a charm, a definite charm there as you sit on the bed thinking, you've got a whole week ahead of you and almost ten dollars left over. that can be as safe as you will ever get.

soon there will be a knock on the door, usually a toothless old guy waving a near-empty bottle of cheap wine.

"come in," you'll say.

and he will be all right he will talk better sense than your father or the college professors but, of course, they wouldn't agree because he's without a job or money.

I like my new room
I like the dripping faucet,
I like the toilet down the hall
I like my old guest
and soon there's another knock and
there's another old guy
and then another knock
a woman
not too old
she brings some vodka.

soon everybody is talking smoking cigarettes they come in and go out as they use the bathroom down the hall.

somebody turns on your radio and soon everybody is talking LOUD. it's nice in room 22.

somebody pukes in my sink.

a fist fight starts between two 70-year-old men. I stop it.

I look up and see the hotel manager she's been drinking too, holding a cigarette in her mouth she tells us to quiet down, the long grey ash about to drop and fall into the front of her gown.

then later to awaken alone in a roomful of empty bottles and silent dried puke discarded food and candy wrappers scattered on the floor and rug.

you get up dress go down the squeaking stairs buy a newspaper come back up take off your shoes climb onto the bed and read the Help Wanted section looking for someone who needs a shipping clerk stockboy busboy dishwasher.

those old hotels they give a man a chance as long as he can enjoy a few good nights in room 22.

# she caught it on the fly

the entertainer smokes 50 dollar cigars and goes out on stage and sings and the women throw panties at him. some of the panties come out of their purses and some of them actually come off their bodies.

he sings love songs and that's what they want, and he wiggles a bit and he sweats.

I'd hardly compare him to Sinatra but he seems an all right sort he generates a certain electricity, and if he was my gardener or my mechanic I'd probably like him.

I know an airline stewardess who told me: "he's a pig. he took a stewardess into the crapper while we were in flight and he fucked her. she got the clap. all my feeling for him has left me."

there you go: love gone wrong again. this is where we live and it keeps happening.

I've never had the clap but if I were bombarded with all those panties I probably would have had it several times.

and I don't think it has hurt his singing. and that's what they're paying for.

#### a drink to that

we were on LaBrea Ave. and I asked her, "want to see the house I lived in for 15 years when I was a boy?" "sure," she said. I drove over to Longwood Ave. and we parked across the street. there it was 50 years later it was still there the house of horrors the house of a thousand beatings the house of brutality and unhappiness. "show me where your bedroom was," she said. we walked across the lawn the lawn I had mowed and watered 750 times. we walked up the neighbor's driveway. "there it is," I told her, "there is the window I crawled out of at night, and I think that's the same bush I slid over. Christ, let's get out of here!" we got back into the car and drove off. I had been the victim of no love from either parent, and I had been the victim of much more than that, and the luck had held bad for a long long time thereafter.

"you didn't want to see that house again, did you?" she asked.
"it was my idea," I said. "I'm sorry."
"Baby," she said, "I'm sorry too."
"it's over," I said, "some of it is over."

when we got back to my place and opened the door the angels jumped out of the wastebaskets and ran across the worn, brown rug light and luck were bouncing from the walls as she went to the bathroom while I kicked back and popped a bottle of Havemeyer Bernkastel Riesling.

#### sit and endure

well, first Mae West died and then George Raft, and Eddie G. Robinson's been gone a long time, and Bogart and Gable and Grable, and Laurel and Hardy and the Marx Brothers, all those Saturday afternoons at the movies as a boy are gone now and I look around this room and it looks back at me and then out through the window. time hangs helpless from the doorknob as a gold paperweight of an owl looks up at me (an old man now) who must sit and endure these many empty Saturday afternoons.

# out of the money

there is this superstar jockey who has taken a sudden interest in the written word and one night at my place he asked me, "listen, isn't there something I can read?" I told him, "well, there's this fellow Céline, he wrote a book called *Journey to the End of the Night.*"

a couple of nights later he phoned.

"listen, I can't find that book in any of the stores"; so I told him where he might find Céline.

I met him at the track one day and asked, "did you find that book yet?" and he said, "yeah." each time I saw him at the track after that I asked, "you read that book yet?" "no," he'd answer.

the last time he told me, "I couldn't get into it. it was too slow."

"what?" I said.

"yeah," he said. "I gave the book to my wife."

"good," I said. "well?"

"she said it was depressing."

I played out the card and then drove home, thinking, he can't be talking about Céline, not the Céline I read that rainy winter night so many years ago after a long day at the Acme Electric Co. spent packing light fixtures into wooden crates. reading Céline for the first time there in my

room
I laughed out loud at the crazy truth bounced on the springs turned and beat the mattress with my fist, thinking, nobody can write like this, this is the beginning and the middle and the end of it all!

I still see that jockey at the track now and then, he's a good sort, but it doesn't quite mean the same thing to me. we just talk about the horses and let it go at that.

## 4 cops

dogs walk the walls as the submarine sinks quickly to the bottom.

I sit in a coffee shop with 32 cardboard faces most of them blank.

4 very fine cops sit at a table watching me.

I guess I don't look so good to them.

why didn't we get those boys killed in some war? their mothers would only have cried for ten minutes.

I've been packed (in here) for seven decades: no front, no back, no top, no bottom. my parents wanted me to succeed in some curious profession that only they could understand.

my life unfolds in front of me like a dirty napkin. I'll never come back to this coffee shop again.

# my girlfriend says it's all so easy

"she designs the sets for Broadway plays and edits art films. he plays the flamenco guitar, he's really famous and has his hands insured for 200 thousand dollars."

"he makes customized hot-tubs and when winter comes he works at the best ski resorts. she makes lovely baskets and sells them at craft fairs. she's really very talented."

"he takes the photographs while she interviews celebrities. they built their beachfront home themselves with stones they found along the shore."

"he grows grass in Hawaii and smuggles it into L.A. in surfboards. she writes for a famous pop music magazine."

"she restores pleasure boats and he manages a rock group and arranges all their tours. they have a brilliant child."

"she only works a couple of months a year as an income tax consultant and he buys and sells houses. he'll buy a house for 500 thousand and he'll sell it for 600 thousand 4 months later."

"he'll only take odd jobs, he makes enough in 3 or 4 days to lay around for a month or more. she does wood carving, she's really good."

"his father died and now he runs the lumber company. he used to be gay and an alcoholic. she's so tiny, and half his

size. they finally got married."

"they live in Mexico and South America. they know how to live off the land. they make jewelry and sell it not only to the tourists but also to the natives. he never learned to speak English. he doesn't have to. he just sits there and looks at you with those eyes! oh, my god!"

"he goes to Spain every year and lives in a castle. he has an English accent and the women are crazy about him."

jesus christ, I think of all the factories and the warehouses where I worked, the park benches on which I slept, the jails I've been in and then to hear about all these others!

I could have made wood carvings or lounged in art school or traveled to Crete or stretched skins in Peru or I could have wept at the feet of rich old ladies or constructed handmade crossbows for the hunting of boar!

it's all so easy all you've got to do is to be clever and bright

if I hadn't been retarded I could have been like them:

the handy and successful magic people everywhere!

#### **American Literature II**

personal is best. I know this professor, we were drinking beer together and he said, "I don't see how you can be so personal in your writing, isn't it embarrassing?"

he's wrong, it's all personal. history is personal. pulling a shade up in the morning is personal. drinking beer is. the abstract is. the objective is. the waterbug is, and synapse is.

and nothing is more personal than walking down a stairway alone thinking about nothing. I often like to think about nothing for hours.

this professor, he'd simply taught too long while I'd been a night watchman and a circus hand. there was really nothing I could tell him but I tried: "drink your beer," I told him, "and tell me about your wife."

he would only drink his beer so I told him about my wife.

#### heartache

I was living in this gay hotel, he told me. it was getting to me. I began fucking those guys. I even fell in love with a drag queen. well, the other morning I found a dildo in the trash can, it was still coated with vaseline. I just hadda get out of Frisco so I flew down to San Diego. I'm in this bar and I meet this young girl, marvelous body. we drink awhile and she says she'll suck my cock (she sucks so she won't get pregnant). we go to her place and I find out there are 3 guys in the front room. I ask her who they are. and she says, oh, they are my lovers. and I say, wait a minute, you mean to tell me you suck those 3 cocks too? she says yes and I get out of there. I go to do a painting of an attorney. he promised me \$300 and when I finished he said, I'll give you \$25. what the hell, I said, that doesn't even cover the costs of paints and paper, let

\$25, he says.

alone my soul.

I ripped up the painting and walked out.
now I don't know what to do.
maybe I'll go back to
New York.
where do you think I ought

to go?

Portland, I said.

Portland! he said, furious. Don't fuck with my head! where'd you get that hanging plant? what are you doing with a cat? and who painted your bathroom that awful color?

# I cause some remarkable creativity

she burned holes in the couch with her cigarettes drank almost a 5th of scotch by 2 p.m. and turned the radio up very loud to the symphony. she got very intellectual and her idea of intellectual was to disagree with everything said by me, also she wasn't very good in bed so I wearied of it all and told her it was over.

now she phones me continually. long distance. she reads me poems she's written.

there's one about a fly even a fly can feel pain, says the poem.

there's another about how she killed a june bug. there's no law against killing a june bug, says the poem.

then she phones and tells me that she has submitted a story to a magazine and in it she exposes me.

do you want me to read you the story? she asks.

no, it's all right, I say, and hang up.

there's another lady I know who wrote a long unpleasant story about how she killed a roach with her bare foot.

I should introduce them.

# the cosmic joke

men and women finally break. men and women deliberately abandon their loved ones in madhouses sedated or electrified until they die.

cats kill cats at 3 a.m. in the morning chewing off the front legs and opening the throat leaving stiffened fur and still forms for any collector of garbage and life past gone.

so many wish to be kind and understanding so many wish to act educated and knowing so many use the word love as if they meant it.

and too many believe it when they hear it.

our chances are negated by our very desire to be kind. we've got to raise taxes so we can feed and clothe and amuse all those in madhouses and elsewhere who believed in love when there was so little there.

#### the death of the snowman

the only time it ever snowed in Los Angeles we made a little snowman in Neal's front yard, the only snowman any of us had ever seen: raisins for eyes, carrot for nose, wine cork in mouth like a cigar. that was at 8 a.m. in the morning. by the time noon came around all the snow had melted from the roofs and the lawns but our snowman was still there only he was getting smaller. Neal decided that we should put him in his parents' icebox so he would stop melting so we did.

the next day the snowman was still in the icebox there on the back porch and he was only a little smaller. he reminded us of the miracle that had happened. there were four of us:

Neal, me, Eddie and Gene. we reached in and touched him and admired him. we knew it would probably never snow again in Los Angeles.

it was 3 or 4 days after that one afternoon we were out in front when Neal yelled, "THEY'VE GOT OUR SNOWMAN!"

we didn't know those guys, they weren't even from our school. one of them had the snowman and was running around and around in Neal's backvard like he didn't know where to go with it; there was a high fence back there. there was the guy with the snowman and three other guys all about our age. we ran back and started swinging at them. the guy with the snowman dropped it and started swinging back. they were good fighters but we knew we were right and we were madder and so they started losing and getting bloody

noses. even though they cussed better than we did. we backed them off. three of the guys started running but the biggest of them the fourth guy reached down grabbed the head off our little snowman and stuck it into his mouth. "KILL HIM!" Neal yelled. we went for him but he ran off up the driveway he had really long legs and we couldn't catch him.

we walked back to what was left of our snowman. we'd stepped all over him during the fight. there wasn't much left. small dirty white chunks. "no use saving this," Neal said. and he started crushing and stamping the snowman into the ground. soon there was just a bit of wet earth.

"how'd those pricks find out about our snowman?" Neal asked. we were sitting around when Neal's mother came home. she went in the house for a while, then she came out on the back porch.

"what happened to the snowman?" she asked.

"nuthin'," Neal answered.

"don't talk to me in that tone of voice!" she said.

Neal just sat there.

"did you hear what I said, Neal?"

"yeah..."

"there you go again! you come into the house this minute!"

Neal got up and walked into the house.
Eddie, Gene and me got up and we walked out to the street and Gene went off to where he lived and Eddie went to where he lived and I went to where I lived and we didn't say

anything, we didn't even say goodbye. we knew it would never snow in Los Angeles again.

#### shut out

they were putting the horses in the gate and I was rushing to get my bet down and there were two men ahead of me in the line. the first, a well-dressed fellow, seemed to be leaning up against the window and dozing. "JESUS CHRIST," I yelled "SLEEP AT HOME!"

"LOOK AT HIM," I said to the man in front of me, "HE'S TRYING TO PICK UP HIS TICKETS WITH ONE HAND!"

"yes, he's very slow," said the man in front of me.

"I'VE SEEN SOME JERK-OFFS IN MY DAY!" I said loudly, "BUT THIS BABY BEATS THEM ALL!"

the man at the window slowly picked up his tickets, turned around and said to me, "buddy, I've only got one arm."

"sorry, sir," I said. then as an afterthought I said, "listen, if you've only got one arm you ought to make your bets way ahead of time!"

he walked off and the bell rang sending them out of the gate and there was nothing to do then but go back to the bar.

# the machine gunner

some have compared my typewriter to a machine gun, even I have, but sometimes I run out of bullets and I cover it (the gun) and walk into the bedroom fall on the bed and think, god almighty, why did I ever quit my job as a stockboy at Sears Roebuck? they had such nice little smocks and gave me a ten percent discount on purchases.

there's no response from the hinterlands to my immortal stories, the editors sit on them like pillows. the only thing that arrives are the poets they must have a rotating schedule. "come on, Chinaski, let's drink and talk! you're lonely, Chinaski, you're getting paranoid..."
"no, listen," I say, "believe me, there's a different gang here every night. even a crew with a tape recorder last night. it was awful!"
"ah, I bet you loved it! have another drink!"

they even sleep here and in the morning I tell them they must go. they don't understand. they tell me I can live by my name alone; they tell me I don't realize who I now am. I know who I am.

after they leave, it's the mailbox. no replies from the magazines. only personal letters that want answering: a letter from Israel, a letter from New York, 2 letters from San Diego, one from New Orleans and one from Normal, Illinois. between the poets and the personal letters I *am* immortal, but who's tending the store? where's the machine gun? I've fought a lifetime to be able to write and now I'm running a correspondence course and an all-night bar.

I've got to get an old woman to guard that door and answer the phone: "I'm sorry but Mr. Chinaski is indisposed today. would you care to leave a message?"

of course, they'll call me a son-of-a-bitch. well, I am. or they're making me into one.

#### 2 deaths

you told me many years ago (long before Stravinsky died today) that you wanted to learn everything about engines and buildings and war and women and cities and the history of Man and I told you it's tiresome don't bother what counts is not what we but what we don't know.

you wanted so desperately to prove that you could know what was not already known.

and when I saw you in your casket I had no idea that Stravinsky would also die today and that I would sit here and write about both of you tonight.

