



The Canto Beery Tales

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with

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THE GENERAL PROLOGUE

and if you're a solid existential atheist
that would be that
but, unfortunately, in our psyches
we can't always maintain
 our strong atheistic character
we start to feel bad about
the condition of things
 the things we've done
 and the things we've said
and might have said better
and ways we might have treated Her
treated the Muse better

“No, I've treated Her well—
“I'm not open to any self-reproach.”

That we're not open to it is a sign
that we've walled ourselves off
into a position that is untenable
 because we don't really know
what's going on with others

“No. I don't know, and I don't care.”
there are tears in our voice
 when we say it
we pull everything together that we can
to keep up our self image
 which is ok, it's natural
but it isn't going to solve the problem
we can't kill the other
She isn't going to die
 we're going to go on as things

The converse is to ask
 How is this transformed?
does it evolve?
go through metamorphosis?
does it fix itself in time?
can we intervene?
can we stop it?
will it take care of itself?
crash and burn?

You're lucky She's not toting a gun yet
robbing convenience stores to get Her fix
more and more women are turning to crime
and there's less and less tolerance for crime
and more and more people going to jail
for dumb things
so, all in all,
 you don't want to embolden Her

Everyone needs lovingkindness
 the problem is
how do you get someone
 to appreciate lovingkindness?

Do you twist their arms
 & crush their fingers?
—they'll want it
without conditions.

“Exactly! She'll say, ‘You don't love me enough. You have to love me
24 hours a day,
and even if I make foolish mistakes,
you're supposed to love me.’”

Foolish mistakes are one thing,

but stupid mistakes are unforgivable.

There'll be a reckoning
not in a future lifetime, but in this one
 you finally get it—
if you're getting busted,
you're not a very good thief
 if you're taking drugs,
 the idea is to stay high
so if the bottom keeps falling out,
the thing to do is to get off drugs

You gotta face it,
 the situation is not going away
fine when you're young and strong
 and resilient
 but at some point,
there will be a reckoning
you can call it God, or whatever,
 but it will be revealed
in a very clear fashion
 that no one really gives a fuck

Like me standing in that house, drunk
 with my shirt all torn
after I tried to beat up this guy because of something he said
 about a woman
I was in love with
 and I realized that I had made
a complete asshole of myself
 and the universe fell down around me
and then I woke up later
with this same guy trying to kill me,
it was getting worse, and I suddenly said to myself,
“Hey, this isn't the way to go.

This is not the path.
This is the way towards death.”

When you see this, you say,
“I got to stop something—
I got to stop
stealing from my boss,
got to stop taking drugs,
stop cheating on my wife,
 something’s got to stop
because if it doesn’t, the next step is...

I mean the universe is pretty generous
to reveal this to you, that you can do
quantum computations to arrive at this
 consciousness...amazing, really!
that you get the message
One way or another, if you step outside
the normal pathways that are on
the brochure alarms go off—

GET A JOB
GET A HAIRCUT
GO TO SCHOOL

 you get a job, you get married, you have a kid
 and if you decide, oh no, I’m going to hell
 hell is right there, two steps away, and if
 you’d better learn to live in hell comfortably
like a Tibetan yogi, or you’ll suffer

“Really?”

That’s the key to yoga,
 being able to be

comfortable in all circumstances,
 be
able to go wherever you want, through
all the heavens and hells
 and purgatories,
through death and rebirth,
keep on truckin'
 and staying out of the way
 of falling
 rocks

“When I was six, and the Germans
were bombing London, my family
got together with another family
who lived in the same block
and went down in the cellar, and
there were bunks there, where we slept.
But when the bombing was close,
I woke up, and I was so scared that
I made a vow. And the vow was:
If I survived, I would be someone else.
And I think this has affected my whole life.
It’s hard to know how to figure that out,
but I interpret it to mean
that is why I’m here.
I kept my vow,
and this is my ego sense of being me.
Before that I was just a nuisance.
How so? A nuisance,
mainly, in my father’s perception.
And he got around my being a nuisance
by running off with another woman.

Inside and outside, the world suffers.
The President four more years

to frighten everyone and encourage them
to consume every last drop of oil they can.

Just lucky, as poets, that we aren't
that invested in being rich or powerful,
that we are witnesses. That that's been
our role from a very early time.

We've had our respective covers
a bookseller and a professor
and we raised our families
and didn't get all that attached to stuff.
You didn't want to be a senator
or the CEO of a corporation, did you?

No.

Or want to be president of your university?

No.

No, you just wanted to write another book.

Right.

Have the time to write to write another
scathing poem on the nature of these fucks
just like every poet before you.

But you had to keep that quiet.

“It's funnier if it's kept quiet.”

It's subversive is what it is. It's what we do.

That's our job description

in the times we live in.

And it's humorous that we can.

And we almost always do, because
no one's paying much attention.

They'll pay attention

in a couple hundred years.

Then, they say, “Oh, look, here,
what they were saying!”

And that’s what’s funny about it,
that it doesn’t go away,
that it’s right there in their faces.

There are people, like Dana Gioia,
and there always will be,
who say we should read this in school
and quit worrying about whether Darwin
was right or not. That we should read
Shakespeare and Chaucer.

Besides, I can’t imagine
the paleozoölogical record will disappear
just because Bishop Usher determined
God created the Earth in 4004 BCE.

So, let’s get to work on our epic.
We’ll call it *The Canto Beery Tales*,
and it’ll be the 4th part to our *100 Cantos*.
A group of tourists in a coach are
on their way from visiting the martyr’s
shrine at Canterbury Cathedral to
Stratford-on-Avon to see *Twelfth Night*.
Maybe there has been a terrorist scare
at Heathrow Airport,
and the airport is closed,
and the pilgrims need to lay over.

No, too much like history.
They just need to tell their stories.

Ok, they tell stories.
They’ll be introduced by the Tour Guide,
who is like the Host, and each pilgrim

will have a prologue, so we can get
some background on them.
And some of the stories
will have stories within the stories,
and some will be moral tales
and some will not be moral tales.
Our task: to keep Chaucer alive.
Darwin will just have to fend for himself.
Life is a pilgrimage.

THE SOLDIER'S PROLOGUE

Back f/Baghdad

a traveler f/an Antique Land

a Warrior/Pacifist

Achilles /Aesculapius

Chiron/Prometheus

Savior, Man, Titan

Gentle knight

fought fifteen mortal battles

decorated, Bronze Star

and two Purple Hearts,

3 times in hand to hand combat

and each time killed his man

Travels with his son,
who is studying at University
Forestry

Our knight fought in
The Battle of the Trees—
defended the timber line
against a flank attack

doesn't want his son
to go to war
born, 1941, in Washington,
mother killed by Japanese balloon bomb
near Hanford Nuclear Plant,
at the beginning of WW II
married, 1960, draft 2 D, student/married,
feels he should serve his country,
divorced, 1963

Votes on the right,
the Party of God and the Bible
conflicted around secular humanism,
doesn't want Darwin's *Origin of the Species*
and Einstein's *Special Theory of Relativity*
added to the Bible, inserted before
The Book of Revelations
where it says nothing can be added
or subtracted

Blames the failure of the Democrats
on the Queers, not the Greens,
the fury of the Führer
the fragmentation of the psyche
the consolidation of wealth

the monopoly of media

Easy targets to machine-gun

“Ducks on a pond”

Says,

“I’m not happy about this nasty little war
with Civilization,
even if you call it a Holy War

“Compassionate conservatism”,
he says, “what’s that?”

They invented it.

“What is it?”

Something mystical
like trickle-down economics

“Well, when you dismiss your poets
in time of war, you are dismissing
your first line of defense—
an old Bardic tradition. Now sire,
than wol I tell you forth my tale.”

And so, begins the game.

THE SOLDIER’S TALE

My tale is of a fallen comrade
Sgt. Joe Saviers (b. 1950 d.2002)

I invoke Duncan,
our old king
skull bowl memorial
in the charnel grounds
life against death—
a dreadful dream

Tashi prayd over your ashes, naked
on her moon time
menstrual minstrel mistress
her pussy
which you so loved—
speaking to your mind stream

you dead, gone
busted in your beard
o, horror

is issuing from the brain shining upon us ...

Tashi phoned me and asked if I would drive with her to Montrose, Colorado, and pick up Joe's truck and horse trailer, inventory things in his storage locker, then drive to Joe's ranch in Telluride to see if the house could be put on the market as a completed shell, check with the contractor, check with the lawyer, check with the realtor, stay in Montrose with Jack, at his brother's, deal with the mortician, where Joe's brother, Pierre, had left the truck and trailer after freaking out about hearing Joe willed everything to Tashi, had loaded the truck with stuff and left it with this dude who'd cremated Joe, who might be difficult to deal with, him being a debarred lawyer and used car salesman as well as a mortician, who might be holding the truck ransom for storage fees, hmmm, obstacles, Joe had been having problems with the crew working on the house, trouble getting

his construction loan, all kinds of pressure, Tashi said she was afraid to live in a tent near a gang of ex-cons with Joe driving them hard to get the work done, and so his girl had gone back to Point Reyes Station, California, and Joe flew to Venezuela, where he had begun to drink, fallen off the wagon and got crushed under the wheels, and would I drive with her in a rented car and sort out this stuff

“Sure, why not?”

Tashi and I take the lonely highway
which is a lot of desert to cross
heading for a 40-acre spread
near Telluride, land between
the ranch of a movie star and that
of a retired four-star general

there's property, and then
there's land

Joe left this world
left a home half-built
a four-wheel drive truck
a four-horse horse trailer
three horses
and debts
spread to the ten directions

left half-finished yet, somehow

left
right

on time

Pony Expresso Deli

on the old Pony Express Trail

espresso coffee
in every small town in America, now

driving a diesel and a horse trailer
Heehaw!

the open sky— a part of me
turning

 never returning,
always rising
Joe died of hyperthermia, found him laid out in his tent,
surrounded by knives, knives stuck in the tent posts, in the ground,
knives everywhere— Joe stabbing demons

the autopsy said advanced stages
of cirrhosis, liver failure aggravated by alcohol, no knowing

And could it be suicide?
a reckless act, a hopeless soul
headed to ultimate torment

But what do we know?
A few pieces of the puzzle
fragments— mostly nothing

ignorant of your hopes and fears
your wishes
your epiphanies

we're on a longitude
on our way to a latitude
on our way to a kill box
flying around with hot ammo

intending to kill everything
or
 we're rowing across a lake
getting nowhere fast
talking
about the causes of happiness

this is where
my mind stalls— there's a gulf
a war in all of us

in the ticking present— nothing
of consequence

don't get attached, Joe
seeing us going through your stuff

no putting the petals
back on the stem
now the flower
is torn
your photo album—
a photo of Hem on a fishing boat
a photo of Coop in hunting gear
photos of The Stones stoned
you in bell bottoms ice skating
with Sun Valley snow bunnies

you laughing
your gentle, giving, forgiving laugh
your impish irreverence
your healing side, then
your quirky switch to macho
your 30.06 in the gun rack
your knives and bear skins and drums

hint only partially at who you were

I mourn the loss of my friend
the years taken
the stories untold
the

I mourn the loss of my friend

I bless him

I pray he's in a good place

I

I mourn the loss of my friend

his spirit among the shades

God is crazy

God is a castrati

God is a blind eye wreaking havoc
on beauty

Violence, violate, vile

My friend is dead, ded

daid, died, done

gone BEYOND

both virtues and faults

here— I'm sure

this is what you want

to be remembered for—

walking down Fall Street

you pick up a piece of dog poop

and say,

“Look what I almost stepped in!”

your shrink didn't know
your family and friends didn't know
and even if we did

what could we do about it?
you kept drinking
and drinking and drinking

and now I say prayers
and two rainbows appear
in my eyes

I tried to kill the rose
creeping into the tower
but it came back

with vengeance
from your heart to
my heart

of you, part
to part, of me
now, healing

we are rampages of feeling
heaps of hopes and fears
tangled in thought webs

top, bottom
and at the edge
of beyond

suns burn in you

THE NURSE'S PROLOGUE

She was remembering how the mists rolled off the hills of St. Thomas and St. Martin and settled into the Valley of the Stour, where she could see the great towers of Canterbury Cathedral reach towards the sky.

The Nurse, Miss Zöe Dunstan, had read *The Confessions* by Saint Augustine when she was a freshman at university, and now she was able to see where the great man had been the first Archbishop.

The story goes that Pope Gregory had sent St. Augustine to England in the sixth century because Gregory had seen "Angle" slaves for sale in the city market in Rome and had said, "not Angles but Angels," and he believed these were truly a fit people to be converted to Christianity.

On her visit, the Nurse had learned that The Cathedral is linked to the lives of many great figures in history, and that among these was a distant relative of hers, Saint Dunstan. She guessed she was not directly related, but she was pretty sure there was a connection. Her heritage was Scots-German on one side and Irish-English on the other, so in all likelihood this Saint was in her father's family tree.

Our Miss Dunstan's traveling companion was her lesbian lover Jane Farr, a school chum of Zöe's at the University of California at Berkeley. Miss Farr had graduated with a degree in English and had become a real estate saleswoman, and Miss Dunstan had taken a degree in Biology and gone on to become a nurse. But what the two shared was that they were both short story writers in their spare time. As they sat together and chatted,

Miss Farr asked her friend to read her a story from her recently published collection.

THE NURSES TALE

“This is one that was originally published in *The Kickass Review*,” said the Nurse. I think it takes its name from *The Kirkus*, which is a much more somber review. Do you know that review?” But her friend didn’t respond, so Miss Dunstan launched into her story:

Phoebe likes to lie on her stomach and put her ear to the heater vent. Her brother’s room is downstairs, and their heater vents must be connected, because when she does this, she can hear everything that goes on in his room. Most of the time there isn’t much, just some mysterious bumps and thumps, maybe a cough, or a sharp whistle. Mark can whistle through his two front teeth in a way that makes Phoebe envious. He takes great pleasure in this ability, and will do it spontaneously, even when he thinks no one is listening. Mark is sixteen and so handsome that everyone says so. Possibly in response to so much positive feedback, Mark spends a good deal of time lifting weights, whistling through his two front teeth, and not doing his homework, which is why Phoebe’s mother is always saying that Mark’s grades are *abominable*. Phoebe, who is only nine, had to look this word up in her pocket dictionary, which she loves because it is so small, and she loves anything much more if it is smaller than it ought to be. When Mark lifts weights, they make a sharp thumping noise that Phoebe can hear through the heater vent. Whenever she hears this sound, she thinks of the word *abominable*, and then she thinks, *detestable or loathsome*.