# schoolyards of forever

the schoolyard was a horror show: the bullies, the freaks the beatings up against the wire fence our schoolmates watching glad that they were not the victim; we were beaten well and good time after time and afterwards were followed taunted all the way home where often more beatings awaited us.

in the schoolyard the bullies ruled well, and in the restrooms and at the water fountains they owned and disowned us at will but in our own way we held strong never begged for mercy we took it straight on silently we were toughened by that horror a horror that would later serve us in good stead and then strangely as we grew stronger and bolder the bullies gradually began to back off.

grammar school jr. high high school we grew up like odd neglected plants gathering nourishment where we could blossoming in time and later when the bullies tried to befriend us we turned them away. then college where under a new regime the bullies melted almost entirely away we became more and they became much less.

but there were new bullies now
the professors
who had to be taught the hard lessons we'd learned
we glowed madly
it was grand and easy
the coeds dismayed at our gamble
and our nerve
but we looked right through them
to the larger fight waiting out there.

then when we arrived *out there* it was back up against the fence new bullies once again deeply entrenched by society bosses and the like who kept us in our place for decades to come so we had to begin all over again in the street and in small rooms of madness rooms that were always dim at noon it lasted and lasted for years like that but our former training enabled us to endure and after what seemed like an eternity we finally found the tunnel at the end of the light.

it was a small enough victory no songs of braggadocio because we knew we had won very little from very little, and that we had fought so hard to be free just for the simple sweetness of it.

but even now we still can see the grade school janitor with his broom and sleeping face; we can still see the little girls with their curls their hair so carefully brushed and shining in their freshly starched dresses;

see the faces of the teachers fat folded forlorn;

hear the bell at recess; see the grass and the baseball diamond; see the volleyball court and its white net; feel the sun always up and shining there spilling down on us like the juice of a giant tangerine.

and we did not soon forget Herbie Ashcroft our principal tormentor his fists as hard as rocks as we crouched trapped against the steel fence as we heard the sounds of automobiles passing but not stopping and as the world went about doing what it does we asked for no mercy and we returned the next day and the next and the next to our classes the little girls looking so calm and secure as they sat upright in their seats in that room of blackboards and chalk while we hung on grimly to our stubborn disdain for all the horror and all the strife and waited for something better to come along and comfort us in that never-to-be-forgotten grammar school world.

# beaujolais jadot

the dogs of Belgium feel bad on certain winter afternoons as the sweep of things goes this way or that. nothing, nobody is ever spared.

no matter, tragedy continually reminds us of random chance: great airliners crash into unseen mountain ranges; old ladies set themselves on fire smoking lonely cigarettes in forgotten rooming houses; small wars continue, and brutal rapes, and there is always accidental murder as the dogs of Belgium feel bad on certain winter afternoons: their eyes show it, they twitch and shiver and there's no place to go, there's never a place to go, it's meant to be that way. sitting here like this, wondering about it all, with beaujolais jadot spilled across the desk, all I can think of are the dogs of Belgium, and Christ, they must be feeling awful bad to get inside my head

#### like this.

maybe it doesn't mean anything at all, that would be best.
across from where I sit is another room and soon I will go in there and I will stretch out on the bed and sleep a dreamless sleep and thus I will escape those dogs of Belgium who would continually remind me of the lost and forsaken lives of so many.

#### bar chatter

Arnold looked down into his drink and said, "when you finally realize that there is no one perfect woman, then you can wait on death in a settled fashion instead of being tricked into the usual frenzy caused by the ladies."

Mike looked down into his drink and answered, "but, to establish sanity you must first endure a series of insanities."

"the insanities," said Arnold. "I remember all their names..."

"I remember," said Mike, "that they all were similar: intestines, elbows, skulls, ears, kneecaps, veins, hair, eyes, noses, feet, toes and so forth..."

"I remember their complaints best," said Arnold. "none of them seemed to like me."

"they liked you," Harry answered, "but they were trying to mold you into their vision..."

"let's not talk about women," Arnold said. "it doesn't lead anywhere."

"all right then," said Mike, "let's try this one: how long do you think we have before a nuclear war wipes us out?"

"god damn, man," said Arnold, "from women to nuclear war!"

"hey," said Mike, "look at *that* one who just walked in! I'll bet her intestines are in great shape!"

they watched her walk to her bar stool and sit down.

then they began to talk about professional football. they both liked the game, it was sensible, brutal and brave and talking about it they began to feel less worse and much much better

and as they talked the woman with the great intestines blew a perfect smoke ring about the shape and size of a baboon's asshole.

she stuck her finger through it as Harold and Arnold ordered another round. they didn't have much time left now at all.

## punched-out

I remember best coming out of that factory into the night none of us saying much glad to get out but needing the job —getting into our old cars one could hear the grinding of the starters the sudden roar and explosions as the worn engines fired up once more —as we backed wearily out of the parking lot to pull away leaving the factory back there —each of us to a different place —some to a wife and children —others to empty rented rooms or to small crowded apartments: as for me I never knew if my woman would be there or not or how drunk she would be if she was home —but for each of us the factory waited back there our timecards punched and neatly racked.

for me somehow the best time was that moment driving from the factory to where I lived stopping at the signals looking at the crowds suspended between a place I didn't want to be and a place I didn't want to go —I was caught between my two unhappy lives but so were most of the others there not only from that warehouse in that city but in the world entire: we had no chance yet still we all managed to continue and endure.

# counterpoint

he noticed that every time he expressed an opinion she contradicted him.

he decided to ignore it. that is, he decided not to mention it to her.

but each time he expressed an opinion (as the days and weeks went by) she quickly contradicted him.

he thought, it's probably her way of asserting her intelligence. she probably does it to everyone.

he decided to keep his opinions to himself and to speak out less or not at all if possible.

but one day he slipped up and expressed an opinion and she contradicted him again.

so he decided to mention it to her. he said, "do you realize that every time I express an opinion you contradict me?"

"why, that's not true!" she replied.

# 3 pairs of panties

Sweden is a lousy place Paris is a lousy place

the executioner cut off the wrong heads

when you left you left behind 3 pairs of panties and I'm too fat to wear them

London is a lousy place

Los Angeles is a lousy place now: dank clicking beast dead fish memory stalking me, ambulances masquerading as flower petals:

what was wrong was not understood and what was right didn't last.

#### this drunk

this drunk in the next apartment he looks at baseball, football, and spy dramas on TV, he brings home 2 or 3 women a year I hear him through the thin walls: "come on, baby, let me put this god-damned thing in there!"

he also falls out of bed about 4 a.m. every morning then he falls out of bed about 5 a.m. and sometimes again at 6 a.m.

he's worse than a church chime.

when we had that earthquake 2 years ago it was 6 a.m. and I thought he had fallen out of bed again but when the walls kept shaking I got out of bed along with everybody else and went outside and smoked cigarettes and waited for the world to end.

when I saw the drunk at noon I asked him how he liked the earthquake and he said, "what earthquake?"

one day the drunk went out and the landlord went in there and started cleaning his place.

empty beer cans and bottles came flying out, some by themselves others in paper sacks.

it was an afternoon in October

and I stood outside and watched the cans and bottles bounce on the sidewalk

and then stiff and yellow here came a Christmas tree.

I thought you might like to know about him, he's a colorful fellow, this drunk next door.

### Casablanca

Bogie smoked 4 packs of cigarettes a day and was in a few good movies.

he made them good by being in them.

some men have this undeniable presence and some women too.

Bogie had it.

you listened when he spoke.

which is more than my women do.

all my women say the same thing to me: "listen, I've heard all that before."

"heard it where?"

"from you."

Bogie had the delivery, it never varied. sometimes my voice changes sometimes I sound like a callow youth although I don't feel like one.

I rehearse my voice, I practice, I put a steel edge on my vocal inflection:

"listen, you whore, I've had it with you!"

"oh, go to sleep," they say turning over in the bed. "I need my rest."

Bogie with his 4 packs of smokes, he had an instinct, a presence, even his clothing and his demeanor were like a gentle smirk.

and with the telling lift of an eyebrow and those hollow cheeks he looked like he knew everything.

throughout all my relationships I've tried to be like that.

I mean, aren't we all influenced by somebody?

I wonder if he had lived what he would look like now:

smoking a pipe in a house on a hill sitting on a front porch staring off at nothing over the rooftops of a small town in Arkansas a truly terrible and beautiful end...

"this is Bogart Week on TV," I tell my woman.
"just think, a Bogie movie each night for seven nights!

"this is trash night," she says, "have you taken the trash out yet?"

I cup my hands light a cigarette inhale look at her narrow my eyes while gently exhaling smoke from my mouth and my nose:

"you take it."

#### the saddest words I ever heard

I was a substitute carrier at the P.O. and the supervisor was out to break me sending me out on the toughest routes in the city during the day and then assigning me to night pick-up runs.

in between I drank and fought with my shack job.

one afternoon coming in so tired I could hardly walk there was Ernie the assistant soup at the desk. he wasn't as bad as the supervisor and he looked up and saw me lit a cigarette smiled sympathetically and said, "I know it's tough...but for dumb guys like you and me this kind of shit is the only job available."

then he leaned forward and began on some paper

#### work.

I walked to my route case thought about that thought about that some more dropped my mail sack with a sigh and sat down.

## the light

he won't die. 95 years old. he walks down the hill, the very steep hill, to fetch his own groceries. then he walks back with the big bag, leaning heavily on his cane.

old Charlie. he won't let anybody help him.

his is the biggest house on the hill, twelve rooms. must be worth \$500,000.00.

his wife, also 95, is in a nursing home. he walks over to see her a few times a week.

"she looks good but she doesn't know who I am."

Charlie's children don't come around.

"they're waiting for me to die. I'll live on to spite them!"

he used to watch television downstairs with his wife. now he watches upstairs in another room.

"can't go in that room. it reminds me of her."

that's all there is. he lives on bacon and cornflakes. he looks good. he's 6-foot-two, thin, arrow-straight.

the mailman tells me, "you know that old man next door? he's got a sharp mind."

old Charlie. 95. he won't die.

everybody he knew is dead now except his wife who doesn't know who he is.

for a man backed into a corner he's majestic, and when death comes it better come humbly for this one.

I see the light shining in his upstairs room each night.

it's the brightest metaphor for courage I've seen for some decades.

## the closing of the bottomless bar

the idea that moral outrage only can be felt by the gifted and the noble and the intelligent and the sensitive and the powerful that is the biggest joke of they raided the nudie bar last night, had a Supreme Court order in their back pocket, were backed by the highest court in the land and they swept the girls off the bartops like dead flies like dirty napkins, all those poor lovelies screaming in panic their voluptuous rears twisted in surprise, they swept them off and away half-dressed into vans and automobiles to be booked, fingerprinted, photographed and jailed. such a waste. what a waste of grade-a goods. speak about indecency the cops were the most indecent things there that night. a poor girl can't make an honest buck anymore. all they were doing was offering a horny evening to a few lonely men. I've just got to believe those Supreme Court boys don't care about anything real and just can't get it up anymore. listen, girls, we'll find a way, we'll bail you out, we'll think of something.

the human body ain't no crime, anyway, not those bodies of yours.

#### fame of a sort

I dream of being famous.
I dream of walking down the streets of London and Paris. I dream of sitting in sidewalk cafes drinking fine wine and taking a taxi back to the best hotel where
I dream of meeting beautiful ladies in the hall.

I'd like to see the city of my birth, Andernach, Germany, explore it then fly on to Moscow to check out their rapid transit system so I'll have something to tell the mayor of Los Angeles when I get back home where I will have dinner with him and his family while feeling his wife's legs under the table.

#### never look

that's the secret: don't look.

"you never look directly at people," a girlfriend used to say to me. I had good reason, I didn't want to see what was actually there, I felt better without that reality.

I could give hundreds of examples of what I mean but I'll just describe a say, if I boarded a jet and I saw the pilot's untroubled and unfocused face then it would be a very uneasy flight for me indeed. or say, at a harness race, if I looked into the dead eyes of the driver who was to guide the horse of my choice then I'd know that I could never bet that horse. or say, if by chance on TV I see a close-up of the face of the winner of a beauty contest I am almost always horrified. finally, I know it's a terrible thing to say but

I appear to be misplaced among the multitudes, I don't belong.

when I see hundreds of human faces gathered at a sporting

I am best alone watching my three cats, they are for me

event I become dizzy with nausea and

disbelief.

pure examples of real life.

I can look without fear at them.

## now the professors

now the professors come with their little 6-packs of beer and sit on my couch and talk Literature.

"Chinaski," the professors tell me, "you get this profound sense of total Realism into your work."

"uh," I say,
"huh."

it was not Moyamensing Prison it was not not being in the War—any one of them it was not the railroad track gangs the slaughterhouses it was not the whores and Literature and Poesy which killed me, it was not the landladies it was not the fine ladies who never fucked me because I was a bum, it was not all the bad and cheap wine, it was nothing— I was neither Villon getting his ass kicked out of Paris nor was I Crane jumping into a boat propellor and/or a shark's mouth.

it was not sitting behind dark ripped shades pulled down for weeks months years afraid of the landlady's footstep—death was nothing next to that—it was being more and more startled by the world and the world's people. it was the cosmic joke, a dirty one at that.

nothing has changed; it doesn't matter that now the professors come with their little 6-packs of beer. and *sometimes* I am lucky—once one came along while I had the Asian flu. he had a little 6-pack smiled uttered the magic word: "Chinaski?"

"yeh," I said, "got the Asian flu, don't get too close."

"ooh, what'll I do with the beer?"

"I'll take it."

I took the beer while he stood there under my rented porch light autographing his latest expensive hardbound privately printed poems.

the poems I knew about—I didn't have to read them. I just put the book in with all the others like that. I had a bookcase full of them.

the beer?

it could have been better.

I drank it anyhow.

## the hatchet job

- a) he sat across from me.
- b) he said: "I will destroy Ginsberg."
- c) I thought: this man is crazy.
- d) he continued: "I will write a critical essay and destroy Ginsberg forever; he has gotten away with his nonsense for too long."
- e) I thought: this man is very unhappy and envious.
- f) he went on: "I will bury him."
- g) I asked: "do you think he's worse than you or me?"
- h) he countered: "yes, he is, he has a vast and insidious influence, and he's a fucking phoney."
- i) I told him: "let's talk about something else."
- j) he asked: "like what?"
- k) I pleaded: "like anything else."
- l) he went on: "I hate that son-of-a-bitch, I am going to do a service to the literary world, I've made up my mind!"
- m) I asked: "you're going to expose him, eh?"
- n) he said: "all the way."
- o) well, he wrote the article.
- p) and it was published in a critical journal.
- q) and it was quite long.
- r) and I read it while taking a shit.
- s) then I finished it (the shit).
- t) continued to read while taking a bath.
- u) got out, dried off, went to bed.

- v) the best thing to do
- w) when a minor talent attacks a major talent
- x) as was the case in this matter
- y) is take a nap
- z) and zzzzzzz.

## shack jobs

spiders and dogs, dogs and spiders, the cross, the double-cross, the triple-cross, spiders and dogs, I look back on the nights and come up with very little, remembering some of the women I lived with and realizing they had nothing against me, just nothing for me—or for others those ladies had managed to vaporize their existence, and what was left we shared: dogs and spiders, the double-cross, the triple-cross and always the hard carelessness for both me and for themselves dogs and spiders their high-heeled shoes lonely in the corner, empty chalices, and as we slept our drunken sleep I too gave nothing iust my standard response: playing it tough. there was another better way but it was not for us. thusly, spiders and dogs, the double triple quadruple cross: our hearts not willing to love.

#### ground zero

the consensus is that this is a difficult time, perhaps the most difficult of times: large groups of people in cities all over the world are protesting that they'd rather not be treated like shit.

but whoever's in control will not listen.

the suggestion is that, of course, it's only one power fighting another power and the real power, of course, is in the hands of the few who run the nations and their need is to protect those many things that belong to them.

it is conceivable that these few rulers will escape when the final eruption begins; they will escape to their safe havens where they will watch the eruption to its finish, and then after a reasonable wait they will return again and will begin building a new ridiculous and grossly unfair future.

which, to me, is not a very happy thought as I crack open a can of beer on a hot July night.