Sometimes, Mark does more exciting things in his room than whistle, lift weights, or thump and bump mysteriously, and these are the things that

really hold Phoebe's attention and keep her there, ear pressed up against the cold metal of the vent, well past the time in which it has become uncomfortable. Sometimes, for instance, Mark has girls in his room, which is something he can only do when their mother isn't home, and he is meant to be babysitting Phoebe. Then interesting things begin to happen. First, Mark tells Phoebe to get lost and leave him, and whoever the girl is, alone. Mark has a lot of girlfriends, so many that Phoebe is unable to tell them apart. They all look pretty much the same, and none of them is ever very nice, so Phoebe doesn't pay them much attention. When Mark tells Phoebe to get lost, she pretends to be miffed. She kicks at the side of the couch as she stalks off to her room, or else says something contrary like, "Fine, whatever," just so that her displeasure will seem more authentic. Not that Mark notices. As soon as he has a girl over, he only has *one* thing on his mind. Phoebe has no idea what that *one* thing is, but she knows it must be something pretty stupid, because her mother says this to Mark a lot when she is angry, "You only have *one* thing on your mind with those girls." She'll say this, and then she will roll her eyes and look disgusted, the same way she does when she discovers that their cat, Winkers, has pooped in the corner of the living room again, behind the couch.

When Mark is in his room with a girl, there is so much to hear. First of all there is lots of giggling, and sometimes the girl will say something like, "Oh, Mark," or "We shouldn't." Then there will be lots of loud breathing, like the way Phoebe's mom sounds when she is cleaning the entire house and not happy about it. Sometimes Phoebe wonders if this is what Mark and his girls are doing in there, cleaning, but that doesn't make much sense. Phoebe has gone downstairs and peaked into Mark's room after one of his girls leaves and, if anything, it looks even worse then before. When things are really exciting, Mark and his girl will get into a fight. Phoebe doesn't usually like fighting, it reminds her too much of how her mom and grandpa fight at holidays, and how their angry words always make her sick to her stomach. But with Mark she doesn't feel this way, because she doesn't care about the girls, and she doesn't care too much about Mark either.

Today he has a red-haired girl in there who has freckles, and a pretty

little nose that makes Phoebe feel ugly and envious. This is the red haired girl's third time over, and Mark has been acting strange. Phoebe is thinking about the things that seem odd about today, and she decides to make a list of everything important so far, just in case she plays Private Eye Detective later on. She recently finished reading *Harriet the Spy*, and is inspired by the idea of clues and unusual circumstances. She gets her special pink pad of paper from her desk drawer. There are ballet slippers in the corner of each page, and the pad has a matching pink pencil with a ballet slipper eraser that smells just slightly of bubble gum. Phoebe sits cross-legged on her dingy shag carpet throw, next to the heater vent, and begins her list:

1. Mom goes to play tennis with Bob, her new friend from her office, who has bad breath.

2. Mark waits until Mom's car pulls out of the driveway and then he calls one of his girls.

3. His girl comes over.

4. Surprise. It's the same girls as two days ago, and two days before that. The one with the nose that I wish I had instead of my big, ugly honker.

5. Mark says, "Phoebe, me and Alex have a science project to work on. Go in your room and if you're good, I'll give you a Snickers bar when we're done."

6. Usually Mark says, "Get lost." And never offers me anything.

7. He has never given me a Snickers bar before.

8. But he does know I like them.

9. The girl with the nose I should have been born with smiles at me and says, "Aren't you a cutie."

10. I know she's lying, but still, Mark's girls never talk to me or say nice things.

11. Mark does not disagree with her.

Phoebe pauses in her efforts, shakes her hand to get rid of a real or imagined writer's cramp, and then reviews her work. Satisfied, she lies down on her stomach and applies her ear to the heater vent. The late afternoon sun is streaming through her window and across her back, and Phoebe feels a quiet calm slide through her body, a complete contentment like she hasn't felt since her father ran away with that lady that works at

the dentist office, and her mother stopped smiling, and started saying things like, “that slut,” “bitch home-wrecker,” and “fucking-whore” whenever she was on the phone, regardless of whether or not Phoebe was in the room. Before her father moved out, Phoebe could not recall her mother ever saying things like this, and it gives her that same empty, sick feeling she gets when she is around her mom and grandpa fighting. But now she feels good, and calm, and warm, and excited. Phoebe listens.

“No, really Mark, I’m not kidding.” The red-haired girl is saying this.

“Come on, Alex. It’s fine. Just relax. It won’t hurt. I promise.” Phoebe can hear Mark, his voice muffled but cajoling, like when he’s trying to convince his mother to let him go somewhere he probably shouldn’t. When Mark uses this voice, their mother almost always says, yes.

“No, Mark. That’s enough, I mean it!”

Phoebe wishes she could see into the room. She even puts her eyes to the vent and peers in, though she knows there isn’t any use. There is only darkness down there.

“Come on, Alex. Don’t you want to?” Mark’s voice sounds a little desperate now, and Phoebe begins to hope that whatever is it Mark wants to get, he doesn’t get it, just so he will know what it feels like. As far as Phoebe can tell, Mark always gets what he wants.

“Fuck you, Mark.” Alex says, and there there’s the sound of scuffling, like maybe they are wrestling. Then there is a solid smack noise, which Phoebe knows is the sound of a punch because she has seen the boys fighting at school, and the sound of a punch is very punch-like and horrible.

Phoebe cringes, and her stomach tightens, and then she hears a moan that is unmistakably her brother’s, followed by, “Are you crazy? Jesus Christ, I think you gave me a black eye.”

“Well, learn some respect, asshole. I’m going home. You can fuck yourself.”

Phoebe is awash with relief now that she knows it is Mark who has been hit, and not the other way around. She grabs her list and writes:

12. Mark gets punched, don’t know why, but I’m sure he deserved it.

Then she grabs her special pad and pencil and rushes out of her room and down the stairs. She reaches the front door just in time to unbolt the

lock and pull the door open for the red-haired girl.

“I love your nose.” Phoebe blurts.

“Thanks.” The girl says, and she touches it, as if she had forgotten that she had one. “You are a much nicer person than your brother.” And then she’s out the door, and gone, in a rush of drug store perfume, a small-handled purse swinging at her side.

Phoebe waits until the red-haired girl is gone, then she sits down in the hall and writes:

13. I am a much nicer person than my brother.

And though this doesn’t seem like the solution to a puzzle, exactly, it does make her feel much happier, so she decides, for now, she will just leave it at that.

THE REAL ESTATE LADY’S PROLOGUE

“Very funny, Zöe, you nailed your characters. I love it,” said The Real Estate Lady to her friend.

Miss Farr really wanted to be a full-time writer, but she knew it was economically infeasible, so she had gotten a license to sell real estate instead. She lived in the Berkeley hills with her two boys and her lover, Zöe, in an A-frame she had been awarded in her divorce settlement. She liked houses. She read books on architecture in the library and focused on the basics: mounds, fences, hearths, roofs. She developed a spiel on the variations of suburban ranch-style homes. Swiss chalet, Spanish adobe,

Japanese, Mediterranean and variations of Classic Greek. She believed the dictum:

*Architecture is something to get into
out of the rain, when you're gardening.*

Balloon construction: farmhouse is the base, East coast, Cape Cod style, Midwestern sod houses, better to be underground during a tornado, West coast mill towns, more wood, slabs of wood, 2x4s bend better in an earthquake.

Miss Farr has an environmental gripe, considers holding people's land in trust is unconstitutional, lands as farms, lands as utopian, country folk would like to sell their farms and retire, subdivide, while others would like to extend their pasture, hunt, have a survivalist lifestyle, live on the last place on earth. She mused, *Last place on Earth that's untouched by civilization: go by plane, boat, horse, then on by foot.*

The Real Estate Lady's musing was interrupted by her friend: "Your turn," said Miss Dunstan, "what do you have up your sleeve?"

THE REAL ESTATE LADY'S TALE

"This one is about our neighbors, the ones at home." And she read in a soft voice:

The little girls from next door are hiding in my yard again. Their names are Jennifer and Lisa, and they both have very long hair and that pallid, bluish complexion of the kind children get, no matter what their skin tone, when they exist on a diet consisting mainly of McDonald's Happy Meals and Lucky Charms. I don't mind that they play in my yard without asking because, for one, I know the real reason they are over here is because they are hoping that the boys are home and that, if they make enough noise, the boys will come out, investigate, and possibly play. Though,

technically, I could be uptight about it because the youngest one, Jennifer, has forbidden the boys to utilize the chicken coop which is directly between our two properties, as well as banning them from playing on their tree, though they can often be found playing on ours. But I have enough going on in my life without getting involved in the politics of the girls next door who like to play with my kids but aren't always very nice, and so I leave them alone, making sure only that the doors are shut, because the boys are not home, and the girls have an irritating habit of running in unannounced.

The boys don't seem to care about the girls one way or the other, an attitude that I neither encourage nor discourage, because their mother is a Christian and a little bit nutty. I have learned enough in my years as a parent to know that this is one of the many parental combinations best kept at an arm's length, especially when you're queer and smoke pot. She yells at her girls, though not consistently, with a marked edge of hysteria and volume that, when it happens, we, meaning myself, my girlfriend, and the boys, will stop what we're doing, eyes wide, and listen with the sort of twisted dread and fascination that comes when secretly feeding off the instability of others.

My other neighbor, two houses down, asked me about it once. The yelling. As if I might have some bright idea about what to do about it, the proximity of our yards possibly providing me with some illumination into the situation, when clearly there is nothing to be done. This neighbor is one half of a lesbian couple, both of them therapists, and so I try and say the right thing because I would like for them to approve of me and because therapists, as a general rule, make me a little bit nervous. As if my every utterance could be seen as proof of my dysfunction. I tried to console her by pointing out that if we lived in Brooklyn or Queens, New York, people screaming at their children would be so commonplace we would hardly notice, in fact, we would probably be screaming at ours too, and that it is proof of our placid environment that a hysterical mother is such an anomaly.

This seemed to console her somewhat, and we then agreed that the screaming mother is under a lot of stress. Having suffered a tragedy. Her husband fell from a roof some fifty feet in the air and almost died, saved

by the miracles of science, but now terrifically brain damaged. Becoming, through his own misfortune, the example that parents up and down Montgomery Road now use to deter their children from careless tree-climbing.

“Have you seen him?” My lesbian therapist neighbor asks me, her voice lowered. “Don’t they ever take him outside?”

“I don’t think so,” I whisper back, glad that we have found something to talk about that doesn’t involve anything about myself, “He never comes out.”

As I walk back to my house I admonish myself for not being more helpful to my neighbor who is a little bit nutty, now that I have been reminded that she is under a lot of stress. I should be reaching out to the girls perhaps or offering my services as a baby-sitter, but then I walk past their driveway and see that the mother has put a KLOVE Christian Rock sticker on the back of her mini-van, and I think better of it. So easily deterred from my good intentions. All it takes is a symbol, a raised voice, dietary negligence, and our differences are set, immobile. What signs, I wonder, does my neighbor see when she looks at me, that cause her to feel the same?

She heard this on the radio: “Don’t pay any attention to women. They don’t know what’s happening.” She couldn’t believe this was her President speaking. And her reply, “Well, pardon me, Mister President, but kiss my ass!”

THE TOUR GUIDE’S PROLOGUE

Our guide sat alone. Usually an out-going type of man, he was now a study in deep reflection.

He thought back on Canterbury. Not a large city, and the sheer bulk of the Cathedral seemed out of proportion to its surroundings. The houses around the great building seemed to snuggle for comfort like kittens

around a mother cat. And this made him aware of his present charges.

Our guide, whose name was Mr. Odo, had instructed the passengers in the coach in which they were now traveling that the journey would be long and that to keep one another company they should entertain themselves by telling tales.

And now, it was his turn.

THE TOUR GUIDE'S TALE

Some years ago, on an excursion around London, a name from the passenger list caught my eye: Isabella Turnkey. I had known some Turnkeys when I was farming in the west of England, aristocratic types. She was politely interested when I spoke to her; when we had our day in London, I asked her where she was going to, and when she replied, "Regent Park Zoo", I asked her if she would mind sharing the afternoon with me. "Well," she replied, "only if you will go at my pace, for I have a program of the animals I wish to view." I found this intriguing, and gladly agreed to obey her rules, which fascinated me.

And thus, after an early lunch, we began our tour. There were fake rocks and bars to keep us from entering *The Bears Lair*, as I coined it, punning on the eating place at the university in Berkeley. I was trying to find out more about this beautiful woman with the disdainful look. But she showed no recognition. Instead, she said, flatly, "All these animals will have to go. Just look at all the space they're taking up," she muttered of the various brown bears. "And they don't taste that good. No, they'll have to go."

She turned and walked off, and I followed her. Next we stood before cages that held monkeys, the kind who are small, with long, prehensile tails. "The zookeeper told me these ones are always doin' it," she said. "No point in keeping these around. If only we could train them."

"To do what?" I asked her.

“It has been done with some in their native land,” she told me. “Retrievers of the tree tops. But they’re dicey. Bring some, lose some. But if they only could be properly trained.”

As we walked on through this great zoo in London, my companion kept up a running commentary on those imprisoned there, which always held my interest by the novelty of her view, but which, due to the crowds of humans I could not always recall or even hear. She often muttered, just below the level of my hearing, but from time to time would turn to me, and smile. I do remember much of that afternoon, however. Ostriches?

“I’ve eaten one,” she told me. “Tasteless. And when you look at the size of the bird, only a small portion is decently edible. And half-a-dozen of them take up as much surface-space as a dozen steer.” She was equally short with warthogs. “Too little edible meat for the size and the energy make this beast a relatively non-producer.” My companion was positively phobic when it came to large critters such as elephants, hippos, and rhinos. “As for the magical properties of the rhino’s horn, strange that those who believe in these are still stuck in the slums.”

Most of the tropics were slums to her. Central Africa was what she hated most of all. “Nothing stays still there,” she told me. “Imagine. 24 million ants burrowing through the jungle, stripping everything bare. Who needs them? The Devil, that’s who. And spiders—how would you like a big leaf to blow down on you in the jungle with 250 poisonous spiders on it? Not much left of the Great White Hunter after that!”