## my telephone

the telephone has not been kind of late, of late there have been more and more calls from people who want to come over and talk from people who are depressed from people who are lonely from people who just don't know what to do with their time; I'm no snob, I try to help, try to suggest something that might be of assistance but there have been more calls more and more calls and what the callers don't realize is that I too have problems and even when I don't necessary for me sometimes just to be alone and quiet and doing nothing. so the other day after many days of listening to depressed and lonely people wanting me to assuage their grief, I was lying there enjoying looking at the ceiling when the phone rang and I picked it up and said, "listen, whatever your problem is or whatever it is you want, I can't help you." after a moment of silence whoever it was hung up and I felt like a man who had escaped. I napped then, perhaps an hour, when the phone rang again and I picked it up: "whatever your problem is

I can't help you!"

"is this Mr. Chinaski?"

"yes."

"this is Helen at your dentist's office to remind you that you have an appointment at 3:30 tomorrow afternoon."

I told her I'd be there for her.

## exactly right

the strays keep arriving: now we have 5 cats and they are smart, spontaneous, self-absorbed, naturally poised and awesomely beautiful.

one of the finest things about cats is that when you're feeling down, very down, if you just look at a cat at rest, at the way they sit or lie and wait, it's a grand lesson in persevering and if you watch 5 cats at once that's 5 times better.

no matter the extra demands they make no matter the heavy sacks of food no matter the dozens of cans of tuna from the supermarket: it's all just fuel for their amazing dignity and their affirmation of a vital life we humans can only envy and admire from afar. 3

they say that nothing is wasted: either that or it all is.

#### progress

this electric typer doesn't make much noise as I continue past midnight while the dog in the yard north barks to the sound; but the people there don't seem to mind and for this I'm thankful. from years past I remember the room on Kingsley Ave. where the woman downstairs would beat with a broom handle on the ceiling while I typed on my ancient manual typer as the woman upstairs would stamp angrily on the floor.

those ladies were a distraction but I just sucked it up and beat the keys even harder.

the worst one, though, was the guy on Oxford Dr. below me he had a powerful voice and he would scream: "JESUS CHRIST, KNOCK OFF THAT FUCKING THING!" he would, at times, give me pause

before I continued but strangely enough he never complained when my girlfriend and I had one of our arguments which could be heard half-a-block away.

each new place I lived in had its critics and I was usually given a ten p.m. curfew by the landlord or manager after which I was privileged to lay back and listen to the babble from their radios.

so tonight
as I listen to the barking of this
good wooly dog
next door
I am almost apologetic that I am intruding
upon his simple
life;
but bark away
little friend because,
as they say,
good literature
is almost always
disturbing.

#### Carter

Carter was the biggest guy in high school, fat, aggressive and incomprehensibly stupid; you could *feel* the stupidity oozing out of him and getting into your eyes, mouth, brain. and since they seated us alphabetically in class and he was Carter and I was Chinaski I sat behind him day after day staring at his thick round neck at his senseless ears and big dumb head. he was always raising his hand in class, smiling at the teacher, making a little joke, but unfortunately he always asked the wrong questions.

I sat behind Carter day after day class after class trying not to hate him for his reputation for being stupid for being the butt of every joke but wishing various things for him: like drowning in the bathtub or moving to Cedar City, Texas.

I knew in my heart, however, that he couldn't help what he was, he was just a big space where nothing grew and that didn't make him guilty of anything and I knew in my heart that because of how I felt about him there must be something mean and small about me and so finally I hung around with him at recess I stood up for him on the playground and when he would turn in class and make some dull ioke I'd grin at him as if we were friends as if he had really said something clever.

I was not always sitting behind Carter. he was not in all my classes.

I was never a good student but strangely in the classes with Carter I got mostly "C's" and sometimes a rare "B" but in my other classes I usually got a "D" and now and then an "F."

it got so bad that near the end of my senior term a notice was sent to my parents that I wouldn't have enough credits to graduate.

my mother, a woman with a psychotic fear of failure, came to that school and wept and screamed until they told her, "all right, Mrs. Chinaski, we'll let him graduate."

what they meant, of course, was that they were getting rid of me and her.

during the graduation ceremony you know who I stood behind while waiting for my diploma.

as they called his name he turned to me and made a little joke but this time I didn't grin back I let my expression show him exactly how I felt; that false friendship must finally come to a sad end.

and as he moved onto the stage I graduated.

## two cats asleep downstairs and death itself no problem

you have to wait patiently some nights and not be embittered by the rub of Humanity. you have to wait patiently some nights preferably alone not thinking about too much of anything alone with the typer the cigar the electric light bulb. you have to wait patiently some nights for the right moment to climb out of the trough. there's something splendid about this ritual as curious and easy thoughts arrive (right now I'm remembering that the license plate is hanging loose by one screw from the bumper of my car). you have to wait patiently some nights not because of this or that or some other thing but because it's the sensible thing to do. you have to wait patiently some nights not because killers prowl the streets not because of the tax man and not because you miss the dance of life. suddenly I decide right now that tomorrow I'll add another screw to that loose license plate because that's what keeps it and my world from falling apart: small desperate acts like this enable one to continue fighting the good fight after waiting patiently through the darkest night.

#### the pro

up in San Francisco an editor said to me, "Hank, you bring a suitcase when you come to read. you know, when Diane comes to read she just carries a little traveling bag, that's all she needs."

well, Diane was a looker, all she needed were some clean white panties and her miniskirt. me, I didn't look so good.

I said, "well, hell, I'm used to being on the bum, I always drag a suitcase."

"no matter," he said, "you oughta learn from Diane, she's a pro." I knew about Diane, she was already famous at 24, she got up and read poems about bringing down the government and still she got a government grant every year. she was beautiful, tough, slinky and had long blonde hair down to her ass. as she wiggled and wailed about fascist Amerika every man in the audience got hot and some of the women too.

and in between readings she had a

job teaching at a university.

now, that editor is dead and Diane has vanished. maybe she's dead too.

I met her just once; fortunately for me we were on the same card. two things I liked about her: 1) at dinner before the reading she matched me drink for drink 2) and her hair kept falling into her food.

"better go easy, Diane, or I'll have to read for both of us."

she looked at me. "like shit," she said, "like shit you will."

"I can wail," I said, "and I can wiggle. I'd love to read for you!"

"what you'd love, Chinaski," she said, "is to fuck me."

we both read well that night, I

think.
and that was over two decades
ago
and the government's still
here and I am
too
and
I remember Diane with special
fondness
even thought she didn't want to lay her
favors on a man almost twice her
age.

I remember her little traveling bag her tough talk her humor her perseverance her guts her energy talk about a show!

she really didn't need that miniskirt and change of white panties. they weren't necessary.

she was the real poetry.

# pain like a black-and-white snapshot

the dead dogs of yesterday (it's twilight in Missouri) the dead dogs of nowhere (all those empty, forsaken lives) the dead dogs of tomorrow (and the purple sunrise) the dead dogs of Hades (my love with a broken heart) the dead dogs of our love and the dead vanilla dogs with ice cream eyes (and please don't forget the shy dog in the north yard).

dogs.

the aviator dogs the president dogs the dogs that crawl the wallpaper and the dogs that bring an early taste of November; the dogs that burn down the town and the dogs who whimper and creep while promise sings like a lost soul.

I was a young dog of 23 and you a beautiful woman of 35 loving me burning me leaving me my guts bleeding in the avenue while the swan circled on the pond and watched.

now I'm an old man and you've been dead for 30 years.

and often I'm alone.

I still walk a frozen path often getting lost and trapped and fooled again

but you were the first lovely bitch to take that special bite out of me in that special way.

#### Life, Death, Love, Art

he had long blonde hair shoulder length smoked a pipe claimed he looked just like Lord Byron. he was both intellectual and handsome and all the girls loved him for a while.

he always had a new girl on the string some young fawning thing.

I knew him at a time when things were going very badly for me in every possible way. but he liked having me around. he found something amusing about my suicidal and shiftless ways.

he made a good living poking around in the editorial field. he always seemed comfortable, always in control. he lived in an expensive arty place with antique furniture and beautiful rugs and always some new girl at his feet

on one of those rugs listening with admiration as he spoke.

I'll admit I tried to arouse some interest in myself in his girls but they hardly ever even glanced in my direction. of course. when I would examine myself in my bathroom mirror I'd notice, say, a shoe untied, a couple of buttons missing from my ragged shirt. I'd notice my worn shoes, yellow teeth, facial scars, etc.

of course,
I didn't expect
any of his girls
to go to bed with me.
I just wanted a look, a
smile,
some conversation.
but
I never got even that much.
it was as if I wasn't
in the room
at all.
and this didn't just happen
with one of his
girls,
it happened with all

of his girls.

so I began to study him to find out what he had that I lacked.

first, I saw he was very scrubbed, spotless. his clothing was fresh, clean. his shoes in the latest style and brand new. he sat relaxed but erect never slouching and he didn't gulp his drinks

he sipped his drinks. but it must have been his conversation that won them over. I noticed that he always spoke with his beautiful accent and with high seriousness of Life, Death, Love, Art.

he went on and on never at a loss for words talking about Life, Death, Love, Art. and he always referred in his soft tones to the same dear departed: Shelley
Keats
Byron
Oscar Wilde
George Bernard Shaw
Chopin
George Sand
H. G. Wells
Debussy
Socrates
Santayana
and all
the other people who
didn't
interest me.

one night I decided to get out of there and leave him alone with his girls.

six months or more
went by.
I was sitting
in my cheesebox room
closer to suicide than
salvation when
my landlady
knocked on the door:
"somebody wants you
on the telephone. how'd
they get
this number?"
"hell, Clara," I told
her, "I don't even know this
number."

I went down and picked up the phone. it was Lord Byron himself. he was drunk. "hey, Lord," I asked, "how'd ya get my number?"

"never mind...do come quickly...I've been drinking for weeks...I think I'm going to kill myself! hurry, please!"

I got his new address jumped into my 12-year-old car and drove on over.

he had evidently moved down from his fancy place in the hills. he was just off Fountain Ave. near the Hollywood Police Station.

I parked and got out.

I found him in a small shack in the rear behind a broken screen door. there wasn't even a bed in there.

he was lying on a cot. and he was

out cold.

I shook him: "hey, Byron, wake up!"

he stirred. a lock of blond hair fell down across his forehead: "oh, Henry, hello."

"got anything to drink?" I asked.

"yes, there is some scotch. do pour us some..."

I found the fifth almost empty, poured two drinks.

he said, "just put mine on the table."

I drank mine and poured myself another.

"Henry," he asked,
"have you ever thought of suicide?"

"yeah."

just then the screen door opened and a new one (to me) blew in:

long red-brown hair long slender legs clear hazel eyes.

"get out of here," she told me.

"what do you mean?" I asked.

"I mean, you've done this to him! I know your rotten type!"

"listen, I just got here!" I told her.

she looked down at him: "Nelson, are you all right?"

"Sybil," he said.

Sybil went to the cot sat on the edge of it bent over him her long hair falling across his face. "Nelson, darling, are you all right?"

I stared at her legs her buttocks her breasts.

I finished my drink.

I left.

I drove right by the Hollywood Police Station

and that was 20 years ago and

I haven't seen either of them since.

# sometimes when you get the blues there's a reason

it only takes 6 or 8 inept political leaders or 8 or 10 artsy-fartsy writers, composers and painters to set the natural course of human progress back 50 years or more. which may not seem like much to you but it's over half your lifetime during which time you're not going to be able to hear, see, read or feel that necessary gift of great art which otherwise you could have experienced. which may not seem tragic to you but sometimes, perhaps, when you're not feeling so good at night or in the morning or at noon, maybe what you feel that's lacking is what should be there for vou but is not. and I don't mean a blonde in sheer pantyhose, I'm talking about what gnaws at your guts even when she's there.

#### the Word

they rang at 10:25 a.m. Sunday morning.

I put on my dead father's bathrobe with one sleeve missing and opened the door to

a woman in dark glasses and a man.

"how are you feeling today?" he asked.

"not well."

he shoved some religious materials toward me.

"please. I don't want those."

"we are all made by the same Creator," he said.

"I am the Creator," I answered and closed the door.

then they walked down to the other drunk's place in the back and pressed his bell. he told them to get the fuck away for Christ's sake to leave him alone.

God's not much of a cure for hangovers.

## my nudie dancer

some years ago I knew this nudie dancer, it was a gentle friendship, she was one I'd just rather look at. yes, we did it once or twice but she had her own life her hobby was painting she painted badly and she had a series of boyfriends all just alike: dull fellows who wore their shirts open and wore gold neck chains dressed sharp and moved as if they were walking on eggs. they all had little buttocks like grapefruit halves but they never lasted or maybe she never lasted.

"I can talk to you," she told me as if that was something marvelous. what she meant was that I seemed to be listening.

I liked to watch her nervously walking about her apartment lighting cigarettes cursing changing into different outfits 3 or 4 times a night.

I found her funny she made me laugh, not so much laugh as made me smile or grin.

she was into crank,
had no luck with her
men at
all
while I was being shot down continually
by hard numbers
from the street

so

we had this little club where we exchanged conversation about our continuing love failures.

about the ladies, my complaint was mostly directed against myself: I believed in too much too early and when reality arrived I couldn't stand it.

her complaint was almost the opposite: "I knew the guy was dumb...and when a dumb guy can't get it up anymore then there's not a lot left!"

"sex," I told her, "what's all this talk about sex? is that *all* there is?"

she said, "everything helps."

it was the first time then that I said it to her: "human relationships just never work!"

she acted as if she hadn't heard. she said, "you've never seen me dance, have you?"

"no."

"why don't you come watch me at work tomorrow night?"

I told her, "well, all right."

the next night I was seated at a table she was standing at the bar saw me came on over and sat down across from me, she looked good very good.

I thought, if I let myself

I could fall in love now and be in terrible trouble later.

"you know," she said, "I'm serious, I think I like you more than any man I've known in a long time.
I guess it's because you're not always hitting on me. you're kind,
I can feel it."

"do you always talk like that before you strip?"

"always," she laughed, finishing her drink. "now I've got to go."

she left.
there were a couple of opening acts.
there wasn't a band just a loudspeaker blaring as the young girls danced their dismal torture until they finally were naked under the soft purple lights.

it was very discouraging as if their essence after all that meant nothing at all.

some time went by then *she* came

out.

it was different you could see it right away she had the body language she knew how to move and she was good.

she looked all around the club.

the barkeep waved his bar rag

I waved a paper napkin

and

she got into it

dancing shaking clowning

singing and laughing

then she stared straight at me like never before.

her eyes were laughing too.

you could hear the guys in the club getting excited

sounding off groaning joking throwing money on the stage.

gradually, finally, she disrobed.

then she stood straight, her arms held out.

that beautiful body was as if nailed to a cross; then the purple lights went out and she was gone behind a curtain.

a little while later when she came to my table I felt *very* special.

I ordered a couple of drinks.

"did you like me?" she asked.

"all the way."

"maybe we can be better friends now?"

"I'd like that," I told her.

we drank for maybe 15 minutes when this fat guy walked up. he must have weighed 300 pounds and was well over 6 feet tall. he stood there a moment then he looked down at her.

"let's go, Isabel," he said.

"o.k., Daddy." she started to pick up her purse.

"you don't have to go with this guy," I told her.

"who's this jerk?" the fat guy asked. "should I handle him?"

"no, Tony, he's all right, don't... please...he's an old friend."

she looked frightened, stood up.

"let's go, baby," said fat boy.