She was making my skin crawl. I was about to suggest we find a convenient bench where we could reflect at our civilized leisure upon what we had seen thus far. But she was too wound up to listen or respond. She went on, “No civilization can make its peace with the insects. They outnumber us fifty to one, The Devil made them so fertile, and he will never cease. Every life-form that is evil must be exterminated if we are ever to build Heaven on Earth!”

Now at last she was silent, and we both stood silent, pondering the task. When I lifted my eyes to her face, I found it transmogrified; relaxed and smiling, her lovely eyes met mine. “I live only three blocks from here,” she told me, “Will you escort me home? Too many undesirables walk these streets, drawn to the zoo.”

I said I would be glad to and took her hand. But she wanted to be closer and put her arm through mine. She was warm, astoundingly so, for it had been a cool day. Her hand was in mine; I pressed it. The fervor of her responding pressure was clear. “Perhaps you feel as I do, tired of walking, but alive in all your senses? How good a cool drink would taste right now!

We soon arrived at her door; she gestured to me to rest on a wide couch and went to the kitchen to prepare a drink for each of us. Only after we had taken the first sip did she put her glass down and begin to kiss me. Once we were fucking, my mind was seized by a kind of reefer madness. There is no way I can reassemble my feelings—only that they were tropical: thick, swarming, multi-textured, warm shade shot through with sudden hot, dazzling shafts. We fucked a long time. When I came, I wasn’t sure that she had. I asked, “How was that for you?” She smiled sweetly. “Pretty fine, for a first time,” she replied. Then she looked at the clock, and gasped, “My husband will be home any time now! You must be of here right now! Thank you so much for your attention. Till tomorrow!” And she gave me a quick kiss.

Out the front door I went, down the steps, and thus into the anonymity of the streets. But what was this? A muffled figure of large proportions, who walked with a kind of limp, passed me by, but not without hesitation at first, and drawing in his breath. Then he resumed his walk, climbed the steps to my lover’s home, and was greeted by her just inside the door, which for that moment stayed half-open. Glancing back, I saw my lover embracing—but what? A lopsided creature whose neck was ringed with ginger fur.

THE DOCTOR’S PROLOGUE

The doctor was a morose man, but he was also garrulous and a man of many eccentric ideas. As we turn to him, he is in conversation with the

Lawyer but only snippets can at first be picked up:

“If everyone lived to be 133, they’d shrink down
to a handful of matter...”

“Frankenstein released after a bit of stem cell research goes haywire...”

“The Year of Washing Hands...”

“Let the black man suffer;
he’s less than human...”

“If I was young again,
I’d study with the Chödpas...”

As we move closer, you can distinctly hear the Lawyer say to the Doctor, “I thought it rather witty what Dr. Bethenue said, while working on the battlefield in Mao’s Eighth Army: ‘It’s not the cough you cough that carries you off, it’s the coffin they carry you off in.’”

“Well put,” exclaimed the Doctor, “all stories should end with that punch line. They should begin with ‘On a dark and stormy night’ and they should have one sentence that always occurs in the middle, so you know when you’re halfway.”

He began his tale, but it did not start with “On a dark and stormy night.”

THE DOCTOR’S TALE

At eighteen, the British Army, Queen’s Westminster Rifles, swallowed up my dad, and then Death swallowed him. My grandmother, by then a

widow, got this news on Christmas Eve. This later turned out to be wrong. The confusion following a battle in some part of France caused one pale English boy to be mistaken for an even paler one. Some days later, a note from the War Office: “We regret to inform you that due to a mistake, your son is not as previously reported, dead. He was shot in the knee and will be returned to England shortly. Sincerely, etc., etc.”

To England, and to hospital: six weeks, two more of convalescence, then, riding top deck on a roofless omnibus, glorying in London’s sights, he broke down, began to weep; my mother told me once, despite her desperate attempts to stop him, “What did I know about the war?” she said. “What Hell he’d been put through? No one knew. I was embarrassed. I thought, “What a coward.”

Actually, Dad had seen his share of mudholes, dugouts and trenches flooded to knee-level; and there you stood waiting for the shell with your name on it. And then, one day, mustard gas filled his trench and filled him, too. Behind the lines, he got better, slowly. And he again became fit to fight and was sent back to the trenches to wait to be killed.

Mum and I had this conversation in 1948, atop a London bus. We were coming from a showing of Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, and were together, moved and silent. Then Mum said, “That’s right. When there’s a war, let the leading politicians of both nations meet in a field and fight it out.”

I thought back over the last decade, and I thought, no, it wouldn’t have worked. But when Korea needed me to help them bifurcate, I thought, “This danger doesn’t feel pressing: I’ll go work on a farm.” For if the farmer claimed you were essential to his work, you were excused from the draft. I found a farmer up in Derbyshire who figured I’d be cheap enough to outweigh the errors I’d inevitably make, so he promptly hired me.

I ate meals with them, was given my own room to sleep in, and evenings, I talked with the family—the Kays—or read, books found in the Higham village library. People at one end of the village said “hig-um” and people at the other end said “hi-am.”

Morning came early to the Kays' small farm. In summer, when I started there, I'd bring the cattle in and milk them—happily, Mr. Kay had purchased machines to milk them—I'd give them hay or cattle-cake, then take them out to graze, and then remove my boots and go into the house for a big breakfast. I can't remember half the jobs I did in Kaytown, but I remember breakfasts eaten there, the bacon, eggs and toastpiles; I began to put weight on my skinny bones, and the work my body had to do grew muscles, too. Ah, but nor can I forget the cows, so mild and patient around me, so warm in the cold mornings, so seldom bad-tempered, though I got a kick or three.

Visitors were few: the older man who owned the farm next door would always exchange comments on the weather with me, sometimes observations on the cows, his or ours. Another farmer-neighbor, a woman who was a Justice of the Peace, gave me her polite "Good Day" and once, Jim Scott, a friend of mine from Wokingham, who had, like me, left London to study farming somewhere in D.H. Lawrence country, once came some score of miles to check me out. We compared notes, naturally. I told him I like the solitude. "You shut yourself away from pain," he said.

Maybe so. I've a vivid memory of one night in the Blitz, when I was six. The German planes, as usual, nearby or overhead, stick upon stick of bombs falling and exploding, each one closer than the last, until one of these explosions seemed headed straight for us, and in my terror, all around us, huddled in the basement, I swore this: I cared so deeply, that I could not care. This was the birth of my double vision in my psychic life. So, well-spoken, Jim.

Dr. Bromige put in: "I was in Highgate in a bomb shelter, and it was very nice. All my neighbors were there, and most of them survived. Fortunately, I didn't know the ones that didn't."

THE DENTIST'S PROLOGUE

He's a doctor, too, a Tooth Doctor, and he's just had a radiation treatment for prostate cancer, and he's also just found out psa blood tests can be unreliable.

“At base, I prefer curious people to incurious people,” replied the Professor, whose name was Edmund Alphege. “I visited the Cathedral when I was a boy of ten. It's like déjà vu, and even though the Doctors of the Church and the Martyrdom of Beckett instills faith, it's still hard for me to understand why we're here. The most compelling explanation is that we are here by accident.

Accident—I mean we can't explain it. If we could, we would. No rhyme or reason for us being here. We have not found a planet with anything like us on it. There's so much balance in Life, so much design. *Divine* and *design* rhyme, but what to make of it?

All we know is that it works. When the sun goes down, I move over here to this chair on this side of the coach so I can have ten more minutes of warmth.

I look out the window, and it seems wonderful that there are hills covered with grass and trees and flowers. Makes you believe there must be a God. But no sooner does everyone believe in God, than you have to kill everyone who doesn't believe in God, and that does not seem just. That's an important word, *just*. The objection to killing everyone who doesn't believe in God is that killing them just doesn't seem just.

There should be more laws that restrain human behavior, keep mad people off the street, keep them from doing unspeakable things. So, we've got criminal laws, which cover a lot. But we didn't have a law to stop Schickelgrüber from calling the heathens criminal or insane and sending them to the camps. He thought he was “bringing the light.”

All any of us have known is darkness alternating with light. Light is warmer; you can see yourself moving around. I don't know truth from the cinema when it comes to God. Movie directors and evangelicals both seem demented when it comes to what they believe. The human being is certainly capable of exotic beliefs.

No matter, I have my own troubles.

THE DENTIST'S TALE

I'd like to title my tale *Down on the Ol' Seed Implantation*, or better yet, *My Favorite Screw Removal*. Here goes:

After having the radioactive seed implantation, I was feeling bruised and glowing and needed healing vibes from everyone, but now, after some weeks, I feel less oppressed having cancer. I'm released from the constant deliberation of the should I-shouldn't I wait and the games going on in my head. Oh, the operation was no worse than a kick in the groin with a steel-toed boot; I hardly noticed; and yesterday, I went down to my bone doc and had him remove the pins from my right ankle that held the bones together after breaking both legs.

Funny thing, he gave me a few local anesthetic shots around the ankle, but then he couldn't find his screwdriver. I told him it would be ironic if I had to go out to my car and get my Philips head screwdriver. He said his screwdriver was special but that a small Allen wrench would do, and he finally borrowed his office partner's instrument and went to work. Got them right out of there, and I couldn't feel anything, although the idea of little screws being screwed out of my ankle made me twitchy. Just to pass the time while they worked, I got on a passing cloud shaped like a bird and flew to Anselm's perfect island. The nurse gave me a running count: "There's number 2; one more to go. (Squit, squit, squit sounds—very small threads, squiddle, squit, ik.) "Whoa, I felt that one, but keep going."

There was not much of an incision, so once the screws were removed, I hardly cared about the radioactive seeds. I did pass a seed. Must've made it down a little passageway in the prostate. Caught it in my handy radioactive seed screen and put it in my personal lead-lined pillbox. Very Doctor Tellerish. Went to the urologist, who told me I was doing fine, I

had a list of questions. Are the rivets in my jeans picking up radioactivity? No. Told him that I showed the seed I passed to a friend, will that hurt them? No. I got more radioactivity with the X-ray when I got my pins removed. I told them I was becoming very concerned about all this radioactivity, so they covered me with a lead jacket. Am I being overly cautious? Yes? How many times did you insert the needle with the seeds? About 2 dozen. How many seeds did you plant? Over 100. Did you put some extras around the tumor? 2 or 3. Are the effects of the hormone treatment going to conflict with the radioactivity as it relates to getting an accurate psa reading? Probably. Anything else? Oh, yes, I wasn't sure exactly what a curie was? I checked out what a curie was, it is a unit of radiation determined by disintegration, 3.7×10 to the tenth power per second, named after Madame Curie, one of my heroines, I say, did you ever see that movie where she and her husband make a vat of radioactive soup and distill the radium until they have a lump that glows in the dark?

"No," said the doctor, "I don't remember seeing that movie; however, I asked Dr. Schickelgrüber from oncology how much a curie was."

"You mean that little guy with the mustache?" I asked.

"Right, and he said that a curie is a lot, that we use microcuries, small amounts that are decaying fast, but I'm sure you knew that, Mr. Alphege," he said in a patronizing tone, "you have such an analytical mind."

"I saw that film," said the guide. "Walter Pidgeon and Greer Garson were both nominated for Academy Awards, and Aldous Huxley wrote the screenplay. I can still see that glowing lump of radium."

THE LAWYER'S PROLOGUE

There was a talker on the coach, who sat toward the front, though often with his neck cranked so far round as to give a careless glance the

impression that he had his head on backwards. And even though he said he was a lawyer he gave, at times, the impression that he was a used-car salesman. Now, he began to shout that the tale he had to tell had to do with the Bible's Ten Commandments.

I think he was a little drunk, for he was, for a lawyer, at times a tad indiscreet. "Take the Ten Commandments," he shouted through the coach and passing farmyard. "Aye, as they are hereabouts, and three sheepcotes away!"

Mr. Tomlimson was not all that loud, but he had an insinuating, persistently crackling tone to his voice. It made me admire the man for having chosen the right job for his voice, a quality he shared, after all with such well-known orators as Winston Churchill, Josef Stalin and Ronald Reagan. Unlike Hitler, he did not shout. Rather, it was as if the speech generated itself in your brain and spread outward from there.

In a bar one night on this holiday, I had heard him boast of coaching President Clinton into questioning the court's attempt to define fellatio as a sexual act; I hadn't found this a particularly successful act of definition, nor of cunt lapping, but to hell with that, no one remembers that storm in a teacup anymore.

But back to his tale. *The Ten Commandments* was his theme, and he had considered it from several odd, not to say acute, angles.

THE LAWYER'S TALE

"And keep the Sabbath holy." This is already awkward. In North America, there are two days of rest at the end of the week, Sunday for Christians and Saturday for Jews. Now we are being overrun by swarms of Moslems, whose holy day might be Friday. Best, therefore, to declare every day a Holy Day, which in effect will render none of them holy.

Number four on the list of Ten commandments: "Honor thy father and thy mother." No dispute here. Clearly, to have been brought, squirming

and screaming, into this Vale of Tears insists upon gratitude, exactly as does an unwanted Christmas gift from one's parents. To behave otherwise would be very small-minded.

Number five: "Thou shalt not kill," also goes without saying. Murderers are often caught, and after serving twelve years in prison until all of one's appeals have failed, you will probably be glad to have some poison slipped into your bloodstream, or, in Utah, some lead. The one trouble with this law is that, in war, thou shalt kill. But you will only when executing the orders of a superior. Once a war is ended, all such superior persons should be killed. Every hangman should be hanged.

Number six: "Thou *shalt* not commit adultery," is more complicated. If a man is married, or a woman for that matter, presumably he or she has made an adult decision. Each has found that one above all others. But unfortunately, life goes on, and our chosen partner may have character defects that did not at first show. Fortunately, in America, our jurists have recognized this flaw in the law, and we may now marry and divorce as often as we want or can afford to. One famous American, Mickey Rooney, has gone through this harrowing procedure eight or more times. Seems God has cut us a deal on adultery.

"Affairs have always haunted monogamy. This because the other partner in the marriage resents the rival. But he or she is not really the rival. There are dozens of men or women who are lonely and wishing contact with someone of their favorite sex. Therefore, it is OK to have an affair as long as you remember not to tell anyone. However, your affair partner will also have to keep it secret. This proves exceptionally difficult for women, men, so beware, you would do better to decide to be true to your wife," the Lawyer said, "as I myself have, finally, done. Women," he told us, "are made of two X-chromosomes, while men, as you know are made of an *x* and a *y*. So women tend to fall in love twice as deeply as men. Twice as constantly. A man should work his Y-chromosomes harder than she works for his *x*. Or he will become an Ex-husband."