I grabbed a beer bottle and stood up. "I'LL KICK YOUR ASS, WHEATCAKE!" Wheatcake snapped his fingers and two guys came up behind me.

first I felt myself being lifted and rushed through space

it was a floating, helpless sensation

the second thing I felt was the unforgiving surface of a charming cobblestone alley.

my last feeling was one of having been fucked over, again.

I got up
went to the parking lot
found my car
got in
put the key into the
ignition
turned it on
hit the gas
it started
it
stalled

and
as I kicked it over
again the
black Cadillac came
by
just like
in a movie
fat boy driving,
Isabel
laughing and

lighting a cigarette.

I realized then and there that almost anything that might occur upon planet earth would have very little to do with what I really wanted or might want

so I decided not to see her again as if that would solve anything at all for me this time the next time or the time after the next.

## I can't see anything

I can't see anything but mutilated twilight. I would like to venture forward with hope not only for human survival but also for the survival of human thought and music and art and painting and even our history, but you know it's like a tip I got once from my bookie: don't bet on it. I see it all now turning to burnt bacon cripped van goghs begging pennies from crippled bankers, everything going like that everyone begging and drifting down the twisted landscape into the valleys the condemned audience wailing:

you know, all this is what we deserve.

the dark is empty; most of our heroes have been wrong.

## not exactly the sun

it's a yellow light. I mean walking down the street it's a yellow light there soundless.

picking up the telephone or peeling an orange it's there the same yellow light.

shoot an arrow through it and it's still there still yellow.

fight with your woman at night it moves across the room stands between you still yellow— it's got a head fat arms obese body wide legs no eyes.

I saw it at my mother's funeral I saw it last night in the garden I saw it sliding among the bottles at the supermarket I don't know what it is. it sits inside of me now and yet it looks out at me from the walls.

we can't nail this one to the cross we can't ask it to leave we'll have to live with it like we live with dresser drawers dogs cats landlords.

if it comes to see you don't try to phone me. I'm unlisted now.

## the doomed lady poet

I met her down at the beach after a reading. it was the morning after and while my woman slept I got into my walking shorts and went down the back steps and there was the sand and the water and then I heard her voice and went over and she introduced me to her man—a very pretty young fellow she had just married.

she was not a handsome woman and so much of the good poetry she wrote was about her bad luck with men.

"were you at the reading?" I asked her.
"no," she said, "we didn't go."
"I'm not feeling well this morning," I said.
"you have great legs," she said.
"thanks," I answered, "I've got to go now."
I walked off along the shore.

her husband—not long after—ran off with a man and she had more angry poems to write.

the next time I saw her was in a cafe overlooking the water. "isn't that Sandra?" my woman asked me. "no wonder she's been staring at us," I replied.

I walked over to her table. "hello," I said, "I thought it might be you." she introduced me to the two men at her table, horrible land creatures—long hair sticking out all over them.

when I got back to my table I told my woman, "let's get out of here."

I left the money and the tip for our drinks and we drove off down the coast looking for another place to eat.

I don't know why I'm always trying to get away from her. I think she's too willing to suffer. I see her sitting like a target waiting for the slings and arrows.

we found a restaurant further south on the coast and while we were looking at the menu over the first drink my woman asked me, "are you in love with her?"

I nodded toward a waitress carrying a Dungeness crab.