This led to many loud cries from his audience, some positive, but mainly negative. In fact, more than one fistfight broke out. Our coach had just reached a high point on the Cotswold Hills and was about to begin its descent into Stroud.

The bumpy and at times precipitous descent did a lot to quiet the quarrelsome pilgrims, but as the leveler streets of Stroud were reached, arguments broke out afresh among the holy sightseers, and the Tibetan Nun from Vermont was driven to drum with her rolled umbrella on the balding pate of the Bank Manager from Worcester, Massachusetts. However, at last all began to calm down, as the need for some refreshment was borne in upon this good soul. Then, a new clamor began to arise: "Food, food!"

But before the Host would let the pilgrims out of the coach, he delivered a brief homily. "Ladies and Gents, excuse me, but I have been asked to say this in both the tour company's and the bus company's interests. I must ask you all to be on your best behavior during your visit to the quiet town of Stroud. Do nothing to besmirch the names of Deadwood Tours nor Wyndham Coach Lines during this brief visit for afternoon tea. Remember, America has placed its faith in you."

The earnestness with which the Host spoke this speech, who had no doubt spoken this more than once before, impressed the travelers, who did not let their voices rise above low whispers for some minutes after they had entered the tea house and been seated there. However, the quiet behavior lasted only until one of their number discovered that the café also had a liquor license. More than half the group ordered drinks rather than tea, and before long voices were again raised in internecine dispute.

Several locals entered battle with the pilgrims upon the Eighth Commandment. "I swear it is no false witness to say you are an idiot," Mr. Adolf was saying to a corpulent drinking companion, who might have been his brother. The man thus charged staggered to his feet and sat back down again as the result of a mighty wallop from his opponent. All hell broke loose. A member of the Stroud Police Force quickly appeared, and before the big man could inflict further damage, handcuffed him to a floor-to-ceiling post inside the café.

"We'll hold this man here on charges of disturbing the peace," the policeman said. Mr. Adolf had his luggage unloaded, and minutes later, the coach was miles away, crossing the flatlands, heading straight for Stratford-on-Avon. But there was no joy in the coach. If any spoke, it was in a low mumble. Every passenger was doing Stroud with his or her face.

The discussion of the Ten Commandments had ceased, and everyone was thinking of the lost passenger.

THE MONK'S PROLOGUE

There was a Tibetan Buddhist monk and a Tibetan Buddhist nun sitting together, for the most part silent, looking through one of the large windows at the enchanting landscape.

These were not your usual Tibetan monastics, in that they were not Tibetan by birth; he was White and she was Black, but what held one's attention about the Monk was that he showed some signs of melancholy.

The view was surely heartening, and the Professor, who was interested in talking to this Monk, decided to engage the man in conversation. At an opportune moment, while the Nun had excused herself and left the compartment, the Professor leaned across the aisle and said, "I wonder, Sir, whether you find the hills uplifting or saddening."

The Monk did not answer for a while, but then, slowly, he began, "You are a sharp unriddler of a countenance," he smiled, not sadly. "Yes, you see, I have made this trip before." There he rested, and it seemed he would say no more, but then he spoke again. "First, I should introduce myself. I am Jampa Dorje, and I am a relative of an Englishman, long since passed, who awoke one fine morning to discover that he was a walk-in for a Tibetan yogi by the name of T. Lapsang Rampa. You may have heard of him. He wrote many charming novels filled with esoteric lore, and as a child, I visited him and his wife at their cottage, which was not far from here."

"Ah, I thought you were looking wistful," said the Professor. "My name's Potwell, Dr. Potwell, Professor of Literature at Cambridge University."

"Nice to meet you, and how kind of you to care," said the Monk. "Yes, perhaps I am wistful. I have been truly enjoying my visit to your fine

country, and many startling thoughts have arisen in my mindstream since our visit to Canterbury Cathedral.”

“The Cathedral was beautiful, indeed,” said the Professor. “But what of your thoughts?”

“I follow a path known as Zogchen, which is a part of my lineage,” said the Monk, “and the knowledge that The Cathedral had succumbed to the ravages of fire and had been rebuilt was a lesson on impermanence and manifestation that has inspired me to rethink a theory I have about poetry.” Here the Monk paused.

“And...” inquired the Professor, after a bit.

“Are you sure I won’t bore you,” asked the Monk. “It’s all rather abstract.”

“I think I would enjoy your ideas,” said the Professor, “but you must include a personal tale of some sort. Is that possible?”

“That’s entirely doable,” said the Monk, and he began.

Poesis, means to make, to process, and writing equals path, view of what is, vision, action, meditation practice, using pen, typewriter, and computer, the poem equals conduct, being a poet 24/7, which brings us back to the view, vision, no ideas but in things

So, winning out against the poem, outside, view of what is, poem as a box, no ideas but in things,

“Follow the lineaments of desire,”
as Blake said, the book as measure

Base of poetry, poetry is everything “Try and buy the well and it springs up somewhere else,” said Jung

Action equals writing, eye-mind-hand coordination, mind-lungs-voice,
sing speak, dick-gut-heart composition

logopoeia,
melopoeia, phanopoeia

tactilpoeia

A pithy saying of Creeley's: "After all's said and done, it's the feelings remain"

How we look
at the world
illusion
material
both

From whence comes the poem
"inspiration"
need to fulfill promise
result of prayer
habit?—

With inspiration comes a flooding
feeling, bliss, hitting the zone, vision
& Apocalyptic need to write like crazy
The poem appears
as a mind treasure, what the Tibetans call a *Terma*

Chaucer as Garab Dorje
Shakespeare as Guru Rinpoche

Build the poem like a box
inside out

Subconscious or nature?
Trungpa's *first word, best word*

Outside in channel
ghosts, Martians,
the Muse
or Devils/Angels

the Unconscious
aided by hypnotic drug—
and the poem
just starts to happen

Visualization – mind
Breath/rhythm – energy
Word – body

How do you go about making poetry?
somehow things come together
to express

FEELINGS

Brought its own solution
which was very poetic
taught me how to draw
a bunny

Aesop's Fables
“The Crow’s Story”
how he got a drink

In the poem I was
able to cry

To name it kills it

“my cat died the other day”

Confessional poets of the 50s
sheparded their ideas into a pen,
and then they stamped them
so we wouldn’t miss
the point

“Capture
phrases”

Here the nun returns and says,
“I didn’t have a good breakfast.
Do you happen to have an antacid?”

The occasion arises
by the occurrence
of the phrase
and it grabs you, and
then you somehow write it:
I met a traveler from an antique land.

Stuff coming into life that haunts you
things said you shouldn’t have
things said you could have said better
things other people said

“It was a beautiful day, and I want to remember it.”

“Misery comes from every direction.”

“Whatever are we going to do about it,
we can’t always be watching TV.?”

“I feel like a blind man who doesn’t know where he is?”

Did you think
the Kali Yuga Age was going to be easy?

Did you think samsara would vanish
if the other candidate was elected president?

And now a theocracy ascends supported by the oligarchs—a Protestant Reformation, a revival of God in public space, a central government at the helm of a reformation of secular government, the lights and orbs of the battle from the pulpits, as the power flows through spiritual channels, pulpits on every roadside, in every suburb, pulpits in the laboratories and the schoolrooms, old party politicians, atheists and other religious will have to go, not forgetting artists, intellectuals and gypsies of all ilk.

Poetry of the mind
poetry of the voice
poetry of the body

“I sound like Stalin talking.”

Am I forgetting anything?
Oh, yes, my tale.

THE MONK'S TALE

Fifteen minutes late, and the battery is dead. And I'm supposed to take the Lama to catch his plane. I climb the hill to the main house, a half-mile, hot, dusty. Say mantras, hoping the local mountain lion won't pounce on me. I can see it now. “Where's Jampa. He's late. Go look for him. Report back. “Jampa's been eaten by a mountain lion. Nothing left but a leg bone, but it'll will make a great thigh bone trumpet.”

I climb the hill, round the bend, thinking how it's always something. I see the luggage on the stoop of the house. This Tibetan doesn't travel light. A roll of thankas and four black suitcases. Maybe I should prostrate up the driveway. Full body. Do guru yoga mantras. No, no time for this. Tell him there's going to be a delay. Phone a friend. Get a jump. Hope there's time.

The Lama nods. His English is good. Says, “I gave myself an extra hour in case of such a contingency.” I’m relieved. I return to the van to wait. Half an hour, a jump-start, and we’re on our way.

We are driving through the village of Gem, and there’s a stack of elk antlers in front of what I take to be a tannery. A sign says, “The buck stops here.” I point to the antlers, and the Lama’s mantra machine kicks into overdrive. We travel a way, the mantras at a low hum, and a rainbow arcs across the road ahead of us. “Wow, Rinpoche, you liberated a whole herd of elk.”

Not more than a mile further, a bolt of lightning shoots straight down from the sky in the distance. I’m incredulous. Either one of those elk was rejected in nirvana, or the Phoenix Airport has just been obliterated by a flying saucer.

No, the airport is intact. I park in the short-term parking section. Unload the bags. Look for a cart to ferry the luggage to the terminal. The Lama is having a good time. He’s doing a little shuffle. I watch his tennis shoes move in small steps in a circle. He lifts his arms. A little Lama dance to propitiate the local deity.

I know these bags are not going to get any lighter. They aren’t going to levitate and float over to the check-in counter. Just as good, a Red Cap appears with a cart and loads us up, and we’re in line in no time. There’s not much time to spare, either. But the flight’s on time, and we’re in line. The battery slowed us, but all our obstacles have been overcome. How does he do it?

After we are checked in, we walk toward security. I notice there is a *purba* on his belt under his robe. I’m sure the metal detector will sound an alarm. A *purba* is a triangular-shaped dagger made of iron and brass, eight or nine inches in length, which the Lama uses to slay demons. They’ll never let him on board with that. All the same, he marches right through security without the *purba* even being noticed. He didn’t check it in, didn’t show it to anyone. Walked right through the metal detector. I stood in the visitor’s section. He turned and waved and was gone down the causeway.

Half the time it doesn’t seem this man is even in his body, and the other half the time, he doesn’t seem to even be on this planet. I did guru mantras

all the way home. Quote. Through signs one comes to believe. Through faith one comes to understand. Unquote. All blessings flow from the teacher.

THE NUN'S PROLOGUE

“I live in a 5-dimensional hologram
of consciousness
divided by 10 directions
5 bodies of experience
6 realms of incarnation
with 3 intermediate states
between sleep, waking, and prayer

When you take on the foundational
practices, you take on the work of Christ,
or Buddha
along with the rest of your life.

I've undergone drastic interior
decorating,
an extreme makeover, done with broad strokes, then the details,
groups of 3s and 5s

I'm applying a new Law
of Contradictions: true, if both/and
as well as neither/nor
In this veil of tears, everyone is very
insular—lots of armor,
less and less amor

Tantric Christianity
Jesus as Vajrasattva

Tantric Christianity complete
with wrathful deities—
Sadhana of Judas Iscariot,
Sadhana of Pontius Pilot,
Sadhanas of the Thief on the Cross
& the Trinity of the Marys

I was born in Haiti into Voodoo, then
baptized into the Catholic Church—
but I've left that behind and taken
refuge in the Three Jewels.”

THE NUN'S TALE

Recently I was in Vermont, where I was a woman Lama's assistant, and there was this odd occurrence. Three times in the period of a week I was mistaken for someone called Mary. When I was introduced, or when I introduced myself, I said my name was Clair, but the next person I talk to calls me Mary, and I develop this snappy rejoinder—“It's Clair. Mary is the Queen of Heaven. Clair is only a saint.” I suppose there's a little sarcasm in my tone. I try to keep my voice flat, so the irony will not be apparent, but it's against the precepts to punish a Lama for her absentmindedness.

We're at The Garden, a kindergarten, a lodgepole-constructed building, which I'm told was originally a Zendo, seeing the radiant energy of children's drawings on the walls. The toilet is kid sized. The moon's light through the skylights. The Lama is about to give her “What it's like doing a three-year retreat at Jalu Mountain” talk and slideshow. There's a digital

projector to attach to her computer.

I've set her zafu and zabuton near the wood stove because the Lama still gets cold, even after living in a leaky yurt in the New Mexico desert for three years, doing mantras in the sagebrush among longhorn steers, coyotes, and rattlesnakes.

One in the group got bit and had to break her retreat and leave the boundaries she had set, a yurt encircled by a six-foot fence. She got bit on the ankle in her garden. A rock garden looks harmless, nice even rows of sand, not looking at that curled configuration on the rock.

She was taken to a hospital after she hobbled forty yards to the main house. Lucky, she was on the perimeter of the compound—you're not supposed to walk with a leg full of poison, but she didn't want to disturb the other nuns and break their retreat.

The Lama only found out about her dharma sister during the next month of group study. Still silent, she got a note which explained the whole episode, maybe too much information, but the details altered her perception of being contained in a sphere of natural mind, to the reality of the jungle, which is of course the world of illusion, which takes on new meaning when you are in pain and fear death's fang.

Torma studies, thanka painting, sand mandalas and doing translation of the Heart Sutra—then, another month of layabout, doing the Nyondro, one hundred thousand recitations of Vajrasattva's hundred syllable mantra, one hundred thousand mandala offerings, one hundred thousand raisings of bodhichitta, and the one hundred thousand refuges done while she's doing her one hundred thousand full-bodied prostrations. The second year, two months layabout, and then one month study.

Layabout is practice session after practice session, Sutra and Tantra, mantra and study. The third year, three months of solo practice and one month of group practice, and out to three years, three months, three weeks, three days, three hours, three minutes and three seconds just to finish the three-year retreat and come to Vermont to reveal her presence.

She sits like a mountain, like she's taken the king's throne, has a lot of information processed, now clear and focused.

"Do you consider meditation to be the most important part of Buddhism?" she was asked.

“Finally, there is no meditation, only virtue and purification,” she replied.

“In what context do you consider your morality?”

“In the context of the six perfections. Meditation can only be accomplished with virtue, with that and purification, allowing compassion to arise unhindered. Purity is skillful means.”

Another log was added to the fire. Old hippies sitting in a group in a kindergarten listening to a teacher tell a tale that has been told since the first fire was built—how to be patient, to keep focus, to relax, how to handle bliss when it arises, to understand the reptilian impulse and the surreal flickering of images on the cave wall which portend the light outside the cave. She tells us that all accomplishments and possessions are illusory and points out how extremely concrete are the karmic conditions which hold us in the grip of existence.

I told the Lama about my hysterectomy. “But maybe that’s too much information,” I said.

“No,” she said, “there’s sixty-four thousand things going on in a single thought, which is made up of 40 million computations in a nano-second. That I would say is a lot of information, Mary.”

THE PREACHER’S PROLOGUE

“That’s right; that’s right,” the Guide said from the door of the coach. “Miss Kotthalfa, you first, then let’s have Mr. Jiffie; next to him, Miss Lodesh, and then, Mr. Springfield. And you flower-maidens, line up as seems to you best, only don’t take all day. Now, Dr. Bromige will join you in utter matrimony.”

The man they called Dr. Bromige muttered some meaningful words in a sonorous tone, and when he stopped talking for a while, the two men and the two women scurried forward and said some words that sounded to

those in the front of the bus like, “I do,” although some in the back of the bus thought they heard, “Screw you!”

Rings were slipped on each of the couples fingers. Dr. Bromige said, “Now, you may kiss.” After a while, Dr. B. cleared his throat, and the two couples obligingly parted again. “Just a word of advice,” Dr. B. said, “no fooling around with other men or women. You for example, Tom, don’t go to bed with any other woman but your new wife. Two of the three people involved get hurt, your wife and the other woman. And if she’s got a husband some place, him, too, because this kind of thing always gets talked about sooner or later. And there’ll be two, three people upset by your selfishness. Look, you, you’re all old enough to hear the truth of what I say, and remember, I don’t do divorce. You have to pay cold, hard cash for that.”

He stopped speaking for a minute. The group was quiet. Calmly, he peeled the black mask from his face and resumed speaking in his mid-Atlantic accent. “So, that’s that, and I wish you all the best. You’re going to need it.”

“Yow!” one of the women growled, as Dr. B. pinched her recently married bum. The shriek this drew from Mrs. Jiffie set everybody jabbering. After two minutes had passed, the commotion subsided, and the Tour Guide took this opportunity to get everyone settled in a seat, and the cool, gray driver at the wheel. And the tour resumed.

“That was useless advice,” said Mr. Springfield to his bride, for we have already swiven each other’s wife.

The group was headed for Stratford-on-Avon to view *Twelfth Night*, or *What! You, Will?* and a lively debate started throughout the coach. Some said it was wrong to covet another’s spouse; some said it was only natural to do so; and some said they weren’t sure. Mrs. Springfield appeared reticent to give her opinion, but Mrs. Jiffie liked to talk, and both of the grooms were outgoing.

“Oh, we were married before,” said Mr. Jiffie. I was married to her, and he was married to her, but now I’m married to *her*, and he’s married to *her*.” So, in a way, neither of the guys or wives could argue for it because

they've done it. They've somehow invalidated their position in the argument.

“ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS,” Mr. Jiffie said, vehemently, “but by all means give us your explanation.”

THE PREACHER'S TALE

Mrs. Jiffie pushed a button to lower her window. “The Wife of Bath had eight husbands, and it didn't dampen her desire to have more.”

Dr. B said, “Now you're older, so now you should be able to stay married to one man for the rest of your life,” as he pinched her tit.

“What kind of behavior is that?” she asked.

“There's a kind of moral behavior that only goes so far and no further,” he said, pinching her other tit.

“Ouch!”

“Let me explain,” cried Dr. Bromige. “Some of you may think that my behavior is inappropriate here or that I have made an error, that I was going to pinch just one nipple, but then losing control, I pinched the other one as well. Not so. Let me explain. Pinching tits is never erotic. It's just like the sexless implant of a kiss a college student gets upon graduating. I suppose that for a marriage, I might choose to pinch a tit to designate fertility. And it is my sincere hope that the union I have just officiated at will be blessed with offspring.

But what really happened just now was that I saw a big cockroach, that's all, and I picked that roach up with my fingers and dropped him on the floor where I could step on him, and my apologies to the young lady and her husband for disturbing such a serene moment of their wedding so unceremoniously. I just wish that things like roaches wouldn't scuttle into the middle of what I'm officiating at and try to spoil things, but I know everyone here has a holy heart and that my error will be forgiven. Please overlook it, and proceed with your merriment. Soon we will arrive at the famous town of Stratford-on-Avon, and in plenty of time to see a play

which ends with two happy marriages—at least until the curtain falls. And blessings on this holy pair of pairs, in this fruitful land of Warwickshire, in the middle of this most bounteous of harvest seasons.”

The Guide said, “Let us have a tale by one of the newly-weds.”

THE GROOM’S TALE

Mr. Springfield rose to the occasion. A tale needed telling, and he was the man to tell it. So, without further ado:

This happened last Christmas. It began at one minute to ten on the day before Christmas. The elves gathered at the sleigh in the mall. Where was Luis? I wondered. He was usually early, but it was now two hours past starting time, and still no sight of him.

“He must’ve got caught in the traffic,” said Monty. “Traffic was horrible this morning.”

“I don’t think so,” snorted Smitty, his hat tipped rakishly. “He’d be here by now. He probably had something important to do. He’ll be here by noon. We’ve got plenty to do before he gets here with more.”

“We need to get back to work,” I said. “If the boss is a no show, we’ll tell the kids they have to write their wishes on a piece of paper, and we’ll get it to Santa later. As to whether they’ve been good or not, if they don’t know by now, they’ll never know.”

“Right on,” said Monty. “I’ve got a mountain of Faxes to work on, and I still have invoices to check.”

Smitty was looking anxious. “We’re cutting it pretty close this year. I still haven’t figured out that thingamajig. If I don’t have it fixed by the time he gets back, I’m in for it.”

“I know; I know,” I said, “Let Monty do what he’s got to do, and I’ll give you a hand. But, first, I have to go to the warehouse and get a flexall.”

Everyone returned to their tasks, and I walked down the passageway behind the shops to the storeroom. I got my heavy green cloak and headed

out the back door to my jalopy. *Could use a coat of paint; might take out that dent by the front light, if only I can get all these packages ready.*

Frank was in his cubby when I got to the warehouse. I'm in a hurry when I come up to his cage. I come up at an angle.

Frank growled, "There's someone ahead of you."

I looked over, and, sure enough, there was a man in a baseball cap, brim forward, standing back. I said, "I'm sorry," and the man nodded for me to go ahead, and I moved toward the counter. Frank must not have noticed this exchange, because when I stepped up, he said, "Let him go first."

Ticked me off. "Listen you fat fascist," I spat, "if you'd spend less time telling people what to do and more time just doing your job, we'd all be a lot happier." Some Christmas cheer, there.

"I am doing my job," he said. "I'm keeping people in line happy."

I wanted to reach across the counter and grab him by the shirtfront and say, "Do you want a piece of this," but I knew I was getting agitated, so I let the anger go and simmered down. "Do you have a flexall?" I asked, and there was a tremor in my voice.

Frank went into the stacks and came back with a box. He typed a bit on his computer, pushed the box towards me and said, "It's not much fun coming to work when you get your ass kicked every day."

"I can certainly understand your frustration," said Mrs. Jiffie, "It takes someone with a heart of gold to work with the public. I've run into so many surly clerks in my time. If they aren't grumpy from being overworked and underpaid and underappreciated, they are spaced out in their own world and totally disconnected from what they're supposed to be doing."

"All the same," said Miss Dunstan, "a job is a job, and if you are paid to do a job, there's really no excuse for dereliction of duty." It was at this juncture that Mrs. Springfield entered the discussion.

THE BRIDE'S PROLOGUE

The newly married Mrs. Springfield was irrepressible. She loved to hear herself talk. And she talked on every imaginable subject. For example:

“Oh, the dead-end jobs I took up in Toledo were galling. At Idea Research and Development Corporation I walked around in circles collating TV bingo cards. At Sport-in-Print, I put stuff in the mail, took it to the post office, and more interestingly, ran the switchboard.

“I worked with a man named Michael Bowen. Once, he took me to his parents’ house in a big block of slums, distinctly working class, i.e. a notch below me in scale. We went to the movies, which in those days was most likely a double bill. The theater was in the central part of town, and we sat together and held hands, or rather he held my hand and I didn’t discard his. And I don’t think he disliked my goodnight kiss. I remember his face showed his pleasant nature. But soon after, he was laid off from his job, and I have never heard from him since. “

“He went to Canada,” said Miss Farr, “to evade the draft. Today, he’s a well-known writer.”

“Well, I never!” said Mrs. Springfield,
“What a small world we live in.”

“Canada is vast,” was the reply. “You should google him.”

“I think I will,” said the new bride. “Perhaps, he’s a millionaire by now.”

“Perhaps,” said the other woman, “and perhaps not.”

THE BRIDE’S TALE

“My dad told me a story about his youthful antics with George W. Bush,” said the bride. “One time, he put my dad’s hand in water while he was asleep, and Dad peed the bed. Another time, when he woke up suddenly, there was W.’s butt in his face.

Always outdoing himself, W. said, “Give me a light.” He had put lighter

fluid in his mouth, and he spewed out this enormous flame. He also used to light his farts. And once, W. mailed an erotic poem Dad had written to Dad's sweetheart, which had been written on his father's letterhead stationery. Really got chewed out for that one.

Dad told me that on one of their sprees they picked up a hitch hiker together. W. fucked her in the backseat, while Dad listened to the radio. None of this was true, of course. Dad didn't know George W. Bush from Adam."

THE INTERIOR DECORATOR'S PROLOGUE

"Don't fail to note the charming
countryside of Warwickshire.
Pick a window and gaze,
and if your neighbor's
hot breath bothers you, take it;
nature's hot breath
is one large compliment.
nothing to be afraid of!
Hungry? Thirsty?
keep those baskets moving
round and round from hand
to hand, and we'll stop
and eat lunch in Gloucester."

The Interior Decorator raised his finger.
His was a philosophical mind:

 "What exactly do we sit on?
Coach seat, floor, tires, road, soil, rock, lava down there, magma,
 glowing embers of a white spot,
the appropriate black hole— we are

an entire sea of being sitting on a seat.”

“Not sure I want to hear the public
organisms speak in a single voice,”
said someone said from the back.

“Art, to me,” continued the Interior
Decorator, “is a religious experience.
‘Jacob Wrestling with the Angel’
is a favorite of mine—the invisible form which speaks to my soul,
finds expression in painting,
in drapery, in furniture, in capitalism
all combined. But my story’s getting ahead of me.”

And the coach
filled with laughter.

THE INTERIOR DECORATOR’S TALE

Childhood snapshots show I smiled. We lived in West Hampstead, in a two-story flat, while on the ground floor was a shop: Earls Men’s Outfitters. I thought that Earls shopped there.

Dad became a cameraman for G-B News but should have been a music-hall comedian. His first job, on leaving school was as an assistant to a butcher. And in this capacity, he met my mother. He loved to talk of this even decades later when hate and habits ruled their lives, this simple-minded factoid, as if it were completely current. “Your mother is a saint.”

Once I said to him, “You fight all the time. She chain-smokes and drinks straight from the bottle.” He roared at me, “Your mother is an angel.”

Dad was now a cameraman who soon found himself in Ireland, getting shot at by men from southern Ireland, supporting Catholics in Ulster, who wanted to free also, and didn’t give a damn for any cameraman who’d help publicize their protest. Odd, that. Basically insane. While Mum and

Dad had my sister a year after they got married, I wasn't born till ten years later.

My father's hatred of the Irish, however, never waned. Still, as I grew up, I had good friends who were Irish, two wives who were half-Irish, one of whom screwed up spectacularly and one of whom I'll love until I die—unless I stop.

Now, the time has come to change my tale from my family matters to studying at a college, the Berkshire College of Home Economics, where I took an introductory course in Interior Décor.

We had students of all ages; thirty men and four women, all young. One of these women reminded me of a chest of drawers. She was decorative but not very useful. To my slow surprise I dated three of these mysterious beings before the year was over. "Dated" was really not a term yet in use: held the hand of? Felt the breast of? Kissed the lips of? No more than these, for sure; that was as far as I dared, or was allowed. And these events were relatively rare: four girls go seven and a half times into thirty.

Thus, mathematical logic drove me to re-evaluate my gender preference, and besides, I really didn't want them to interfere with my masturbation. By then, I was pretty sure I was gay.

THE SALESMAN'S PROLOGUE

There was an uncomfortable silence in the coach. Some of the passengers checked their manicures, while others stared out the windows at the rolling green of the land. At last, Mr. Hoffman, listed on the registrar as a salesman of insurance, rose to the occasion.

"I speak in syllables but think in rhyme.
I cannot read and I cannot spell.
Still, I tell it, what the hell—and
since the subject seems to be kissing,

I have a kissing tale to tell as well.”

THE SALESMAN’S TALE

Mrs. Duffy was my school bus driver. Only she didn’t have a school bus. She drove us to school in her own car. Five of us. We lived outside the regular bus route, and the city had no regular school buses since all public-school students had a free pass to ride city buses to and from school.

In the early days of *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, this is how the city schools in our area stayed segregated. You could go to any school you wanted to—all you had to do was get on a bus and ride. The result was students from a Black neighborhood went to the nearest school. I lived in the hills, and the nearest school was five miles from the nearest city bus, and the city hired this Mrs. Duffy to drive us to Bret Harte Junior High..

Mrs. Duffy picked us up at a turnaround near some horse corals. I watched for her from my smoking hideaway in a clump of eucalyptus. I kept my eye peeled on the sharp turn across the canyon, she’d be three, four minutes more. I needed that hit of nicotine to propel my sorry ass through the school day. A couple more drags on a Lucky Strike—heart valves opening and visionary eye fixed on the day’s gold ring.

I rode home with four other kids: Don, Bobbie, Burt, and Nancy. We all had a thing for Nancy. She was a year ahead in school and, maybe, six years ahead in flirting. But I was gaining ground, and one November day, I told her it was my birthday, and she said she would have to give me a kiss. I suggested she give me a kiss for every year. Fourteen kisses was what I wanted, and Nancy didn’t say no.

We walked along the fence that borders the horse coral, and there was Scottish Broom in bloom on the other side of the road. A trail climbed from the road to the top of a hill and Nancy’s house. My house was across the paddocks, and this was where we usually parted company.

This time, I followed Nancy out of sight of the road. Was I ever curious to experience a kiss from a girl who knew something about kissing.