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"see that crab?"
"yes."
"I'd be much happier with it."
"and how about me?
```

would you be happier with me?" the ocean was blue and green more blue than green and there was only one boat on it and I couldn't see China.

"I thought we discussed that last night," I replied.

## the eternal horseplayers

not much originality there: they stand in long lines between races making their little bets hoping that the impossible dream comes true for them.

not much chance: run-down shoes, shirt tails hanging, they lose all day

to go back to roominghouses thinking of all the plays they could have made.

but *could have* is no good, it has to be *now* and they don't know how to deal with *now*, they'll never know while

opening an evening newspaper checking the next day's entries.

thank god and the devil hope seldom abandons any of us; when that happens it's cancer or heart attack or playing checkers with your old lady as she talks about what they talk about.

## first day, first job

it was high school all over again at Union Pacific Railroad. as I walked up the gravel path toward the foreman they were waiting, 3 of them standing in my way. (Jesus Christ, it never stops. the same thing over and over again. will it never stop?)

they waited as I walked toward the foreman, blocking my way.

"new guy, huh?" said the smallest one as he grinned, reached down, grabbed his lower parts.

"what the hell's *that* supposed to mean?" I asked.

"hey, man," said the next guy, "you looking for trouble?"

numero uno, the leader, stood between them with his slick black hair, his arms at his sides, his fingers with many rings waiting to rip your face and eyes.

numero uno was handsome in a dumb, vicious way. he was nearly a grown man.
he had probably already screwed a woman. his black hair and black shoes shone in the morning sun.

"hey, prick," he said, "fuck off!"

I looked at him, then at the other two and thought, well, I guess I am going to have to try to kill them all.

I closed my eyes and swung a right hook which caught numero uno on the nose. the other two backed off. as I followed I heard the foreman yell: "HEY, CUT THAT SHIT OUT!"

the leader held his hand to his nose, crimson blossoming between his fingers as he turned to the foreman: "the son-of-a bitch hit me!"

the foreman walked over and made a speech about how they didn't tolerate that sort of thing at Union Pacific Railroad. we were one big family, we were a brotherhood and I was lucky he didn't let me go right then and there but he'd give me *one* more chance but any more crap *like that* and I was finished.

"PUNCH IN!" he screamed.

we did, and were divided into different work gangs.

nobody in my gang talked to me which was fine.

an hour or so

later at the water fountain numero uno was standing there.

"I'm gonna get you, man!" he hissed.

I walked back to my work station more than a little worried.

but nothing happened that day or the next or in the weeks that followed.

then
I got lucky in a crap
game, quit and took a bus
to New Orleans.

I had finally learned that the guys who talk tough hardly ever are.

## long sad story

Mama Norman's was just south of downtown L.A., a little east of Broadway, probably gone to warehouses and parking lots now, and I'd come downstairs in the morning and Mama and old Jeff would be sitting in the kitchen and she'd say, "Hank, feed the chickens and I'll pour you a drink," and I'd get some feed out of the sack, put it in a pot and go out into the cold sunshine yard and I'd throw the yellow stuff to the chickens like a god. they'd come wildly to life from the spray of my hands and then I'd go back inside and sit down and the bottle would be sitting there in the soft sunlight and old Jeff would pour, his hand like the bark of an oak tree, telling long sad stories, and the oven would be on, a little gassy, and we'd sit there with our drinks, and soon down mine would go, good whiskey making that kitchen as dramatic as any play, and there I was a young man sitting with these old people and drinking and they treated me as an equal by god by god the chickens were full of grain and old Jeff would roll a cigarette and Mama Norman would say something, and then one more drink all around, the sunshine coming in like redemption through the curtains

and then I'd go back upstairs to my room which was away from the sun and smelled of centuries of damp, but there was my port wine, the tears of grapes, and the whore from the south room knocking on my door and she was naked and round and white and terrible as she told me about the night before, about her men, and then about her sons, I looked like one of them, she said. and the cabinet radio played and she danced all naked and fat and white and terrible, insane really, and the only thing to do was to get more wine, drink more wine and wait for morning and the chickens once again.

# the theory of the leisure class

the best thing about old women is that all they want from you are the simple things.

I used to feed the chickens for my landlady, Mrs. McCarthy

and afterwards in the breakfast nook she'd pour me half-a-glass of whiskey.

we'd sit there as the morning sun came in through the curtains.

Mrs. McCarthy asked me once, "you're a young man, why don't you get a job?"

I nodded toward the chicken coop and said, "I got one."

"Lord, boy," she said,
"you're just no damned
good!"

I smiled. unexpected praise such as that helped keep me going.

#### divorce

maybe when I was seven or eight
I remember the day we decided to play house.
we got a big blanket took it out to the backyard propped it up with sticks and we all crawled under there.

we each had a wife.
Frank got Stella.
Gene got June.
and I got
Charlene.
Charlene had the bluest
eyes
they just burned
blue
and she was quiet
in a red dress.

I had crappy parents and wasn't used to being close to anybody and we all huddled together under that blanket. Charlene and I put our arms around each other. we didn't kiss or anything we just held each

other and I had never felt so good. then it ended: one of the guys got mad about something and kicked the blanket off.

it was Gene. "let's get the hell our of here," he said.

Charlene got up and stood there and I stood as close to her as I could and her blue eyes looked right through me. "goodbye," I said to her as she just looked at me with those clear blue eyes.

for some days I talked to Frank and Gene about how wonderful Charlene was.

it was some time later that Gene got me off to one side.

"listen," he said,
"don't tell anybody
but I'm going to tell you
something about
Charlene."

<sup>&</sup>quot;what is it?"

Gene leaned real close and whispered, "she wears *rubber* panties!"

"really!"

"really!"

after that I stayed away from Charlene.
I mean I'd see her out in front of her house now and then as I walked by.

but I wouldn't look at her. I'd walk by as if she wasn't there.

those blue eyes were terrible, a god-damned lie.

#### no wonder

Tony phoned and told me that Jan had left him but that he was all right; it helped him he said to think about other great men like D. H. Lawrence pissed off with life in general but still milking his cow; or to think about T. Dreiser with his masses of copious notes painfully constructing his novels which then made the very walls applaud; or I think about Van Gogh, Tony continued, a madman who continued to make great paintings as the village children threw rocks at his window: or, there was Harry Crosby and his mistress in that fancy hotel room, dying together, swallowed by the Black Sun: or, take Tchaikovsky, that homo, marrying a female opera singer and then standing in a freezing river hoping to catch pneumonia while she went mad; or Dos Passos, after all those left-wing books, putting on a suit and a necktie and voting Republican; or that homo Lorca, shot dead in the road, supposedly for his politics but really because the mayor of that town thought his wife had the hots for the poet; or that other homo Crane, jumping over the rail of the boat and into the propellor because while drunk he had promised to marry some woman; or Dostoevsky crucified on the roulette wheel with Christ on his mind; or Hemingway, getting his ass kicked by Callaghan (but Hem was correct in maintaining that F. Scott couldn't write); or sometimes, Tony continued, I remember that guy

with syphilis who went mad and just kept rowing in circles on some lake—a Frenchman—anyhow, he wrote great short stories...

listen, I asked, you gonna be all right?

sure, sure, he answered, just thought I'd phone, good night.

and he hung up and I hung up, thinking Jesus Christ no wonder Jan left him.

#### macho hell

listen, I now forgive all the women who have lived with me and then left me in order to find someone else to fuck, to snort coke with, to drink with or maybe just to talk to.

I realize now that often I am a dull fellow and also by nature not much good at expressing affection, and in addition most of the time we simply weren't interested in the same thing and/or things.

but I must tell you now that back then it was difficult for me to forgive or understand; I remember many nights of macho hell just looking at the walls or an unmade bed or yesterday's newspaper on the floor; the minutes strangled inside my head; and there was always female detritus scattered about: clothes on the bed, shoes on the floor, lipstick on the dresser, a hairbrush in the bathroom...

and then there was my precious ego, never being able to understand how any of you could prefer someone else to me.

there were many nights spent walking to and fro across the room, refusing to accept, doubled over, grabbing my gut with both hands, growling, "shit, shit, shit..."

and trying to forget, going to cheap bars, looking, seldom finding, and when finding playing a role I really didn't like, just hoping for some kind of cheap vengeance instead of accepting what should have been accepted gracefully.

I understand that
I never would have met any of you
if you hadn't left someone else for me or been discarded
by someone else—
so here's to the good nights along with all the bad:
at our best we experienced as much joy as any
one
and I thank all of you for giving me your
best;
you live in my heart and if there's a heaven
somewhere
someday you'll all be there
as
the great white shark continues to circle endlessly
in captivity
with stunned eyes, with dumb stunned
eyes.

# you know who's best

it's warm here there's a roof overhead and a radio and some good white wine.

it's raining and I lost at the track today.

yesterday I won \$680. today I lost \$750.

Madeline we fight and we fight.

but tomorrow I'm going to win so pick your panties up off his floor and come back to me.

# he died April 9, 1553

catching the flu and reading Rabelais.

as the cat snores, as the toilet down the hall hisses, my eyes burn.

I put Rabelais down: this is what writers do to each other.

for him, I substitute a tab of vitamin C.

if we could only swallow death like that (I think we can). or if death could only swallow us like that (I think it does).

life is not all that we think it is, it's only what we imagine it to be and for us what we imagine becomes mostly so.

I imagine myself rid of this flu

I see myself parading the sidewalks along with the kings and princes of this world...

meanwhile, the cat, like most other things, pushes too close; I move him gently away, thinking, Rabelais you were a mighty mighty interesting fellow.

as I stretch out to sleep the ceiling watches me and waits.

# pick-up

the rivers the dogs won't swim, we cross.

the women other men don't want, we love.

the horse that wears the bandage, we bet.

sit me down at a bar with 3 women: one, faintly obnoxious; one, generally stupid; and the third, a killer:

the killer will leave her stool and come sit next to me.

the gods always make sure. the gods watch over me. they fix me up real good.

"hi, honey," she asks, "how ya doin'?"

"what're ya drinkin'?" I ask.

she states her drink. I order her a drink and another for me.

outside, it's much nicer: cars are crashing; buildings burn; future suicides whistle through their teeth while walking west or east or south or north.

"whatcha got on your mind?" she asks.

"I hope the Dodgers lose," I tell her, then I get up, go to the men's room, sneak out, then slip through the rear exit.

there's an alley out there. I walk west whistling through my teeth.

# it's all right

small cheap rooms where you walk down the hall to the bathroom can seem romantic to a young writer. even the rejection slips are amusing because you are sure that you are one of the best.

but while sitting there looking across the room at the portable typer waiting for you on the table you are really in a sense insane

as you wait for one more night to arrive to sit and type Immortal Words—but now you just sit and think about it on your first afternoon in a strange city.

looking over at the door you almost expect a beautiful woman to walk in.

being young helps get you through many senseless and terrible days.

being old does too.

## one of those crazy nights

we were sitting at a table; I'd known him when he'd lived in Munich working at something that we were mutually interested in; now he'd come down from Montana, still working at something that we were both more or less mutually interested in.

we'd been in a bar maybe 3 or 4 hours. he had a nose like the beak of a hawk and he was 6-foot-4 and wore a dumb cowboy hat

we were drinking scotch with beer chasers when he leaned forward (it was a crowded Saturday night) and whispered: "you take the guys at the bar and I'll take the guys at the other table; we'll clean this place out, o.k.?"

I narrowed my eyes, looked around: "no, you take the guys at the bar and I'll take the guys at the other table."

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"o.k.," he said, "now?"
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first."

"o.k.," he said, "I wanna see the waitress again anyway. did you see her

boobs?"

"veah."

"man, what TITS!"

I motioned the girl over for another round; she came with her loaded tray.

it happened fast: he reached up and grabbed one of her

such a god-damned SCREAM you never heard along with the crash of a dropped

trav

and then it looked like the whole bar was coming after us!

<sup>&</sup>quot;wait," I said, "let's have another drink

"FOLLOW ME, COWBOY!" I yelled and I ran up the stairway to the crappers. just to the west of the crappers there was a window where the slanted roof almost reached the ground. I climbed out onto the roof with the cowboy just behind and then we jumped and hit the good earth and really started running. we leaped over a vine-covered fence into a yard where a huge dog eyes barked with great verve. one of us kicked him in the balls and then we were out of there and found ourselves walking along a quiet tree-lined street with nobody about. I had sprained my right ankle, each step I took was fire from hell and the cowboy said, "we ought to go back there and kick some ass!" "you really think we should?" "why not?" "I can give you many good reasons," I said. "you're right," he said, "let's go back to your place." "sure," I said, "but one more thing..." "what's that?" "first we gotta find the fucking car." and with that we moved forward into the night, once again joined by

mutual interest.

#### urban war

the black car and the yellow truck crashed violently in the center of the intersection. the black car was stopped in its tracks and sat there honking while the yellow truck veered off from the collision and came directly toward me sideways with the driver slumped over the wheel. I should put my car in reverse, I thought, but my hand couldn't find the gear shift quickly enough. then the yellow truck began to skip off to one side and I thought, it's not going to hit me directly, it's going to scrape my door and then it passed by on the right, silently, you couldn't have slipped a sheet of paper between us. then the yellow truck crashed head-on into the car of a man stopped to my right two car lengths back. the yellow truck drove him into a third car, bounced off, slanted across the street, ran up over a curb and was still.

I had not seen the initial crash I had only heard it.
I drove over into a gas station turned off the engine and sat there looking at the four crashed cars. there was not a sound.

if I had been able to put it into reverse, I would be sitting over there with them now. I started the engine and drove out, thinking, let's see. where was I going? oh yes, the post office. I needed stamps.

## good pay

I went to this same college to read again after many years and the same professor was there in his office opening his desk drawer to hand me another fat cigar as my new girlfriend stood and watched.

and
after a while we three walked outside
and
the campus was high on a hill
all very green
and
all the young girls were strolling by
just as they had strolled by
many years ago
and
I told him, "it's strange, the girls
don't get old here."
"think nothing of it," he told me

an hour or so later I read got my check and then we all went back to the prof's place for a few drinks.

he had a new wife (a recent student); the prof was making out, feeding upon the eternal youth of the campus.

I reached under his wife's dress and patted a hunk of flank. then I turned to the prof who was bringing us whiskey sours.
"how do you get a job like yours?"
I asked him.

he passed the drinks out, laughed and sat down.

"I was going to ask you the same thing," he said.

then I noticed my young girlfriend pressed up against an English major and giggling.

"it's easy," I said, "all I do is lie as truthfully as possible."

"that's the best description of poetry I've heard in a long time," he replied.

I watched my girlfriend flirting with the English major.

"don't worry about that kid," said the prof.

"how come?"

"no originality. you're his main literary influence."

we finished our drinks.

"you make a great whiskey sour," I told him. "how about another?"

"sure," he said, got up and left.

I reached up under his wife's dress and grabbed some more flank.

she yanked my hand away:
"do that one more time and I'll kick you in your balls!"

then my girlfriend came over with the English major.

"this is Sonny Sanderson," she said, "he wants to meet you."

I stood up and we shook hands.

"Sonny and I are going to the dance tonight!" said my girlfriend. "he says he's a good dancer."

"you can really write," he said. "how do you do it?"

"thanks," I said, "but we've got to leave now. it's a long drive back to L.A."

so after finishing the whiskey sour I got up and my girl came along as Sonny Sanderson loomed large in the professor's doorway. we got into the car and on the drive back I knew how I was going to hear all about it: how I was no good at parties, how I was afraid of people and that I couldn't enjoy myself and how I often imagined things that weren't true and even though I acted very superior I was actually a very insecure person.

all of which was probably true.

she kept switching stations on the car radio and she kept plugging in the dashboard lighter to re-light her cigarette which kept going out and as her hair kept falling down into her face I checked my coat pocket to see of the reading check was still there.

I turned into the freeway entrance glided into the fast lane turned on the wipers to clear the fogged-up windshield and waited to hear all about it.

#### **Panasonic**

I haven't killed all the spiders in this place but I've gotten most of them. there are two I can't get. they sit inside the plastic shield on my radio, solid-state FM-AM, they sit inside where the red dot selects the station. I only listen to FM on two Los Angeles stations, KUSC and KFAC, in that order. they are both classical music stations.

those are newly cultured spiders. they heard Beethoven's 9th last night and now they are listening to Brahms' 2nd. what they are feeding on I am not sure, but they seem satisfied. only their legs move now and then.

that radio is educating them. they are now starting to look like some critics I know. by this, please understand that I mean no offense to the spiders.

## out of place

I always knew that there was something wrong with me.
it got worse in Jr. High School.
when I walked into a room
all the students would begin talking
at once
it got very noisy
and I would stand and stare at them
and they would talk louder and louder
until the teacher would bang on the
desk:
"ALL RIGHT! ALL RIGHT! THAT'S ENOUGH
OF THAT!"

I had no idea of what excited them and as I sat at my desk heads would often turn and stare at me.

these occurrences were commonplace and because I never did anything untoward or unusual I just knew that there must be something wrong with me.

the teachers, too, acted strangely:
"WHAT ARE YOU DOING, MR. CHINASKI?"
(I wouldn't be doing anything)
"YOU WILL PLEASE REMAIN AFTER CLASS!"

it was usually the female teachers who acted like this and I liked all my female teachers even though I felt sorry for them and afterward they never explained to me what I had done wrong and I never asked.

on the school grounds it was also strange: girls and boys I didn't know would walk up to me and ask, "how are you doing, Henry?" and for some odd reason I'd always reply, "get away from me!"

what it all meant,
I never knew.
I had no plans, few desires and
no impulses.
I sensed that there was something
really wrong and
that I was a freak.

but since it felt neither good nor bad, I accepted the situation and waited.

## a great place, here

sitting here with my pal Kraft Meyerbeer we saw the wetbacks climbing over the wall. Kraft zonkered the first one with a fireball I got the second with my old luger and then Kraft he got the third one who looked a little bit like Marlon Brando he got him in the ass with his crossbow. New Mexico is a great place to be, down here by the border. Kraft and me we sit in the back yard all day under the shade trees listening to Brahms and John Cage and drinking peppermint tea laced with sometimes at night the whores come floating over the wall with their big pink balloon breasts and we slingshot them down with razor rocks of quartz. they scream, piss, flop in the or sometimes we'll catch a wild dog and skin him alive. things get better and better. yesterday we killed a cop, stuck his balls in his mouth and left him on a park bench in the town plaza. on Sundays we either burn churches or

make our own ice cream. the other day a guy put a dent in my fender so I chained him to my front bumper and drove all the way to Phoenix like that and when I got there I rammed him against the fanciest whorehouse in town. nobody much bothers us out here, although they've threatened to call out the state troopers. now we don't want to hurt those nice boys. lots of them have mothers and sisters and sweethearts so I hope they stay away. you ought to see our garden best garden in town best in the world like the Garden of Eden except no snake would dare enter here.