THE STUDENT'S PROLOGUE TO THE POET'S TALE

A young student, Mark Brown, is traveling with his constant companion, Clive Jones, an older man with a drinking habit, a poet with a private income, who likes boys with pimples. His thoughts:

Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.
I pondered this curious, brief sentence.
These ideas could not be at once *colorless*
AND *green*. This thinker had left a mess.
Unless he was using “green” as merely
metaphorical. How careless he had been!
Colorless blue dreams—a different scene,
but just as dependent upon metaphor.
The man was a poor writer. A real bore.
Colorless gambage would be better.
Green has so many meanings. My red setter
appeared to comfort me. His tail kept wagging.
Wag, wag, wag: wagging without flagging.
What a dog! But, to resume my argument:
I take out Ocham's razor. Chop away.
These green (young) ideas they cannot say,
'twould be too dangerous, and thus, silently,
they toss and turn at night, sleep *furiously*.

“Ah, got that one solved,” said our clever student.

Clive, meanwhile, had nodded off, his bearded head a-smile upon the student's shoulder, wobbling as the limo rode the country roads.

“Awake, Clive!” said the boy.

“Ah, hello, Mark, muttered Clive, “I must've fallen off again.”

“It’s the booze,” said Mark, “Careful, or I’ll tip you in the ooze one of these times. Wake up, or you’ll lose It’s time to entertain us with one of your grizzly tales. I know you have a pack of them. There’s the ooze! The plain truth is what we want to hear. We’re listening. So, go ahead!”

THE POET’S TALE

Hmmm, I think back to my first dental experiences, Dr. Norton operating on Blake Street, pools of bloody saliva in the sink, a sink once the standard contraption to spit in before the present suction device that dangles from the mouth, that and the spigot blowing air, suck and blow, gums need irrigating, how long will it be before I learn good hygiene? go for those gums, let the hygienist rag me about taking care, using better tools, the rubber-tipped doodah to get into the space between the tooth and gum, work it along the gum, bleeding means work harder on this cleaning technique, get that plaque, get those gums rubbery, rubber gums, need to get between those teeth, floss and rub, use a Christmas tree brush, a brush at either end, scrub those gums, get those bacteria on the move, septic, halitosis in those gums, germs from a lifetime of eating, kissing, sucking, germs from every girl and boy I’ve kissed, added together, a gumful of funk added to mouthful of sugar meat veggies carbs and drink, making some kind of solvent to dissolve the tartar from the toughest tooth, deconstruct, not many teeth left, well more than my friend Lu, he and I have tooth decay in common, losing our uppers, molars gone, working forward toward the incisors, chewing with my front teeth, grinding them down, need that partial, still have a couple of anchor teeth, special fitting, high dental art several years of getting my mouth in shape, root canals, old caps and fillings removed, new caps installed, porcelain, should I get a diamond installed in this incisor? American flags in fashion today, not until my mouth is stable, keep the jaw line in shape, until the mouth has a constitution, teeth are the duly elected representatives of the digestive

system, the mouth connected to the throat connected to the stomach attached to the colon attached to the nether mouth, causal chain loop, the system representative of a living organism, a complex eater being eaten, \$1200 that tooth, \$800 this tooth, \$1000 for that one, \$1600 for a bit of reconstructive surgery, nip & tuck of dental finance, could you make my new tooth coffee-colored like the rest of them? no, let's not cap it, just a filling for now, Doctor Wind a little on the expensive side, but I get what I pay for, a dental program, remembering a dentist who cut the wrong roots once, midnight dentistry in a Berkeley free clinic, the equipment on the blink, me having to steady by hand the x-ray machine, I probably jiggled it and took a picture of the wrong tooth, later, infection, abscess, tooth removed from the side of my gum, flashing on dentistry around the turn of the 20th century in San Francisco in Von Stoheim's film, *Greed*, based on Frank Norris's novel, used chloroform or pulled the tooth without, maybe drank some whiskey or took a toke on the opium pipe, just handle it, I remember getting Novocain as a kid in the late 40s, and the drills running on a motorized pulley affair, grinding away, today's powered drills get the job done quickly, so I can usually get a tooth drilled without Novocain, hate cottonmouth coming on long after you've left the dentist's office, screw the painkiller, except for maybe a root canal, feels so fine when the drilling's done

THE WRITER'S PROLOGUE TO THE PROFESSOR'S TALE

On this leg of the journey, a few of the pilgrims, for special reasons known only to one of our authors, were riding in a Cadillac Escalade Stretch Limo on a side trip to Chorley Wood. As the limo picked up speed after breasting a hill, a man in his late sixties began to declaim loudly and spiritedly as follows:

*“Whan that Aprille with hir shoures sote
The droght of Mers hath perced to the rote*

*And bathed every vein in swich liquor
Off which vertue engendred is the flowre,
Than logen folk to go on pilgrimages—”*

“For Pete’s sake, Mr. Mansfield, sing us some other verse—or is that all you know of Mr. Chaucer?” said Mr. Jiffie.

“Yes, alas, nothing more,” said the Writer
“My brain is a blunt plowshare. To think
that once I had the whole Prologue by heart!
But enough of erroneous chit-chat. Let’s see
if I can canter in a five-stressed line,
and smoke an imaginary cigarette,
(*Puff-puff*) and if I can remember, not forget,
this intense life I’ve led. It takes time,
but time can vanish if the tale is fine.
I was the youngest of five Mansfield sons.
We grew up working where the Fraser runs.
Then each in his turn left our home for college,
except for me. My mother admired knowledge
but kept me home with her and father
long after my four brothers wed, were fathers
themselves, bought farms elsewhere, while one
/became
a college agriculturist. Then one day
my parents set me free. They went to Europe
having sold the farm, then, finally, their rope
run long enough, returned, and settled down
in old age in the nearby town, the town
where Toby settled, while they were gone,
but now no longer lived, because at long
long last, he’d decided to attend
the university where we made friends.
While getting drunk as lords to celebrate
being first-year students over 28

(in his case, 33), and thus began
a friendship that has lasted, shade and tan,
until this present day, and beer we quaffed,
(until it took us staggering aloft)
in barrow loads, and later, wine and grass
we rolled around in afterwards, sweet grass
that alters focus and sense of feeling
and's state-wide, but not beneath a fed ceiling,
almost legal—he does a lot of that.
(He lives in Holland now, so that's alright.)
His professorial career proved fruitless:
he taught where I taught, his career was stress.
Drinking in the morning, drunk at night,
I seldom saw one in such sorry plight.
To sum his academic life up in a word:
two famous scholars taught at Oxenford.
Biography, their field, one held one must
exclude all but known fact, the other sussed
stuff out; their fame was equal. Which to be?
He taught for years, but never could quite see.
But 'tis time I stopped to take a cup of tea.

THE PROFESSOR'S TALE

Yes, you drink tea now, Clive, instead of Scotch,
but Scotch for me! Damn me, it's nearly noon,
well past the hour for me to start my watch,
but Mansfield will upstage, we've heard him croon!
Now, I'll tell a tale that made my heart dance.
I think it should please more than half of you.
Back in those days when I still had a chance
with English college youth, on English choo-choos

I sought out the likely-looking few: lads
in late adolescence, who might catch my eye
and hold it just a tad, as if something bad
might come of our encounter, and if an eye
in that face drooped into an unconscious wink,
or even better, conscious, he'd be my prey.

But nothing this time caught my eye. Heart sink!
The train was crowded, and my coach, oi weh,
(as I have heard our Hebrew brethren say)
with more than a fair share of young women.
One was virtually sitting on my lap!
She smelt as if she'd spent the morning swimming
in melted butter, perhaps it was some crap
they fancy smells seductive, on a lad
perhaps it might have, yes, but her gloved hands
folded, as women like to do, on her sad
nothing, was almost more than I could bear; glands
unresponsive, I kept my face as far
from hers as my natural politeness
allowed. But it didn't stop her lar-lar
larynx from trying to attract me; the less
attention I gave her warbling, the more
she rattled on, her diction a real mess
as we reached Paddington at last! I saw
my opening for leave taking, and took
her hand, but Lawks a Mercy, what a grip!
She pulled me to her, and she found my lips
with hers. The strangest of sensations took
a hold of me: as with my knee, I sensed
a hard, large cock thrusting for my fingers,
&, through my pants, her fingers, curling, tensed,
gripping my own organ—which, if singers
could be found to praise it, you'd soon learn
is just slightly less than massive...Shorty.

His name, he said, was Longfellow. I burn
once more as I end these acts, these naughty
deeds. Too bad you couldn't be there, Broms
in his apartment, which we reached by cab.
But let me tell you, what in old London's slums
were sexiest: the delicious crop of zits
revealed when he washed his face! The dabs
disclosed each one. So many! Yes, what tits
are to you, zits are to me. I'm seventeen,
no flab. This transformation scene brings down
the curtain—"—& one day may bring down you,"
I warned him. "the lifeforce slaked. He may look 'round
for objects blunt or sharp to make you glue."
"No, Clive," my old friend sighed, "his love was true."
"You met more times?" "No, alas, just once."
"Once—again?" "No, just that one time." "Oh, man,"
I said, "Phone-number? Address? Means to reach you?
Red, as red as a red hen, I must hear more!"
"Oh, yes, let us hear the end," Miss Duckworthy,
the Head Librarian from Minnasdoula
Hole insists. "And I AM a Duckworthsy."
"That settles that, then," says the Massadoula
man, Duckworthy's traveling companion.

"Very well, companions of the bus," he laughed,
drunken, reeling, but not a drunken stallion,
more of an eager hound. He stopped to cough,
then resumed his tale, with an "Alas, alas!"
He disappeared; I gave up all hopes of him.
I still wrote, though; I thought he must have passed
my letters 'round a room of friends, made cruel, dim
fun of them. Yet still I wrote, and still I
never heard. And then, one day, a letter from him.
'Dear Toby, I apologize to you for my
long silence, how you must have suffered. But better

times are mine, now, and, I must hope, yours too.”
I felt my heart leap in my pants with joy—a letter!
Looking up, I marveled of the sky so blue
and ran like a red deer bounding like a boy.
naked in the sun, until at last came true
when Longfello; and I met in our joy
at Paddington, in a rapturous embrace.
He was in drag, that made it all the better:
“My secret love,” I thought, “whom I’ll unlace,
following directions to the randy letter.”

We kissed, and kissed again, then tore our clothes off,
and...what horror I felt then! What wretched blues!
What sadness, but what horror! I feigned a cough
and kept on coughing. She thought she couldn’t lose
and meanwhile, my feelings must be plain
to her, as hers were plain to me. She sobbed
but I could say nothing that would explain
for her my horror at her change. “Good God!”
I thought, “What she has thrown away!” “Toby,”
she wailed, trying to explain how good
we’d be together, “like it’s meant to be!”
I fled, and now I spend my days in Göuda.

Now, it’s your turn, my friend.

THE WRITER’S PROLOGUE

There was a man as short as he was tall,
who’d mostly maintained silence on our route,
but now and then, half-whispering, had made
by no means all, but a select few to laugh

and laugh they did, most willingly, although
he himself seldom cracked a smile: the contrast
between words and humor was for him a game.
He loved to play, while his eyes twinkled
as he spoke each punchline, and a smile,
or almost a smile, wavered on his lips.
It annoyed me, that he spoke so low, & so,
noticing that some man was asleep near him,
I nudged this man awake, and in dumb show
suggested to him that he and I change seats,
with which he sleepily concurred.

“I am,” he said, then paused—in my own way,
a failure, grotesque as the Doo-Doo—uh, the Do-Do
bird, and soon, no doubt, shall make an end
to an existence ridiculous as any
in this quaint void called world, laid in a quiet grave.
My life, whose story’s to be told to you
before my tale is wagged, has naught to it.
Born English, for my first two years I breathed
the air that Blake breathed, and Drake, and the Lake
Poets, and Shakespeare, and Hake, a lyricist
less known than Jake McKenzie even, unknown
as Sally Shiplake even, or even P.Q. Pod.
Ah well, long is the list of our forerunners
who made things as though they believed in time,
and longer yet, due to the increase in population,
any list that has to name those bards who,
thanks to Modernism, hot on those heels,
all the postmoderism, until, Lo! (or lower)
the Savior of the Upright Poem of our Age,
Mr. Jan I. Whit, has come to refute all
that T.S. Eliot, H.D., Ezra Pound,
Miss Stein, and William Carlos Wheelbarrow
strove for, the opening of poetry

to the masses: to the intelligence
of the masses. Goddamn you all!— Oopps, excuse
the slaver on my lips! Beside the white chickens,
a stooped and beggarly old man humbly
craves your pardon. You have a native right
and that is, to be dull. Gardez-bien!

As I was, if not already saying,
then about to say, I am two years old,
freshly released from Heaven to a suspect
group of semi-mortals: Mother, Father,
Sister— what business had these people here
with me? I had died and gone to Heaven
with its other non-communicative
children, and we were tended by nurses,
adult women like my mother, if less
easy to offend. Now, I expect my heart
broke, there, for while Anna Freud tells us that
a child of my age then remembers five
days only, how long, how long are those
five days, and filled with what weird mindfulness?
Mine was a life ruined almost from the start,
and yet, in a sense, rescued to be something else,
if...but this is too much thirsty work, my friends.
We're not driving! Pass that bottle and drink up!
My story's far too sad, and, like all such, meaningless.
I think it best to tell the history of my life like so,
I was born; I wrote books; I died; and let it go at that.

THE WRITER'S TALE

A place has power, but when Jubal first set foot in the carriage house, he knew it would not be his final home.

“You’ll like it, Dad,” Joy said. “It has an indoor pump and a catalytic toilet.”

“What’s a catalytic toilet?” Jubal asked. “Is it only for Roman Catalytics?”

“They use them in Alaska, where they have permafrost and can’t dig a hole for an outhouse. It fries your turds in a metal box. Anyway, you won’t have to disturb us by coming in and using the bathroom, and you’ll have the whole place to yourself during the day, while Sam and I are at work and Tim and Con are at school.”

“Well, it’s good of you to give an old man a place to rest his weary bones and get his bearings.”

“Now, Dad,” Joy said, consolingly, “I’ll make us some coffee.”

What I have, Jubal thought, what I have is a great family in this time of terror and promise. The world is collapsing, and the cities are vomiting up their loneliness, and even as I recognize the rot, and the years pass, I still find I have a stubborn joy. He puffed through his nose at the pun on his daughter’s name. The stars were coming out—huge, remote eyes in the sky. Jubal needed something new, to know nature in its muddled leafiness.

The smell of coffee awoke Jubal from his dim vision. A car passed on the highway, and there was the sound of a bird that sounded like a bird imitating a seagull. Jubal couldn’t see this bird hidden by dense leaves, but he was sure if he saw it, it would be big. Real big.