well, thanks for listening come on down and visit me anytime... we'll find you something interesting to do.

# horses don't bet on people and neither do I...

I look for a seat alone but a couple of rows in front of me sits a bald old man in a grey sweater.

he has a voice you can hear for 40 yards. the year is 1980, he is talking about some horse that won a stakes race in 1958. he had bet him to win.

"HE WAS 13-TO-ONE! THE HORSE HAD NEVER RUN MORE THAN SEVEN FURLONGS AND THEY WERE ENTERING HIM IN A MILE-AND-ONE-EIGHTH! WELL, SIR, HE JUMPED IN FRONT AND WENT ALL THE WAY, THE OTHER HORSES NEVER GOT CLOSE TO HIM! IT WAS SOME RACE!"

the man he is talking to turns his head away and pales, he is suddenly sick. I get up and move, I find a new seat, the closest person to me is three seats away and she doesn't even have a Racing Form, she's working a crossword puzzle. she looks up at me: "hey, what's a four-letter word for 'departed'?" "dead?" "no, that don't fit..." "gone?" "ah...yeah, that's it. say, didn't I see you in some movie? aren't you a movie star?" "no." "yes, it was a horror movie, you played a man who fell out of a bell tower!"

I get up and walk to the escalator and ride it down and find a bench in the sun. I sit down there and then I find I've lost my program so I go to one of the vendors and buy a new program.

"buying another program, buddy?" he asks.

"yeah. you remember me, eh?"

"oh yeah! I remember you!"

I walk quickly back to the escalator, pulling my hat down over my eyes. as I ride the escalator up, the man next to me is carrying a portable radio and he has it turned on as loud as it can go.

somebody is singing on that radio. it's Barry Manilow.

## my failure

I think of devils in hell and stare at a beautiful vase of flowers as the woman in my bedroom angrily switches the light on and off. we have had a very bad argument and I sit in here smoking cigarettes from India as on the radio an opera singer's prayers are not in my language. outside, the window to my left reveals the night lights of the city and I only wish I had the courage to break through this simple horror and make things well again but my petty anger prevents me.

I realize hell is only what we create, smoking these cigarettes, waiting here, wondering here, while in the other room she continues to

sit and switch the light on and off, on and off.

## in memory of a dead jock

he was looking down trying to soothe the horse when it reared up, and the top of the gate sliced behind and under the protective helmet of the jock and crushed his skull.

I had a ticket on the horse, #9. they took it back to the barn and drove off in an ambulance with the jock. some minutes later the track announcer told the crowd that the jock was dead. but the people went right on one thing I remember, though, is that ten minutes after the announcement I saw a man jam an entire hot dog into his mouth, you could see the mustard, the bun, the relish, the dog all going in, and then he closed his mouth on it all and chewed, blinking gulping.

he was still alive the man with the hot dog as the hyenas circled and the toteboard flashed.

## repeat

it's an old poem: sitting here again at 3 a.m. having typed a few, all the cigarettes smoked, the many pages on the floor, down to the last glass of wine.

now to move the body to the bed

thinking, such easy luck, I'll take it:

wine and poems.

this is the way the ancient Chinese poets were able to laugh at and endure death and life

for their own sake

and for ours.

# now you know why we kiss the wall

the sermon's good and the hot tea spills into the falcon's eyes. Griff said he'd bring the stuff at noon and it's 1:30 already. you know how it is: if you found a man or a woman you could trust you'd doubt them for some other reason. Andre writes that he's teaching acting at the University of Illinois and the baby I saw that night so long ago over red wine and a great Italian meal has grown into a golden green creature rising into girlhood. in this neighborhood now the other older girls keep coming by at midnight and behind the barns the cats sleep in the snow. we touch things in our dreams vital disturbing things as our shoes sit under

the bed, one straight up
the other on its
side.
and I wonder why
so many great
composers have been unable to
finish more than
9 symphonies as
I get up and
walk across space
in my attempt
to find the
door.

#### that's who sent them

dead flowers in a vase looking across at me in a room dark because I do not choose light; they have shut off the water again and are now banging on the pipes; this is a madhouse, they raided here last night and I would not let them in, the chain held and I moved the sofa against the door and I called my lawyer and my fat whore cried and at last they went away; this Sunday drags its snake-shape in and out of the light sockets, the phone rings and leaps on the couch like a punched dog, and right away I think I may have been poisoned as I walk over to the flowers but my hands are too weak to take them out not now so white white or so pink pink but rotten dead dead dead and the squawk of a jay rips through the window like cannonfire from an earlier age, and I stand with dead flowers and ringing, sunlight now burning my pale face and pale heart, and I take the flowers white not so white, pink not so pink, it's like turning out the light, and I throw them throw them throw them out OUT as I move and answer the phone and a voice says HAPPY BIRTHDAY DARLING.

# it's just me

I am such an unpopular human being. I should have been born a frog, or perhaps something a bit higher up the trunk of a birch tree: a red-headed woodpecker? a bushy-tailed squirrel?

I don't seem to fit in anywhere. in cafes, restaurants,
I say strange things to the waiters and waitresses, nothing ugly, just rather airy and not quite befitting.
I find it funny but nobody else does especially the lady with me: "you embarrass me in public!"

on freeways I also seem out of place. I slow down to allow people who are changing lanes to move into the space in front of me.

I did this once while driving with a young lady. she exploded in scornful laughter: "you don't HAVE to do that!"

I am often at a loss when confronted by a crisis. once an old man next to me on the sidewalk tripped and fell. I only stared down at others rushed up to help (I never seem to be in sync with the rest of humanity) but my first reaction had been to think that if I was that old man I wouldn't want anybody touching me or trying to help me.

I should have been born a rogue elephant or a giant lizard scorched by the sun. for example, a friend will point a woman out to me and say, "God, isn't she beautiful!" and I will look at that face and see a determination a threat so great that I wonder why the gods do not place a warning sign on her that says "LOOK OUT FOR THIS ONE UNLESS YOU WISH TO DIE A LINGERING DEATH."

I guess I am just out of step with most others. for instance, I don't sleep like most at regular hours. this has given me much trouble in my relationships. suddenly, say at 3 p.m., on any afternoon I might disrobe climb into bed and announce. "I'm going to sleep now." I do this because I feel like sleeping then and like to believe that I have a right to this animal freedom. vet some of the ladies I have known have found this inconvenient selfish and have finally left me because of that (but they would have left me for some other reason anyhow, or if not, I would have left them).

it's a sad fact but I disagree with almost everyone I know. I think most movies are terrible and television is even worse. there is nothing I hate more than idle conversation. the exploration of Space bores me

and I can find more of interest in the daily newspaper than in all the literature of all the centuries.

happy to be alone I sit here at 3 a.m. and clip my toenails as I think about my favorite philosopher who said: "I am Popeye the Sailor Man I live in a garbage can I like to go swimmin' with bow-legged wimmin and I yam what I yam what I yam!"

put that in your smoke and pipe it.

## then I know why

when I see those cowboys driving the freeways in their bright red pickup trucks say on a sunny day in March with a beautiful dog (or dogs) untethered and lurching in the truck beds I wonder about those cowboys, about what philosophy they live with and by, about what noble sentiments motivate them, and when I pull alongside to get a look first at the frightened animals and then at their heedless masters, I am never ready for the swell of anger that rises within me, a spiritual despair so great that I can feel it as something physical, like a hammer blow to the gut, the head and the mind, and then I know why I've had so much trouble in the factories in the bars at parties picnics

at any gathering of the clan, large or small: all there is to them are arms, legs, heads, ears, eyes, empty parts stitched together without anything meaningful inside. there is absolutely nothing one can say to them and to rail against them would be akin to firing bullets into a pile of shit.

the crushed animals I see left along the side of the freeway both dead and dying we wouldn't leave humans there like that to expire and rot in the sun, it would remind us too much of our own feeble deaths to come which most often in funeral aftermath are far more farcical than profound.

# her only son

to endure is only meaningful if you come out with something at the other end. but to endure simply in order to endure is the unfortunate plight of millions.

I remember the time I buried my love and driving back after the funeral with her only son instead of recognizing the fact of his mother's neglected and lonely adult life and death all he talked about was how much money he was making now.

he thought
he had endured
but
he
hadn't.
there was
nothing
left of
his life
to
lose.

he was like a slab of meat in a butcher shop.

and to think she used to talk about him lovingly almost every night before we fell asleep.

# the wrong way

luxury ocean liners crossing the water full of the indolent and rich passing from this place to that with their hearts gone and their guts empty like Xmas turkeys the great blue sky above wasted all that water wasted all those fingers, heads, toes, buttocks, eyes, ears, legs, feet asleep in their American Express Card staterooms.

it's like a floating tomb going nowhere.

these are the floating dead. yet the dead are not ugly but the near-dead surely are most surely are.

when do they laugh? what do they think about love?

what are they

doing midst all that water? and where do they seek to go? 4

you begin by starving in cheap rooms
and you end up by
asking your lawyer
to keep an eye on your
tax accountant.
make a poem out of
that.

# I move to the city of San Pedro

when I first moved here the neighbors were friendly. the old couple next door came to the fence and she said: "anything we can do for you, let us know. we're home all the time." "thank you," I told them.

the young couple to the west didn't say much. "we keep a low profile," the husband told me. "I like that," I said.

things were quiet for a couple of weeks. I dug around in the garden, planted some corn and radishes.

then one night my lady and I had a bad night. we drank too much and she declared her independence and revealed her true feelings about me but either she came on too strong or she worded it badly; her tone seemed to drip with a pure and bitter hatred.

anyhow,
it maddened my thought
processes
and we ended up
at 8:30 a.m. on a
very sunny Sunday morning
me naked
totally imbecilic
chasing her
through the garden while
hurling rocks
wildly and
screaming:
YOU GOD-DAMNED ROTTEN WHORE!"
and so forth and so on.

after a time, of course, it all abated and things became quiet again.

now the old couple next door speak to me very little. he, curtly. she, never.

but the young couple to the west have become friendlier. he started coming by, knocking, and leaving me loaves of fresh-baked bread from their oven.

then he came to my New Year's party with his wife.

as the months went on he came over for many beers.

recently he came to the door with a couple of bottles of wine and said, "I'd like to talk and drink with you."

then his wife arrived and we were joined by my lady and we drank his two bottles.

I have never *quite* repeated my opening act of naked-in-the-yard-at-8:30 a.m.

and I hope I never do

but it's curious what appeals to some people.

it could be that what we think is correct often is not very interesting. sometimes I even think I'd like to have a neighbor just like me

but when I really think it through I know that I could not stand that.

# be angry at San Pedro

I say to my woman, "Jeffers was a great poet. think of a title like *Be Angry at the Sun*. don't you realize how great that is?"

"you like that negative stuff," she says.

"positively," I agree, finishing my drink and pouring another. "in one of Jeffers' poems, not the sun poem, this woman fucks a stallion because her husband is such a gross spirit. and it's believable. then the husband goes out to kill the stallion and the stallion kills him."

"I never heard of Jeffers," she says.

"you never heard of Big Sur? Jeffers made Big Sur famous just like D.H. Lawrence made Taos famous. when a great writer writes about where he lives the mob comes in and takes over."

"well, you write about San Pedro," she says.

"yeah," I say, "and have you read the papers lately? they are going to construct a marina here, one of the largest in the world, millions and billions of dollars, there is going to be a huge shopping

center, yachts and condominiums everywhere!"

"and to think," my woman says smiling, "that you've only lived here for three years!"

"I still think," I say, changing the subject, "you ought to read Jeffers."

#### lost in San Pedro

no way back to Barcelona. the green soldiers have invaded the tombs. madmen rule Spain and during a heat wave in 1952 I buried my last concubine.

no way back to the Rock of Gibraltar. the bones of the hands of my mother are so still.

stay still now, mother stay still.

the horse tossed the jock
the horse fell
then got up
on only 3 legs—
the 4th bent nearly in two
and all the people anguished for the jock
but my heart ached for the horse
the horse
the horse
it was terrible
it was truly terrible.

I sometimes think about one or the other of my women. I wonder what we were hoping for when we lived together

our minds shattered like the 4th leg of that horse.

remember when women wore dresses and high heels? remember whenever a car door opened all the men turned to look? it was a beautiful time and I'm glad I was there to see it.

no way back to Barcelona.

the world is less than a fishbone.

this place roars with the need for mercy. there is this fat gold watch sitting here on my desk sent to me by a German cop.

I wrote him a nice letter thanking him for it but the police have killed more of my life than the crooks.

nothing to do but wait for the pulling of the shade. I pull the shade.

my 3 male cats have had their balls clipped. now they sit and look at me with eyes emptied of all but killing.

# justice

you take the train from Germany to Paris and you know when you've crossed the border: the train stops and French soldiers jump two of them run into our compartment. they seem angry as we flash our passports but they are more interested in the black American soldier sitting across from us. they speak to him rapidly in French. one of them grabs him by the coat while the other rips down his suitcase from overhead opens it dumps the contents on the floor.

they they pull the American soldier up on his feet indicate for him to put his things back into his suitcase which he does then they yank him out of the compartment and take him away.

the train sits a while then jerks into motion. soon we are at full speed.

"that was terrible," says my wife, "I wonder what he did?"

"he was looking up your legs," I tell her.

"that's nonsense," she says.

"I like the French," I say opening up two miniature bottles of red wine for us as the little villages in the landscape slip by.

#### a boor

we are sitting in the cafe waiting.
I've read yesterday's race results and today's entries over and over

"everybody else has rolls," she says. "I wonder why our waitress hasn't brought us our rolls?"

"which waitress is ours?" I ask.

"you ordered. don't you look at people?"

"not before eating. which one is she?"

"she's over there folding napkins. she won't look up."

"that one?"

"that one."

I spear a napkin on my fork and whirl it around and around over my head.

"oh, stop that!" my woman says.

the waitress sees me and walks over.

"where are our rolls?" I ask.

"rolls are 75 cents extra," she says.

"good. bring us four orders of rolls, please."

our waitress leaves.

"besides that," my woman says, "she hasn't brought us our order. it's been sitting there for 5 minutes."

"how do you know?"

"I can see it sitting over there."

"I can't see anything."

"it's behind the glass partition. I can see it."

our waitress comes with four orders of rolls and butter.

"thank you," I say, "but I wonder why you don't bring us our dinner? it's been ready for 5 minutes."

"that's not your order, sir. those are display meals."

our waitress walks off.

"eat your rolls," I say to my lady.

"no, I don't want to spoil my dinner."

"please pass me the front page."

"no, I'm reading it."

so I stare at a strange woman until she turns and glares at me.

then our order comes only another waitress brings it

"thank you," I say.

the new waitress walks off.

"the other waitress couldn't stand you," says my lady.

"I hate to ruin somebody's day," I say.

"well, you have".

"it happens almost everywhere I go," I reply.

it's a good place. they serve only seafood and the tables are clean and comfortable.

I eat the dinner. my woman eats hers. I tip 15% and we leave.

walking toward our car in the parking lot she says, "you ate all the rolls."

"yeah," I say.

#### out of the dark

the tiger killed 4 wild dogs before the rest of the pack finished him off, then the rains came and the dogs shivered in the wash of water while devouring the tiger as at dawn today a man entered the freeway the wrong way crashed into 7 cars killing one commuter injuring eleven as this morning for breakfast I had 4 hard-boiled eggs sprinkled with chili powder along with a glass of orange juice while thinking about the old man next door who died last night: I will miss watching him tug at the crabgrass in his lawn.

the constant is in the occurring and the occurring is constant.

beautiful things can be terrible and terrible things can be beautiful.

I must remember to thank the gods later today for all that.

#### for the foxes

don't feel sorry for me. I am a competent, satisfied human being.

be sorry for the others who fidget complain

who constantly rearrange their lives like furniture.

juggling mates and attitudes

their confusion is constant

and it will touch whoever they deal with.

beware of them: one of their key words is "love."

and beware those who

only take instructions from their God

for they have failed completely to live their own lives.

don't feel sorry for me because I am alone

for even at the most terrible moments humor is my companion.

I am a dog walking backwards

I am a broken banjo

I am a telephone wire strung up in Toledo, Ohio

I am a man eating a meal this night in the month of September.

put your sympathy aside. they say water held up Christ: to come through you better be nearly as lucky.

# poem for Brigitte Bardot

coronets alive with the fire of wine, contents of flax, names, speeches, and I see where Brigitte Bardot cut her wrist and took some pills, but like the rest of us she will manage to continue in spite of everything, and then for no reason at all I remember another young woman looking down from the window in her dirty underwear many years ago screaming my hangover name on a Philadelphia Sunday morning, and I remember the way we decorated the trees in the snow outside the bar there on the sidewalk that Christmas Day falling down like drunken bears laughing and tramping over the tinsel. yes, I am sorry, Brigitte, if it is not going well for you, but it's bad all around; you see, I have figured out that seagulls are mad angels trying to tell us something, and as they dip and screech before our eyes the sea comes up for air and spirits them away. so I am truly sorry, Brigitte, that you are not doing well but I have just turned both my pockets out and found just three pennies on my dresser, undress, shave and go to sleep although there is something wrong

with my left arm, it's stiff as hell and hurts (polio? bad blood or something?) and today as I walked through the supermarket I looked at oranges and apples and cucumbers and at the barbecued chickens turning on their spits like great men burning in their own fire, but since I am no thief I bought cigarettes and left, and I still had three cents remaining and I stood and read the headline in the paper and saw your picture and I looked around and on the tall building across the street a man crouched ready to leap, and a dog went by with a bone in his mouth, something dead, and I am sorry for you, Brigitte, and I too have love problems, but I still have my typewriter, a radio, and all the water I can drink, so I will have one for you, a tall one, and I'll shake my arm, turn on the radio and hope for Brahms or Beethoven, and maybe in the morning the man will have jumped, maybe I will have jumped, and maybe through picture postcards and coffins, through arcades of roses and screaming, maybe through the towers and tables and Christmas trees your lover will come and kiss you once again under the cigarette and cucumber sun.

# having the flu and with nothing else to do

I read a book about John Dos Passos and according to the book once radical-communist John ended up in the Hollywood Hills living off investments and reading the *Wall Street Journal*.

this seems to happen all too often.

what hardly ever happens is a man going from being a young conservative to becoming an old wild-ass radical.

#### however:

young conservatives always seem to become old conservatives. it's a kind of lifelong mental vapor-lock.

but when a young radical ends up an old radical the critics and the conservatives treat him as if he escaped from a mental institution.

such is our politics and you can have it

keep it.

sail it up your ass.

#### a time to remember

at North Avenue 21 drunk tank you slept on the floor and at night there was always some guy who would step on your face on his way to the crapper

and then you would curse him good, set him straight, so that he would know enough to either be more careful or to just lay there and hold it.

there was a large hill in back dense with foliage you could see it through the barred window and a few of the guys after being released would not go back to skid row, they'd just walk up into that green hill where they lived like animals.

part of it was a campground and some lived out of the trash cans while others trekked back to skid row for meals but then returned

and they all sold their blood each week for wine.

there must have been 18 or 20 of them up there and they were more or less just as happy as corporate lawyers stockbrokers or airline pilots.

civilization is divided into parts, like an orange, and when you peel the skin off, pull the sections apart, chew it, the final result is a mouthful of pale pulp which you can either swallow or spit out.

some just swallow it like the guys down at North Avenue 21.

# "I demand a little respect"

the strangest thing after living with a woman for some years

is that no matter what miraculous things you might accomplish

they leave her unimpressed.

for instance you could leap 60 feet straight up into the air and

she would hardly notice.

but let somebody else jump two inches off the ground and

this same woman would

applaud enthusiastically as if that was something really special.

at times at this bitterest moment one realizes that no matter how many years one has lived with the same woman

one has really always lived alone.

# pink silks

I think of new roses, angry cats, leaning fences and old photographs of young Charles Lindbergh and his Spirit of St. Louis as my spirit drives along the sea over grumpy dirt roads nastier than a cheap cigar and as I drive along alone and carefree the homes of the rich up above seem demented, unclear and frightened on their flattened mountain tops. where I live now friends turn cold and suddenly old and when they laugh I see their false teeth but at least they laugh that's as important as clean laundry. and, over in Andernach, my Uncle Hein died at 93, and I'm sure his back is as straight in the casket as it was in life, a stout Kraut,

my Uncle Heinrich! the perfect music of a natural event is astonishing: as I watch a jockey walking from the stable area in the finest pink silks (with thin green piping) carrying his whip loosely on his way to a waiting groom, I see centuries of mankind approaching the impossible with casual courage; the bite of reality doesn't kill, it only clears the mind. what I like best, I guess, is that everything eventually resolves itself adjusts itself heals itself no matter what I think or do, but still, the swift and ugly course of common and uncommon experience often bedazzles even those much smarter than myself. so just wind me up run me over the edge of the coffee table to where the sky drops into the sea to the last unutterable end that one day we all will experience and finally know.

# milk a cow and you get milk

I've mostly stopped worshipping other writers now past or present but I was a writer junkie for a long time. I think I read every book about D. H. Lawrence, and those great photos: there was D. H. actually milking a cow. and there was Frieda and there was A. Huxley and all the others.

I once thought writing was magic something that magic people did. I didn't think it would be like this.

I thought it would be natural simple like making toast or skiing down a hill.

it all looked so fucking easy from that distance.

# oh, to be young in 1942!

4-F in Louisiana, couldn't convince the army shrink I was sane, didn't mind,

liked to drink but that was about all, the only talent I had—otherwise, I couldn't figure out the top from the bottom from the middle—sitting there in the

Gang Plank Bar with toothless whores and the other idiots of the night, the drinks were cheap but watered and I wanted to be in love with a millionairess and live with her in a New York City penthouse with green plants surrounding us with their octopus arms but

no, of course, it wasn't going to be that way, everything was going to be

dry and dumb and listless, and there I sat in my body with all my wretched parts, right smack in the middle of American history which wanted

nothing to do with me and I didn't want much to do with it either and

it was all very strange but not too strange because my father had always

told me that the way I THOUGHT meant that there was no chance for me, that I would

always be a useless misfit doomed to early destruction and shame, and

I had no DRIVE, he said, and he was right because I felt best when I was sucking on those watered drinks—

that seemed the apex of life to me—and the proudest accomplishment that I

could point to was my rented room across the street (paid up for ONE FULL WEEK) that was plenty of miracle for me, and the people in the bar thought I was crazy just like the army shrink thought I was, and they didn't speak to me, but then they hardly spoke to each other either and

one night I got tired of the bar and I walked out and kept walking and I walked and walked all the way down to the Gulf of Mexico and sat there with my legs dangling over the pier considering nothing but the waiting and I sucked on the bottle of wine I had purchased on the way and I listened to the water making sounds like woosh woosh woosh over and over again and I liked that but the water stank and I got up and walked around the edge of the pier and into the profound darkness and I was drunker than usual and then I was walking through deep mud with a light rain falling and I thought, man, you must be crazy like they say why would you keep walking through this mud? and then a searchlight was shined on me from a tower (I saw the tower framed behind the light and I thought, what the hell is that?) and a voice screamed "HALT!" the war was everywhere and I had stumbled into forbidden territory and I turned and started running and the LIGHT FOLLOWED ME. then there was a shot and then another shot (and a pause) and then another shot. somebody was firing at me but why? and I stumbled and fell headlong into the mud then

perfectly and I stopped running I walked away and

there were a couple more shots but not nearly as close as the others and I kept walking through the mud until I found a street and I walked up the street and

I got up and I thought, fuck it, this fits my suicide wish

I walked all the way back to the *Gang Plank Bar* and I walked in and sat down and ordered a drink. I was covered with mud—all over my face, hands, clothing—yet nobody said anything and the bartender served me and I picked up

my watered drink and drank it down ordered another drank it down and then just for the hell of it I didn't pay I just walked out of there and back to my room sat in a corner like Little Jack Horner

took off my shoes my stockings all heavy with mud and I thought, I'm never going back to that bar again and I didn't (it was the most depressing place I had ever been and I had been in plenty like it) so too drunk to undress and not wanting to dirty the roominghouse sheets I slept on the floor to be checked out later by my roomies the roaches for sanity or whatever it was they were looking for.

#### the condition book

the long days at the track have swallowed and consumed me.

I am the horses, the jocks, I am six furlongs, seven furlongs, I am a mile-and-one-sixteenth, I am a handicap, I am all the colors of all the silks, I am the photo finishes, the accidents, the deaths, the last place finishes, the breakdowns, the failure of the toteboard, the dropped whip and the numb pain of the dream not come true in a thousand faces, I am the long drive home in the dark, in the rain, I am decades and decades of races run and won and lost and run again and I am myself sitting with a program and a Racing Form. I am the racetrack, my ribs are the wooden rails, my eyes are the flashes of the toteboard, my feet are hooves and there is something riding on my back, I am the last turn, I am the home stretch, I am the longshot and the favorite, I am the exacta, the daily double and the pick-6.

I am humanly destroyed, I am the horseplayer who became the race and the track.

## the kid from Santiago

they brought this kid up from Chile, expressionless, flattened nose, shoulder blades like angel's wings, they threw him right into a ten-round main event against Sugar Boy Matson winner of 14 straight, eleven of them by k.o., the kid's name was Yaro, he knocked out Matson in 2, lucky punch maybe, so they bring in the 4th-ranked welterweight 5 weeks later and Yaro gets him in the 4th. the kid gets his hair styled, a new Thunderbird, a blonde with lavender eves and a book on English grammar. he begins to sniff coke and snow, gets the 2nd-ranked welter in the 3rd, flies his mother up from Santiago, marries lavender eyes, gets the champ, gets k.o.'d by the champ in the 12th round. then he goes against the 7th-ranked welter, loses a split decision, goes against the 8th-ranked, gets a bad cut over the right eye and they

stop the fight; next he goes against a new kid from Panama, gets k.o.'d in the 2nd, goes back to Chile with his mother and lavender eyesthere is money, they have been careful, they buy a nice house, they all sit still and look around, he is in training again, looks fine, won his last 3 down there: one split decision, one unanimous decision, and the last a k.o., all against lavender eyes-one on the veranda, one in the bedroom and the last in the backyard in the rain. he always had fast hands, but as they used to say, he had to get off fast get out in front—to win, that was the chink in his armor. it's common, there are lots of men like that, and horses

too.

#### room service

she comes in with all good intentions while I'm at this machine.

perhaps the sound of it encourages her to try to bring me more luck and success.

but when she enters suddenly and I hear her voice

I leap wildly from this chair

scream: "HOLY JESUS CHRIST!"

she hands me a snack upon a plate.

"thank you," I tell her, "but you really scared the shit out of me. you know, when I'm at this typer I'm gone around

some corner."

"sorry, daddy," she says, "I forgot."

"it's all right," I tell her...

only to have her repeat this process the night after next.

love, of course, excuses everything

and that's when fools such as I pick at snacks change ribbons clean the ashtray and wonder where the last sentence went.

#### passport

I went to get a passport photo. the lady was in her late thirties her breasts about to fall out of her dress. she took me in the back and sat me down under the lights. "you've got an interesting face," she said. I wanted to tell her about her breasts that they were interesting but I didn't. "are you a writer?" she asked, looking at my paperwork. "yes," I admitted. she took the first shot. "why don't you bring around some of your books?" she asked. "I never display my wares," I answered. she took a second shot. "what do you write about most?" she asked. "women," I admitted. "that'll be twenty dollars," she said. I paid her. "the photos will be ready in 3 days," she said, "but I wish you'd bring your books around."

I walked back down Western Ave. crossed the bridge over the freeway. the retaining fence wasn't very high. a person could quite easily fall over into the traffic below. I walked quite a distance from that fence.

I wanted to get safely to Paris. I had taken a lot of abuse for that passport photo.

# darlings of the word

2 poets from San Francisco (one quite famous) are down here in L.A. and she's gone out to hear them read.

I'm glad at the moment that I don't have to read in public anymore.

I never typed this stuff to get up and read it to the mob.

I used to read for the \$\$\$ it helped pay the rent but when I hear of the famous and the well-off still doing it I marvel at their choice.

it has always seemed curious to me that poets are such extroverts. they love to get up there and warble.

I once asked a poet about this *itch* and he told me: "it's as old as language itself: poets throughout the ages used to walk up and down the streets singing their rhymes, their songs. poetry belongs to the people."

"I don't know about that," I said, "but I guess even writing for the printed page is a form of vanity."

"poetry belongs to the people!" he repeated.

"all right," I said, "let's forget it."

if I had wanted to be an actor I would have gone to Hollywood.

the only necessary poetic act is the writing of the poem and all that follows is propaganda.

the teachers the lectures the readings never

can equal or replace what begins it all.

2 poets from San Francisco are down here now

so far down here

now.

#### **KFAC**

here I sit again as the radio announcer says, "for the next 3 hours we will be listening to a selection of..."

it's now eleven p.m.
I've listened to this man's
voice
for many many years.
he must be getting quite
old.
his station plays the best
classical
music.

I don't recall how many women I have lived with while listening to that announcer, or how many cars I've owned or how many places I've lived in.

now each time I hear his voice I think, well, he's still alive, he sounds good but the poor fellow must be getting very old.

some day he'll have his funeral, a little trail of cars following the hearse.

and then there'll be a new voice to listen to.

he must be very old now, that fellow, and every time I hear his voice again
I pour a tall one to salute him happy that he's made it for one more night along with me.

# it is good to know when you are done

most things work out in the end. you walk around lighting cigarettes, getting old, and fat, and feeling quite common. it is only a gesture when you put on your shoes, make love, remember, say, once reading a novel. you even lie to your friends about the weather and your health. is it Wednesday or is it Thursday? you go to a piano recital or see a football game: it's just a way of continuing, you sleep, sleep is best. a little nightly game of death between you and life. you get ready. sometimes flowers open, sometimes flowers die. you get intoxicated. you smoke too much. you cut your toenails. you phone somebody who doesn't interest you. then you say, quietly, to hell with it. I am done. everybody is done, finally. it is good to know when you are done. now you can be a fat snake crawling into a dark waterwell, down into the dark. now you can know why you are alcoholic. there are just too many sober people. sober people are not really sober just because they think they are. idiots aren't sober because they do things in their own way and disregard the world. you don't ask for an end but it comes. like an army drawn on funny white paper. and it is like having wisdom in your fingertips. it is like knowing the names of the planets and it is like seeing green moss on the dark side of a tree and letting it envelop you.

the headstrong are the worst. the headstrong become preachers then politicians then saints and lovers. they are doomed. the truth is in seeing straight on down the line. there have been many good men who are now dead, and there are yet some good living ones: their dumb lips move and their eyes are open and they are mute, like trees and distant stars. it makes me sad to know that one day they too will all be dead for the dead are everywhere, their armies haunt my restless nights and yet, after all, it is so much better that they once were here.

#### **TB**

I had it for a year, really put in a lot of bedroom time, slept upright on two pillows to keep from coughing, all the blood drained from my head and often I'd awaken to find myself slipping sideways off the bed. since my TB was contagious I didn't have any visitors and the phone stopped ringing and that was the lucky part.

during the day I tried TV and food, neither of which went down very well. the soap operas and the talk shows daytime nightmare, so for the lack of anything else I watched the baseball games and led the Dodgers to a pennant. not much else for me to do except take antibiotics and the cough medicine. I also really saved putting mileage on the car and missed the hell out of the old race track.

you realize when you're plucked out of the mainstream that it doesn't need you or anybody else. the birds don't notice you're gone, the flowers don't care, the people out there don't notice, but the IRS, the phone co., the gas and electric co., the DMV, etc., they keep in touch.

being very sick and being dead are very much the same in society's eye.

either way, you might just as well lay back and enjoy it.

# a song with no end

when Whitman wrote, "I sing the body electric"

I know what he meant I know what he wanted:

to be completely alive every moment in spite of the inevitable.

we can't cheat death but we can make it work so hard that when it does take us

it will have known a victory just as perfect as ours.

## the lucky ones

stuck in the rain on the freeway, 6:15 p.m., these are the lucky ones, these are the dutifully employed, most with their radios on as loud as possible as they try not to think or remember.

this is our new civilization: as men once lived in trees and caves now they live in their automobiles and on freeways as

the local news is heard again and again while we shift from first gear to second and back to first.

there's a poor fellow stalled in the fast lane ahead, hood up, he's standing against the freeway fence a newspaper over his head in the rain.

the other cars force their way around his car, pull out into the next lane in front of cars determined to shut them off.

in the lane to my right a driver is being followed by a police car with blinking red and blue lights—he surely can't be *speeding* as

suddenly the rain comes down in a giant wash and all the cars stop and

even with the windows up I can smell somebody's clutch burning.

I just hope it's not mine as

the wall of water diminishes and we go back into first gear; we are all still a long way from home as I memorize the silhouette of the car in front of me and the shape of the driver's head or what I can see of it above the headrest while his bumper sticker asks me HAVE YOU HUGGED YOUR KID TODAY?

suddenly I have the urge to scream as another wall of water comes down and the man on the radio announces that there will be a 70 percent chance of showers tomorrow night.

# spelling it out on my computer

enter, it says here.
delete, it says there.
return, it says.
shift, it says.
it says, control.
it says, tab.
it says, clear.
as the trees swing in the wind past midnight, I was once twenty-five years old
and much stronger, much braver
than I am now
known halfway around the
world.

## crazy as a fox

Xmas season.

I was a young boy and there was my mother and there we were in a department store.

my mother stopped before a glass case and I stopped too.

the case was full of toy soldiers, some with rifles and bayonets, others were mounted on fine horses, there were toy cannons and there were soldiers with machine guns.

there were even realistic trenches with barbed wire and there were airplanes and tanks.

my mother asked, "do you want some of these toy soldiers, Henry?"

"no," I said.

I knew we were poor and I didn't want her to spend the money

but I badly wanted those soldiers in their colored uniforms, their different helmets with all their stances: marching, charging, kneeling and firing. there were officers and enlisted men, there were flags, there were raised swords...

"are you sure you don't want some soldiers, Henry?"

"no, thank you," I said.

we walked on, went to another department where my mother bought me stockings and underwear. they would be wrapped in bright packages and placed under the tree. later I blamed myself and that Christmas was disappointing but when the real war finally came along, as wars will do, and I was found wanting by the army psychiatrist, then I was very pleased to recognize and accept my peculiar insanity.

# cats and you and me

the Egyptians loved the cat were often entombed with it instead of with the child and never with the dog.

and now here good people with the souls of cats are very few

yet here and now many fine cats with great style lounge about in the alleys of the universe.

about our argument tonight whatever it was about and no matter how unhappy it made us feel

remember that there is a cat somewhere adjusting to the space of itself with a calm and delightful ease. in other words magic persists with or without us no matter how we may try to destroy it

and I would destroy the last chance for myself

that this might always continue.

# they need what they need

out here near San Pedro we have one of the largest airplanes in the world which doesn't fly sitting next to one of the largest ocean liners in the world which no longer cruises and the people stand in long lines on steaming summer afternoons and pay in order to examine these lifeless monuments.

show them something useful and real like a Cézanne or a Miró and they'll just look at you and wonder.

## hello, how are you?

this fear of being what they are: dead.

at least they are not out on the street, they are careful to stay indoors, those pasty mad who sit alone before their TV sets, their lives full of canned, mutilated laughter.

their ideal neighborhood of parked cars of little green lawns of little homes the little doors that open and close as their relatives visit throughout the holidays the doors closing behind the dying who die so slowly behind the dead who are still alive in your quiet average neighborhood of winding streets of agony of confusion of horror of fear of ignorance.

a dog standing behind a fence.

a man silent at the window.

## one thirty-six a.m.

I laugh sometimes when I think about say
Céline at a typewriter
or Dostoevsky...
or Hamsun...
ordinary men with feet, ears, eyes,
ordinary men with hair on their heads
sitting there typing words
while having difficulties with life
while being puzzled almost to madness.

Dostoevsky gets up he leaves the machine to piss, comes back drinks a glass of milk and thinks about the casino and the roulette wheel.

Céline stops, gets up, walks to the window, looks out, thinks, my last patient died today, I won't have to make any more visits there.

when I saw him last he paid his doctor bill; it's those who don't pay their bills, they live on and on.

Céline walks back, sits down at the machine is still for a good two minutes then begins to type.

Hamsun stands over his machine thinking, I wonder if they are going to believe all these things I write? he sits down, begins to type.

he doesn't know what a writer's block is:
he's a prolific son-of-a-bitch damn near as magnificent as the sun.
he types away.

and I laugh
not out loud
but all up and down these walls, these
dirty yellow and blue walls
my white cat asleep on the
table
hiding his eyes from the
light.

he's not alone tonight and neither am I.