The screen door clattered. “Here we are,” said Joy. “You know, Dad, you’ll be living just down the road from Walden Pond, where Henry David Thoreau stayed. They’ve rebuilt his cabin, and what with donated materials they managed to keep the cost of building it to his original budget of \$29. So, you can live here like Thoreau. Hoe a few bean rows and think transcendental thoughts.”

Jubal had figured it out. With no rent payment, he would be able to get along on his Social Security check and the interest payments on his modest investments. He could walk along the Ol’ Post Road and dream of the Redcoats coming. He could sit in the tavern and josh with the locals.

Like Thoreau, he could wonder, “By fronting Nature, what truths are revealed?” So, he settled down to a simple life.

7:00 Joy has her son, Tim, standing by the stone fence, awaiting his bus.

7:30 Joy drives Con to his pre-school.

8:15 Sam heads for work at Brandise University in nearby Waltham.

8:30 Joy takes the second car to her laboratory where she and Sam do research in neurobiology.

“What exactly does *plasticity of the synaptic and intrinsic properties of cortical neurons and circuits* mean?” he had asked. After a few minutes listening to Joy try to explain, he wished he had never asked.

Both Joy and Sam have recently been promoted to full professorships—two jewels in the University’s crown of academic achievement. Jubal had asked, “Well, Mrs. Professor, what are you going to do after you figure out how the neuron in the synapse works?”

His daughter smiled. “Oh, I might give up science and write a novel or become an environmental activist.”

And this is the novel—the novel I’m writing about my dad. I feel like I’m inside of a coffin. The inside of this coffin is slightly longer than my father’s corpse. Imagine if it was the other way around.

So, as I was saying, my name is Jubal Denner, and I have been dead for a long time, and my daughter is writing a novel about me. At first, I didn’t like it, dying, but now I like it. I’m only sad that everyone can’t be dead at the same time. But that’s ok—that people come and go.

Finally, I just had to go. I had to go back to California. Simple enough. I couldn’t die near Walden Pond. Just not right for me. I tried to live the simple life—cut my coupons, count my change, putter around the garden, be a grandpa—but it wasn’t me. Certainly, a story must not reference itself, and neither should an old man.

My editor says, “The skeleton of a story shouldn’t show through.”

THE ACTRESS'S PROLOGUE

Call her Her. Her name was a pronoun. Her friends knew her as Marilyn. She had a little dog, but just because it was a little dog didn't mean it couldn't rip your crotch or tear out your jugular. Believe me, life can get bad enough to take downers.

Her was her secret name. Marilyn was her outer name. Her came from Normal, Illinois. Normal is a town that has a normal school, a college to teach teachers, and Her knew that teaching was not the path for her, so she lit out for the Big Apple. It didn't take Her longed to find a sugar daddy, and when she found him, he took Her out on his speedboat, and he could tell by her tone that she was worried and a bit resentful. She was wearing pink, but enough about her clothes, let's get on with Her's tale.

THE ACTRESS'S TALE

Park on the street. Pass through double glass doors with a sign that says to report to the nurse's station before taking patients off the premises. A tall, blond woman with a badge and an enticing smile tells me Dad is in room 34, bed B. "The middle bed," she says.

On my trip down the hall, I meet people in wheelchairs, some slumped over, asleep or not, a man in a blue shirt, drooling, trying to reach a gray towel with red piping laying on the linoleum at his feet—the usual rest home smells of urine, antiseptic and old age funk—but it is warm and dry inside. Bodes well, even with the demented moaning.

My dad sits upright in his wheelchair, a copy of *The Sporting Green* on the hospital tray before him. There are yellow carnations and family photos at the bedside. On the cover of the newspaper there is a photo of an excited rugby player, his arms splayed in exultation. Apparently, England has won the world cup in rugby. A headline to the left of the

player says, “Aussies shirt Philip.” I wonder about the meaning of “shirt” and my dad says the word is like what Americans mean by “dis.”

There is a flushing sound from a toilet in a side room. Dad tells me it’s his roommate, a Japanese man with a name that sounds like Neitzche but it’s probably not spelled like the German philosopher. I ask, “Who’s in the other bed, then, Dostoevsky?”

Outside the window, a sparrow is eating birdseed from a feeder. I look closer at the feeder and see that the seed has sprouted, and a small lawn is growing there. I think of the rugby players playing on this small lawn. I can hear music from a distant radio. The clatter of trays on a lunch cart reminds me of applause. I can see that a game is in progress.

Park, a place to score crystal meth, is down this street. Pass, pass, you vicious, ruinous attraction: today I mark twelve months of freedom from you, and from all drugs, alcohol included, because Her inherited Her father’s addictive problems, flowering through his twenties, when if he took one drink he could not stop until he passed out; but (unlike myself) he’d remain astonishingly able, verbally especially, and was usually the last member of the party to succumb, before they cleared the premises. A shame that his daughter Her did not inherit this particular sort of stamina.

She thought; but on the other hand, Her had sworn off not only alcohol, but all drugs, when she was 23, whereas he stopped only when he developed type one diabetes, at 30, just two weeks before Her was born; and now here Her was, visiting him in a ward of the Crazy Jane Hospital in his adoptive hometown, in Room 34, Bed B. “The middle bed,” the nurse had said.

On her trip, she had been nervous, more so than usual, wondering how damaged he had been by this, his third stroke, but to Her relief, she found him upright in his wheelchair, reading the Sporting Green. There were yellow carnations on a bedside table, which reminded Her of flowers that had been a theatrical prop for a comic love-scene she had played in middle school, where her hopeless suitor had laid them at her bedside.

On the first night, the audience had burst into delighted laughter to see Her, as the argument between the couple intensified, stuff the flowers upside down into the China pisspot under Her bedside. On the cover of the local newspaper, had been her thought, would have been the best place

to present this picture, but the school authorities declined any opportunity to show 14-year-olds, with Her in pajamas, having a beside quarrel in the course of which a young girl crammed flowers into a chamber pot at Her bedside.

On the cover, Her now saw, of a movie magazine in the litter of reading matter beside her father's bed, was a still showing Her in her first film role, waving goodbye to Steve Martin in "Cheaper By the Dozen"—a moment she savored, while her father cheered that England had won the World Cup in rugby. A headline to this effect was on his bedside paper, so it couldn't just have happened; the game he had been watching must have taken place yesterday.

Her would sooner watch a play from five years ago with a starring role in high school as a woman whom Her described to a friend as, "No better than she ought to be." Her first thought was that she would have shirted Philip.

She wondered about the meaning of "shirt" and asked her father, but was confused by his reply; at first she thinks she understands him, but as she thinks about it some more, her mind wanders, and Her finds she is picturing a man she once acted with is now doing another scene with her, one that requires him to be naked to his waist, while Herself is dressed in a ragged gown, and then it comes to her: they are doing a scene from *Streetcar*, and a line comes to Her, "Ah have always relied upon the kindness of strangers," and young tho' she still was, she suddenly felt a dagger digging into her chest, the truth of that, how even her best friends had been strangers to her when first she had met them, and usually *had* been strange at first, with what she found to be many unpleasant traits which troubled her, but which she had gotten used to, one by one, like Eddie Jenkins always being at least a half-hour late for any meeting they had arranged, and always with the same lame excuse, but after a while, she realized, Her realized.

Her had gotten accustomed to this and had a plan with herself to practice lines while waiting, until it got so Her was only waiting with a tiny part of herself, and now, when he appeared, she thought, "Good ol' Eddie, here he comes, at last," and she would remember not to rise and embrace him the way Her had learned from her father and mother, because Eddie was

shy and, as her dad said, seemed to think being kissed was the same as being dissed.

There, then, she realized that to be a good actress, she would need to realize Her was always onstage, no matter how used she became to someone, and that much of the time Her would need to disguise this, but by acting in the most ordinary way possible—to keep in her mind a calm lake she had lived near on holiday, strongly enough itself that it could grow calm immediately after any disturbance, like the flushing of a toilet in a side room.

Her dad told her a lot of wise things when he was in a good mood, although often he wasn't, saying he was going to disown her. But Her thought, *How could he do that? I was conceived; he played a part in that; and he fed me applesauce when I was a baby; I loved that sauce that my parents made from our backyard tree; and now it's as if the little orchard is around me, while Dad is talking about some foreign man on his ward called "Neetsher" or however you spell that German philosopher.*

Her asks, to seem like she's been following the conversation, "Whose in the other bed? Dostoevsky?"

Outside the window, she becomes Her again, moving among the poor patients, as though she was a young woman who has, against all odds, been crowned Queen of England, strolling through an aviary, making sure there is birdseed in the feeder.

I look closer at the feeder and see that the seed has sprouted and a small lawn is growing there. I watch intently as the small lawn swells to full-size and rugby players begin to play, not because I know anything about the game but because the man Her loves is one of the players. Her is filled with admiration for the obvious skill with which he is playing on this lawn, and I can hear music because it is now half-time, and a band is marching and forth on the field.

When they reach the end, they sound like a radio. The clatter of applause: the players are returning to the field; my man receives the most applause. Her can see the audience applaud. Her knows that the game will always be going on.

I, however, am saying my last line of my play, and as it is ended, it is easy to curtsy and bow to the applauding house, because I know I did a

good job, and I feel completely in agreement with them, that the actress showed great progress.

THE PROMOTER'S PROLOGUE

Up stirt the Promoter and that anon:
What we know of a pilgrim sometimes
Discredits his tale. Some tales discredit
The tale preceding. Quiet, match or repay.
Some have eligible girls, & some older men.
Some are about high love and others low.
What Denner & Bromige mean by all this
And what is lewd is the developing debate.

*Here I entreat Apollo to direct their art
Not because they lack mastery
But for the rym ys light and lewd,
Yit makes hyt sumwhat agreable,
Though som vers fayle in a sillable.*

The word “lewd” as used here means ignorant, unskillful. Poet, too, is a four-letter word, and our poets can surely be lewd in another way. I would like to point out some similarities between Bob Dylan and Geoffrey Chaucer as poets of their times. They have the troubadour spirit in common, as well as resemblances between their casts of characters. The Knight leads Chaucer’s procession and the last pilgrim is the Parson. Between these two are the extremes of the human condition. Dylan sees our society as overflowing with everything from *toy guns that spark to flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark*, and he laments that one can *see without looking too far that not much is really holy*.

Dylan dreams he sees Saint Augustine, *alive with fiery*

breath...searching for the very souls whom already have been sold. Remember, Pope Gregory sent Augustine to England because he had seen Anglo Saxon slaves in the market, saw them as “Angels” not “Angels”.

Chaucer knew the ways of the people of his time, and Dylan knows those of ours, and with surreal touches he gives them new features and other names. Where Chaucer relates the tale of the Lady Prioress with her brooch that reads *amor vincit omnia*, there is now a twenty-two year old maid, Ophelia, whose *profession is her religion and her sin, her lifelessness*. There is a Cinderella *who seems easy with her hands in pockets Betty Davis style* who reminds me of the Wife of Bath. There’s the worldly Reeve and there’s Einstein disguised as Robin Hood with his friend the jealous Monk. And the Doctor of Physic in the Canterbury Tales is the none other than Dylan’s *Dr. Filth, who keeps his world inside of a leather cup so that his sexless patients won’t blow it up*.

In his desolation row, Dylan delineates his characters with Chaucerian attention to detail. There are businessmen who *con you into thinking you can win what’s never been won* and plowmen *digging the earth*. And, for Dylan, maybe none of them know what anything is worth.

If this discussion of Dylan and Chaucer seems not entirely relevant, look to your Bible and take heart. But you are waiting for my tale. Well done! I’m ready now, and I will tell you one.

THE PROMOTER’S TALE

I’m a theatrical promoter, and I have many tales. This is one.

One day, the proprietor of a nightclub called me, and he said, “We have a problem.” When he said that we had a problem, I knew he meant I had a problem. The problem was that the owner of the nightclub had spent \$15,000 bringing a woman into town to entertain, and she had a cold. Now we didn’t want the public to know that she had a cold, so we discouraged an interview with her, so that people wouldn’t find out. In the meantime

we want to get publicity, so we decided to put a comedian second on the bill.

Only thing we had to do was to get the comedian. We had no prior information on him, No biographical data, so we decided that the only thing to do was to send me to get something on him, so I was dispatched to his hotel room, to talk to him, to hopefully get some information on him to be used on the publicity, for his coming performance. So, I got over to his hotel room, and he was angry and pacing up and down. I said “Why are you angry?”

And he said, “Well, look out there. The last time I was here I had paid for a room with a view there was a beautiful town out there. Magnolia trees, tulips; and now, they’re digging it all up, and God knows what they’re doing out there in front of the courthouse.” It was a beautiful city, until they built a fence around all this beauty and dug it all up.

I said, “Are you angry?” He said, “Yes, I am.” I said, “I’m delighted that you’re angry. How would you like to go on the radio and express your anger properly?” “I would,” he said.

So, we went down to the radio station, and he got a different kind of interview—not how long have you been in show business kind, but an angry one, that the city center was being destroyed. He got a lot of response. People called in to say what a shame it was that the city was being destroyed, digging it up and putting a fence around. It was good, a lot of good response to the comedian for speaking about it on the radio while he was here.

After it was over, I asked him, “Would you like to do more?” He said, “Certainly.” So, I took him to a bar, and sitting at a nearby table were three university students. We sat near them, and I told them, if this was California, we would DO something about it. So, they went down to a nearby store and got some paint and brushes and began to paint on this eight-foot high fence around the square. Who stole the lawn?

But before they finished this sign, we left them and went to phone the police...that is, having persuaded them to paint the sign, we turned them in. And then, we called the newspaper. The reporters arrived at the same time as the police. Just as three students were finishing the sign, one paper took a picture of their sign and smeared it across the front page. The reason

was this big politician was digging up the lawn to build a concrete fountain.

We got reaction from two levels of government. First, the mayor said, There's been a lot of bad publicity against this site. Let's hear some suggestions about how to deal with it. But first, we have to do this properly. Let's get suggestions from the Art School." So, I immediately phoned the principal of the local art school and he said, "Our students are too dignified to paint on fences. Thank you, and goodbye."

My reaction was to instantly phone the editor of the big paper and say, "The art school won't have anything to do with painting the fence. They won't issue any permits."

They said, "Well, that's not the worst of it. The mayor has withdrawn his offer."