# harbor freeway south

the dead dogs of nowhere bark as you approach another traffic accident.

3 cars one standing on its grill the other 2 laying on their sides wheels turning slowly.

3 of them at rest: strange angles in the dark.

it has just happened.

I can see the still bodies inside.

these cars scattered like toys against the freeway center divider.

like spacecraft they have landed there

as you drive past. there's no ambulance yet no police cars.

the rain began 15 minutes ago.

things occur.

volcanoes are 1500 times more powerful than the first a-bomb.

the dead dogs of nowhere those dogs keep barking.

those cars there like that.

obscene. a dirty trick.

it's like somebody dying of a heart attack in a crowded elevator

everybody watching.

I finally reach my street pull into

the driveway.

park. get out.

she meets me halfway to the door.

"I don't know what to do," she says, "the stove went out."

## gamblers all

sometimes you climb out of bed in the morning and you think, I'm not going to make it, but you laugh inside remembering all the times you've felt that way, and you walk to the bathroom, do your toilet, see that face in the mirror, oh my oh my oh my, but you comb your hair anyway, get into your street clothes, feed the cats, fetch the newspaper of horror, place it on the coffee table, kiss your wife goodbye, and then you are backing the car out into life itself, like millions of others you enter the arena once more.

you are on the freeway threading through traffic now, moving both towards something and towards nothing at all as you punch

the radio on and get Mozart, which is something, and you will somehow

get through the slow days and the busy days and the dull days and the hateful days and the rare days, all both so delightful and so disappointing because

we are all so alike and all so different.

you find the turn-off, drive through the most dangerous part of town, feel momentarily wonderful as Mozart works his way into your brain and slides down along your bones and out through your shoes.

it's been a tough fight worth fighting as we all drive along betting on another day.

# guitars

luckily
we don't have many
visitors
but when we do
sometimes one will
notice my wife's
guitar
propped against
the wall
and then the
night
will turn to
ruin.

"oh, a guitar!"

"yes," my wife will say.

"do you mind?"

"of course not!" my wife will say.

the visitor will go get the guitar come back sit down and begin strumming it.

"oh, you play?"

my wife will ask.

"a little bit."

the visitor will then begin to play.

the voice and the guitar are right next to you, almost under your nose.

it is an original work, both the words and the music.

we get the best of everything.

the visitor finishes.

"that was nice!" my wife will explain.

and the visitor will begin right away to play and sing another original.

to me it is embarrassing, I don't know why.

well, first because the singing isn't all that good and second because there is something about a guitar that I just don't like.

now there is one song after another. there's no stopping the visitor, he or she has a very large repertoire.

at first I grow dizzy, then a bit nauseous.

the music continues. for what seems a lifetime.

I will finally say, "PLEASE! STOP!"

the visitor will quietly put

the guitar down on the coffee table.

"Hank!" my wife will say, "what's WRONG with you?"

"I can't stand it," I will answer.

the visitor will then be at the door. they will be leaving.

"I'm sorry," my wife will say.

"it's all right," the visitor will respond with a little smile.

then he or she will be gone.

"you," my wife will say, "you like to hurt people's feelings!"

"I hate guitars," I say, "only awful people play guitars." "we've just lost a friend!"

"so?" I say and walk gratefully up the stairs.

#### no man is an island

I use valet parking at the track, it's only 3 bucks more than preferred parking. I'm usually late and I can leave the machine there at the entrance: one needs only a reasonable and thoughtful plan to continue to pass through the fire.

the valets see me every day and know I'm a regular, a committed and trusted player. but I hold our conversations to a minimum my only acknowledgment of their skill and alacrity being the daily \$2 I slip to the one who drives up in my car as I get ready to leave usually at the time they are putting them in the gate for the last race.

now, as of late, the fellows have been asking me about the strange cigarettes on the car's dash and I inform them that they are *eral dinesh beedies* from India rolled and made from the betel leaf.

one afternoon

after having myself an excellent \$425 day the valet who brought the car nodded toward the dash and asked, "hey, mind if I try one of those?"

"not at all," I said, "and here, give some to your buddies." and I handed him a pack.

then I took a few minutes to fasten my seat belt, put on my driving glasses, adjust the side mirror, turn on the radio. and when I looked before leaving there were the 3 or 4 valets sitting on the long yellow bench, each puffing on an eral dinesh beedie. "get high, fuckers!" I yelled and as a group they all waved, laughing.

I cut right, seeking the exit, and realized that there are some small moments even more important than beating the horses.

# an animal poem

I've got two kittens who are rapidly becoming cats and at night we share the same bed—the problem being that they are early risers:
I am often awakened by paws and noses touching my face.

all they do is run, eat, sleep, shit and play but at moments they are quiet and look at me with eyes more beautiful than any human eyes I've seen.

late at night while I rest and type they'll hang around say one on the back of my chair as the other attacks my toes. we have a natural concern for one another, we each need to be assured that the others are safely there.

suddenly they'll spring into action run across the floor run through the typed sheets laying there leaving wrinkles and tiny punctures in the poems.

then they'll leap into the open carton of unanswered mail I've received from my readers and scratch furiously:

fortunately they (the cats) are housebroken.

I expect now to write any number of cat poems because of them of which this is the first.

"my god," some will say, "all Chinaski writes about are cats!"

"my god," some used to say, "all Chinaski writes about are whores!"

but these complainers will still keep buying my books: they love the way I irritate them.

this is the last poem tonight, there's one glass of wine left and both of the cats are asleep on my feet. I can feel the gentle weight of them the touch of their fur I am aware of their breathing: good things do happen and I know that as armies everywhere march out to make war the kittens at my feet know more, are more, and mean far more than that. and that moments like this can never be forgotten.

# eulogy

with old cars, especially when you buy them secondhand and drive them for many years a love affair is inevitable: you even learn to accept their little eccentricities: the leaking water pump the failing plugs the rusted throttle arm the reluctant carburetor the oily engine the dead clock the frozen speedometer and other sundry defects. you also learn all the tricks to keep the love affair alive: how to slam the glove compartment so that it will stay closed, how to slap the headlight with an open palm in order to have light, how many times to pump the gas pedal and how long to wait before touching the starter, and you overlook each burn hole in the upholstery and each spring poking through the fabric. your car has been in and out of police impounds, has been ticketed for various malfunctions: broken wipers, no turn signals, missing brake light, broken tail lights, bad

brakes, excessive exhaust and so forth but in spite of everything you knew you were in good hands, there was never an accident, the old car moved you from one place to another, faithfully —the poor man's miracle. so when that last breakdown did occur, when the valves quit, when the tired pistons cracked, or the crankshaft failed and you sold it for junk —you then had to watch it carted away hanging there from the back of the tow truck wheeled off as if it had no soul. the bald rear tires the cracked back window and the twisted license plate were the last things you saw, and it hurt as if some woman you loved very and lived with year after year had died and now you would never again know her music her magic her unbelievable fidelity.

### two writers

been bothered with skin cancer lately, been going to the doctor who burns the stuff off.

strange waiting room full of thick glossy magazines all about Art. you know, painting, sculpture, and etc.

about my 3rd or 4th trip he found out I was a writer.

and he was working on a Doctorate in the Arts or some such thing and he laid this massive *treatise* on me.

"read it, read it, let me know what you think."

"look, doc, you don't understand, I write real SIMPLE stuff."

"that's all right, read it, read it..."

so I took it home, 375 pages, single spaced.

something about how when one civilization takes over another civilization they leave their own art imprinted on it: buildings, statues, shrines and the like.

that was interesting to an extent. he had done his research, plus much personal travel.

but it wasn't exactly my kind of thing.

and that's what I told him when I brought the papers back.

"but what did you

think of it?"

"good, yeah, good."

"what's that on your ear?"

"I dunno..."

"come on in and I'll burn it off."

he did that.
I smelled burning flesh.
it seemed to take a long time.
then he was finished.

"when are you going to give me one of your books?" he asked.

"next time."

I walked out and had the girl charge it to Medicare.

"he's writing better all the time," she said.

"so am I," I said.

then I walked out of there

to my car in the parking lot, trying to stay out of the sun.

# small conversation in the afternoon with John Fante

he said, "I was working in Hollywood when Faulkner was working in Hollywood and he was the worst: he was too drunk to stand up at the end of the afternoon and so I had to help him into a taxi day after day after day.

"but when he left Hollywood, I stayed on, and while I didn't drink like that maybe I should have, I might have had the guts then to follow him and get the hell out of there."

I told him, "you write as well as Faulkner."

"you mean that?" he asked from the hospital bed, smiling.

# girl on the escalator

as I go to the escalator
a young fellow and a lovely young girl
are ahead of me.
her pants, her blouse are skintight.
as we ascend
she rests one foot on the
step above and her behind
assumes a fascinating shape.
the young man looks all
around.
he appears worried.
he looks at me.
I look
away.

no, young man, I am not looking, I am *not* looking at your girl's behind. don't worry, I respect her and I respect you. in fact, I respect everything: the flowers that grow, young women, children, all the animals, our precious complicated universe, everyone and everything.

I sense that the young man now feels better and I am glad for him. I know his problem: the girl has a mother, a father, maybe a sister or brother, and undoubtedly a bunch of unfriendly relatives and she likes to dance and flirt and she likes to go to the movies and sometimes she talks and chews gum at the same time and she enjoys really dumb TV shows and she thinks she's a budding actress and she doesn't always look so good and she has a

terrible temper and sometimes she almost goes crazy and she can talk for hours on the telephone and she wants to go to Europe some summer soon and she wants you to buy her a near-new Mercedes and she's in love with Mel Gibson and her mother is a drunk and her father is a racist and sometimes when she drinks too much she snores and she's often cold in bed and she has a guru, a guy who met Christ in the desert in 1978, and she wants to be a dancer and she's unemployed and she gets migraine headaches every time she eats sugar or cheese.

I watch him take her up the escalator, his arm protectively about her waist, thinking he's lucky, thinking he's a real special guy, thinking that nobody in the world has what he has.

and he's right, terribly terribly right, his arm around that warm bucket of intestine, bladder, kidneys, lungs, salt, sulphur, carbon dioxide and phlegm.

lotsa luck

#### one learns

one learns to endure because not to endure turns the world over to them and they are less than zero.

to endure means to simply gut-it-out and the worse the odds the more enjoyable the victory.

they say you must fight for your freedom.
I know that.
only I didn't fight the Japanese, the Italians, the Germans or the Russians for my freedom.
I fought Americans: the parents, the school yards, the bosses, the ladies of the street, the friends, the system itself.

there's no end, of course, to the fight.
new difficulties arrive like a train on time.
it may no longer be the hangover morning or the
factory assembly line
but treachery, deceit, and false hope take their
place.
I believe we are tested even as we
sleep, and often it all gets so deadly
we can only laugh it away.

to endure takes some luck, some knowledge and a reasonable sense of humor because the cold have gotten colder, the strong stronger,

the once-bold less-bold and all that's left for us is to consider the way the elephant stands silent in the forest waiting to die, the way men fail again and again and again, the way the priest forgets his prayers, the way love can turn to folly, or the way the cold rain soaks Mozart's grave. it's in spite of these and so many other things that one learns finally how to endure.

# the beginning of a brief love affair

a poem with a head like a duck and camel's feet belly of the whale snake eyes arrow in its bellybutton spider fingers rabbit skin frosted like an iceberg with an ugly smile and shining white teeth sits in this machine and grins up at me as a young man slams the lid on the trash bin outside. I like this poem as it looks up at me and I don't always like the poems as they look up at me from this machine. so, goodbye young man, get rid of your trash go on up the street hang around the taco stand try an adult bookstore seize your liberty the world may be yours but I'm not finished yet.

## melodies that echo

thinking back to the time when I was starving to death trying to become a writer (which was a long time ago) I can still remember some of the popular songs of the day: "a tisket, a tasket, a little vellow basket" "I can't give you anything but love, baby" "when the deep purple falls over sleepy garden walls" "the man I love" "anything goes" "body and soul" "I get a kick out of you!"

melodies that echo
through the long halls of memory
as you
wonder again how Faulkner ever did
it down in Mississippi,
or Ezra
after they pulled him in a cage
through the streets of
Italy,
or T.S. Eliot as he counted change in his
teller's cage,
or Lorca before he was shot down like a dog
in the road.

"my heart belongs to Daddy"
"by the light of the silvery moon"
"let's do it!"
"them there eyes"

"it's d'lovely" and "you are my shining star."

## self-inflicted wounds

he talked about Steinbeck and Thomas Wolfe and he wrote like a cross between the two of them and I lived in a hotel on Figueroa Street close to the bars and he lived further uptown in a small room and we both wanted to be writers and we'd meet at the public library, sit on the stone benches and talk about that. he showed me his short stories and he wrote well, he wrote better than I did, there was a calm and a strength in his work that mine did not have. my stories were jagged, harsh, with self-inflicted wounds.

I showed him all my work but he was more impressed with my drinking prowess and my worldly attitude

after talking a bit we would go to Clifton's Cafeteria for our only meal of the day (for less than a dollar in 1941) yet we were in great health. we lost jobs, found jobs, lost jobs. mostly we didn't work, we always envisioned we soon would be receiving regular checks from The New Yorker, The Atlantic Monthly and Harper's.

we ran with a gang of young men who didn't envision anything at all but they had a gallant lawless charm and we drank with them and fought with them and had a hell of a wild good time.

then just like that he joined the Marine Corps. "I want to prove something to myself" was what he told

me.

he did: right after boot camp the war came and in 3 months he was dead.

and I promised myself that some day I would write a novel and that I would dedicate it to him.

I have now written 5 novels, all dedicated to others.

you know, you were right, Robert Baun, when you once told me, "Bukowski, about half of what you say is bullshit."

# racetrack parking lot at the end of the day

I watch them push the crippled and the infirm in their wheelchairs on to the electric lift which carries them up into the long bus where each chair is locked down and each person has a window of their own. they are all white-skinned, like pale paint on thin cardboard; most of them are truly old; there are a number of women, a few old men, and 3 surprisingly young men 2 of whom wear neck braces that gleam in the late afternoon sun and all 3 with arms as thin as rope and hands that resemble clenched claws. the caretaker seems very kind, very understanding, he's a marvelous fat fellow with a rectangular head and he wears a broad smile which is not false. the old women are either extremely thin or overweight. most have humped backs and shoulders and wispy very straight white hair. they sit motionless, look straight ahead as the electric lift raises them on to the bus. there is no conversation; they appear calm and not embittered

by their plight. both men and women are soon loaded on to the waiting bus except for the last one, a very old man, almost skeletal, with a tiny round head, completely bald, a shining white dot against the late afternoon sky, waving a cane above his head as he is pushed shouting on to the electric lift: "WELL, THEY ROBBED OUR ASSES AGAIN, CLEANED US OUT, WE'RE A BUNCH OF SUCKERS TOTTERING ON THE EDGE OF OUR GRAVES AND WE LET THEM TAKE OUR LAST PENNY AGAIN!" as he speaks he waves the cane above his head and cracks the marvelous fat fellow who is pushing his chair, cracks the cane against the side of the caretaker's head. it's a mighty blow and the attendant staggers, grabs hard at the back of the wheelchair as the old man yells: "OH, JERRY, I'M SORRY, I'M SO SORRY, WHAT CAN I DO? WHAT CAN I DO?"

Jerry steadies himself, he is not badly hurt. it's a small concussion but within an hour he will possess a knot the size of an apricot.

"it's all right, Sandy, only
I've told you again and again, please
be careful with that damned
cane..."

Sandy is pushed on to the electric lift, it rises and he disappears into the bus's dark interior.

then Jerry climbs slowly into the bus, takes the wheel, starts up, the door closes with a hiss, the bus begins to move to the exit, and on the back of the vehicle in bold white letters on dark blue background I see the words:

HARBOR HOME OF LOVE.

# moving toward what?

river down, grapes pressed summer is over again and the lovers of most things can no longer find anything to love.

my 5 proud cats lie about the house listening to the hard cold rain

even as autumn is now gone again

as Xmas and New Years those twin plagues wait patiently again for me.

my wife now asleep in the bedroom upstairs her small child's body yearning for the good dream.

river down, grapes pressed this time is the

sad great blade

please please please let the inevitable become

finally as meaningful and as beautiful

as my 5 proud cats now sleeping and no longer listening to the hard cold rain.

# if I had failed to make the struggle

there would be no peace, no solace, no wisdom. night would follow night like a string of ants come to carry you off. in a world cluttered with the falsely famous there would be no escape. you would face a hard impossibility while chewing on your toast or cleaning your teeth or waiting for the result of a photo finish or a cancer checkup.

there would be no voice to listen to, no acceptable god. even the laughter you once enjoyed, they would have stripped even that from you and left you to be worn down finally like water upon stone.

in the beginning youth fought them off; middle age was there to contemplate the wounds; and now maturity is here to record a simple victory.

# wine pulse

I repeat it all again and I'll repeat it all forever until the magic that happens to me

happens to you.

this is another poem about 2 a.m. and how I'm still at the machine listening to the radio and smoking a good cigar. hell, I don't know, sometimes I feel just like Van Gogh or Faulkner say, Stravinsky, as I sip wine and type and smoke and there's no magic as gentle as this. some critics say I write the same things over and over. well, sometimes I do and sometimes I don't, but when I do the reason is that it feels so right, it's like making love and if you knew how good it felt you would forgive me because we both know how fickle happiness can be. so I play the fool and say again that it's 2 a.m. and that I am Cézanne Chopin Céline Chinaski embracing everything: the sweep of cigar smoke another glass of wine the beautiful young girls the criminals and the killers the lonely mad the factory workers, this machine here, the radio playing,

## **About the Author**

CHARLES BUKOWSKI is one of America's best-known contemporary writers of poetry and prose, and, many would claim, its most influential and imitated poet. He was born in Andernach, Germany, to an American soldier father and a German mother in 1920, and brought to the United States at the age of three. He was raised in Los Angeles and lived there for fifty years. He published his first story in 1944 when he was twenty-four and began writing poetry at the age of thirty-five. He died in San Pedro, California, on March 9, 1994, at the age of seventy-three, shortly after completing his last novel, *Pulp* (1994).

During his lifetime he published more than forty-five books of poetry and prose, including the novels *Post Office* (1971), *Factotum* (1975), *Women* (1978), *Ham on Rye* (1982), and *Hollywood* (1989). Among his most recent books are the posthumous editions of *What Matters Most Is How Well You Walk Through the Fire* (1999), *Open All Night: New Poems* (2000), *Beerspit Night and Cursing: The Correspondence of Charles Bukowski and Sheri Martinelli* (2001), and *Night Torn Mad with Footsteps: New Poems* (2001).

All of his books have now been published in translation in more than a dozen languages and his worldwide popularity remains undiminished. In the years to come Ecco will publish additional volumes of previously uncollected poetry and letters.

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