"It's a shame to let it die," I said, and he said, "Yes, it's a slow day." I said, "Why don't you find a long-haired artist and take him to the mayor personally and get the mayor to write him permission to paint one picture on one fence, and I'll do the rest..."

"Ok, Fred," they said, "and you do the rest." So, they started the kid painting.

In the meantime, the Provincial Government crews arrive and start to paint the fence with spray guns and start to paint the fence alternately red and white and red and white all around the grounds. They painted 800 8x4 plywood panels. Gradually, the government contractor is approaching the individual long-haired painter's panel who is doing his thing!

The comedian and I are talking to both sides before an imminent confrontation between painting contractor from the big government and the kid who is doing his own thing. They come together. The painting contractor says, "I'm afraid, my boy, you'll have to stop doing your thing. This panel must be painted red."

The kid says, "Don't bother me, man, I'm doing my thing." The contractor gets very angry and phones the police. We don't have to do it; he does it for us. We're right behind him; we phone the press. Now, the press comes for a second day. They come even more so, television, as well. It's been a front-page story for one day. It's been a confrontation between the government and the individual, single artist.

The policeman wants to make sure that everybody understands what the issues are, so each is asked in turn. Then, the policeman asked the individual artist to show his work order to the press, and this he did.

The individual artist then reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a piece of paper signed by the mayor. So, the policeman now has two pieces of paper to evaluate. He notices the boy's paper is signed by the mayor, and he says, "Well, the mayor's my boss, go ahead, kid, do your thing."

So, the individual artist wins out over the big government that day. The TV and the papers go away with their big story: *Single Artist Wins Out Over Provincial Crew*, and I'm left alone with the kid.

I tell the editor, "We'll show the world we export not only lumber but art." He says, "Mr. Johnson over at the North Shore at the North Shore Terminal about has a boxcar for you."

We went over there in pouring rain. The terminal workers gave us a tarpaulin, and my six foot nine Cree Indian artist began work on his boxcar. Ultimately, it would go over everywhere in North America. We got \$500 to paint it. So, my six foot nine Cree Indian artist began to paint this mural that in the end would go all over the continent.

It took him a month to paint it, every day, I would get a call from the business department of the railroad asking if it was finished yet because the boxcar was costing \$500 a day in downtime.

The PR men were panicking every day. But after he'd done the painting, the six foot nine inch Cree Indian had to apply three coats of lacquer! But finally it was done, and it went all over America show the art work of this six foot nine Cree Indian. It was on TV, in all the newspapers, and it finally was sent on its way. It went as far south as Muncie. It went to North Dakota, New York, Montreal, down to Kansas, and all over North America with gorgeous mural on it.

A month later I had a call from this multi-millionaire in Toronto who was putting on a play that had originated in Vancouver, and he'd heard that I had promoted the play. And he wanted me to come to Toronto to promote it there. So I went. In Toronto, I went to a toy store, six weeks before the play was to begin. Again, I used the boxcar, as I went to model rail way store and bought a scale model and painted *Like Father, Like Fun* on its side. I also painted the remaining panels around the lawn.

Then, I went to all the media with the following story. Not that I was a press agent, but that I was a sign painter, and if anyone saw this actual boxcar, that I had permission to put the name of the play on it, and I was searching for this boxcar, and that if anyone saw it, say at a level crossing, they were to phone in to the newspaper or to a radio station and to let me know the direction it was headed and the approximate speed of it.

Now, of course, I never did catch up to the boxcar, but I did get a lot of publicity for the play out of it.

Here we descended from our vehicle, tipped our driver, and checked into a lovely hotel in Stratford-on-Avon.

THE COACHMAN'S PROLOGUE

The pilgrims have just seen *Twelfth Night* at the Globe. It's a nice setting—Stratford-on-Avon—a large country town full of theatre people.

And they stay in various hotels, all thirty-four pilgrims, even though some of their tales are never told except by hotel maids and, in one instance, by a hotel male.

They are sitting in a bar, discussing the play. "I thought that when Viola was dressed as a man, she acted too effeminate. She needed to act it out in a more masculine way," said Mrs. Jiffie.

Mr. Springfield laments, "Oh, damn, I had a tale to tell called 'Horse Chestnuts of Lower Plethy'—and could've been a hit, had Doris Day singing, 'You don't say Pair-ee, you say Pair-us,' but it'll have to wait until we finish this tale about Shakespeare."

"Leave Shakespeare out of it," said Mr. Jiffie. "He wrote the play. Let's talk about the play. And that's that."

Quite emphatically, Mrs. Springfield exclaimed, "This is Shakespeare's way of saying he's gay—because he like to dress a boy as a girl, who was then dressed up as a man, which confused the cast into thinking she was

a man, but then along came what's-his-name"—some kind of 'bear' in Italian, I think..."

"Orsino," put in the Poet.

"Yes, Duke Orsino, and she fell for him, and as soon as the *contratemp*s was cleared up, all the stuff that makes this play a play was cleared up, she could show herself as a man, and he could say, 'Hot diggedydog.' It was more realistic the way they did it, and I liked it better the way it was."

"It won't do you any good to try and read into Shakespeare's mind," said the Busman. "It just turns the play into a Freudian soap opera. Whatever way you play it, it turns out that way, but at the end, when he turns into a she, it turns out the way that Will will have it—that's why *Twelfth Night* is also called *What You Will*."

THE COACHMAN'S TALE

Dillard has given up on simple living. What's the point when all of his pals from *the good old days* have already begun to cave in. Just last week he went over to Mac's for a beer and discovered him completely spread out on a black leather recliner, with a new plasma screen TV that seemed to be as big as Mac's King-sized bed if it was turned up on its side. Hell, Dillard remembered when Mac's king-sized bed was the only furniture in the place, engage in any activity not involving a bed and you had to sit cross-legged on the floor.

"What the hell's this?" Dillard had said, when he discovered Mac spread out like that, a TV remote in one hand, the other clutching the recliner lever as if ready for any last-minute adjustments.

Mac jolted forward and said, "What?" in that same defensive tone he had used back in '93 when Dillard discovered him in bed with the girl Dillard had been trying to make the moves on ever since she blew into town on a wave of Nag Champa. Sure, Dillard has gotten her in the end, they were married now, and Shelley swore that night with Mac had been a horrific, psilocybin induced mistake and that where in the hell else was she

supposed to sit down besides the bed? Dillard had gotten over that one, sort of, but just the same, Mac's defensive tone put his shackles up and he felt overwhelmed by the desire to smoke a joint despite his promise to Shelly that he would give it up now that they were expecting the baby.

"What's with the TV, man? And the recliner?" Dillard tried to control his agitation but still his voice came out tight. Shelly has taken their television to the Salvation Army only the day before, she didn't want the baby raised that way, and now here was Mac, giving into consumerism like he hadn't spent the last twenty years in hemp pants and Jesus sandals.

Mac shrugged and settled back down into his seat. He flipped a few channels randomly. "I threw my back out in yoga on Friday, Dillard. Jesus. Chill out man. When was the last time you got laid?"

PROLOGUE TO THE END

"It hasn't been feeling right since the Democrats took over Congress," the man with the bow tie said.

The man next to him on the bench outside the tavern was wearing dark glasses and looked down the road at the Tudor facades in Chorley Wood. "Right," he said. "It hasn't been feeling right to me since the War of the Roses...I mean, from a historical point of view. You know, Tony Blair with all his liberal talk and all his conservative behavior. I'm glad we're headed home. When I get home, I'm going to an opening of *Our Town* in Sebastopol. I could use some good ol' American homespun realism about now. How about you? I've got a couple of extra tickets. You could bring your wife. We live in the boonies. We might as well see a play about how we really live."

"Not sure Trixi would like that," said bow tie. "She likes the tube. Real theater scares her. Too much reality, I guess." He looked down at the paper on the bar top: DEMOS TAKE HOUSE. "It's demolition time," he said wistfully, "and just when everything was going so well in Iraq. We should stay the course and see the mission through, and now we are likely as not

going to have a drawdown of troops and a withdraw in defeat.”

“Don’t fold all your legs in one basket,” said the man in shades.

“What did you say?”

“Just a matter of speech, that’s all,” said the other, “and a bit twisted to boot, but you can do what it says, unfold your legs, or to read it another way, relax, don’t be uptight, look on the bright side, in no time at all the Democrats will be the ones with a failed policy, and we will be trying to undo all the torture legislation and habeas corpus shit, and we’ll be a long way down the pike and a lot further from a *government is best which governs least* kind of utopia.”

His companion turned and said, “More likely we’ll be in a state of siege due to some dirty bomb thrower. Sure, we’ll have universal health care. We’ll need it. But we’ll also have sexual predators on every street corner performing gay marriages and doing stem cell research on aborted fetuses, but what the hell, it’s a free country, even if you can’t afford it and have to steal it. One big Kleptocracy is where this is headed. But, at least, I’m still sober.”

“You’re a true Antidisestablishmentarian, I can tell,” said dark glasses.

“You mean the ones with funny hats?”

“No, I mean the ones improperly clad.”

“Well, any port in a storm.”

“Make mine *Sandiman*’s. The innkeeper poured him a drink.

“No matter the hats?”

“No matter the hats.”

“No matter. Hats or no hats, Skål!”

“Skål! to you, Sir.”

THE END

Fred Hill left David and Richard with what they each found a mysterious piece of advice: “There will always be a place for the two of you in B.C.

There, we will never run out of water.” What they both found odd about this was the rain that was drenching San Francisco that day, and had been, for three days straight.

As they approached the Gate Bridge, the rain increased in volume.

“It’ll this all the way home,” said David. “Fred’s bought too much of that climate-change crap.”

“I’m not so much puzzled by his meteorological beliefs as I am by the other thing he said,” replied Richard.

“Well, yes, that was a peculiar remark, too,” agreed David.

“What was it he said? ‘Don’t unfold all your legs in one basket’?”

“Oh, did he say, ‘unfold’?”

“You’re going as deaf as a goalpost, Bromige.”

“Well, it doesn’t really matter, this time.”

“Right, folded legs can soon be unfolded.”

“That’s as may be. But ‘one basket’ is the important phrase. It probably refers to the condition of marriage,” speculated David.

“Fred’s married, isn’t he?”

“Forty-some years.”

“I get it. He was going to get a piece of ass before he caught the plane to Vancouver.”

“Yeah...but I don’t quite have it figured out, that way.”

“What’s his wife like?” asked Richard.

“A wife of some forty-odd years. Extremely odd. I don’t know if they’re back together or apart again.”

“Do you think he’d be screwing Joanna What’sername?” David made no reply but looked sulky.

“What’s up?” Richard asked.

“I wanted to make it with Joanna when we were young. She was living near us. This was the winter we went back to London. Joanna was married, too. But her husband was teaching back in Vancouver. She used to flirt with me. She was one fine woman. But one night she phoned to say she knew my wife had an evening rehearsal, so why didn’t I come by and keep her company? So go I did, but when she opened her door, she was in the altogether. And when she kissed me, all I could taste was Scotch. And when she spoke, it was drunkard’s syllables. I felt like I could have been

anyone. At this stage, I had never been unfaithful to my wife. And I thought, 'Then why, now?' But what a lovely body! I told her I was late; Ann would be home soon. And she was, too, five minutes after me. Oh, joy! and, of course, Oh, goddamit! Joanna was a hard one to have to forget. Is."

"Yeah, those 'close but no seegar' ones can really haunt. I turn to Buddha to get them off my mind."

"I wonder what Fred Hill is going through, working with Joanna again."

"Were those two ever a twosome?" inquired Richard.

"We're gonna have to wait for Judgement Day. Do you have one of those, in Buddhism?"

"Oh, we're judging the illusions of this world all the time. In the present. Now."

"Yes, well, I thought they were, back then, but now they're both in their sixties," Bromige sighed.

Richard said, "They're spending a lot of time together, you say?"

"A lot," David agreed.

"But Fred won't say?"

"Well, he puts his finger to his lips whenever I ask him. But I've seen him together with Joanna, and they don't come off like being a couple."

Apparently wearying of the topic, Richard said, "Well, we'll see. But now's the hoax progressing?"

"Fred's had her paint several pictures. He simply gets her drunk on cheap sherry and talks while she goes on painting."

"Is the plan that she'll have enough to exhibit them in concert with the opening night of the play?"

"Right, they'll be exhibited under the name of Madame Grekunso, a Czechoslovak painter who has been granted a visa to come to Canada on compassionate grounds."

"And what play is your ex starring in? Something by Chechov? Turgenev? Did Turgenev write plays? *Fathers and Fun*, wasn't that one of his?"

"No, no, nothing Russian. Thornton Wilder. *Our Town*, I think."

"So, Hill plans to create an art show hoax, and the woman who pretends to be a nobody is actually well-known in Poland for her painting."

David notices this disparity, but not wanting to interfere with his friend's plot, he keeps quiet. David's ex-wife, who is starring in the play, has one idea about selling these paintings and Fred Hill has another.

"And the woman's painting proves so popular" Richard continues, "that your ex-wife throws a fit. No one is watching the play, and this catches the attention of a terrorist organization, who fill the theater, and the artists thus become the unwitting operatives of terrorists."

Richard and David decided to proceed with the project. You must remember that this was years ago, when people were in the mood for Thornton Wilder. There were people in California who had a hankering to see down home stuff. People felt that everything was so crooked in society that they might as well watch some straight forward interpretations of real life in the boonies.

Richard and David thought so, too. I was often with them and loved to listen to their conversations, and since I, too, had once been involved with Fred Hill on one of his pranks. I was his fan, forever more. The two old boys were recalling the hoax element that occurred in their earlier staging of *Our Town*, because while they'd been in England, a little theater in Santa Rosa had been doing a production of this play, and they were going to see it as soon as they got back from their travels. I was on the Airporter with them, but I would be getting off in Petaluma, where I live.

And who am I you may ask? I am a Clerk in a local branch of the I.R.S. and in that I deal with last things, after death, judgement, heaven, and hell. As they say, *There's nothing surer than death and taxes*. More to the point, I am a member of what Chaucer would deem a Fourth Estate in the medieval hierarchy of Knight, Parson, and Commons. In other words, you can trust me.

But enough about me. Richard and David were sitting in the seats in front of me rehashing what went wrong with a previous production of *Our Town*. The trouble was that the painting by the alleged Russian, Madame Grekunso, were of more interest to the first night audience than the play. People kept milling around in the foyer and discussing the paintings.

Finally, Joanna said that the paintings had to be cleared, and they were cleared, but not before Fred pinned red flags on the paintings that had been bought, with the names and phone numbers of the owners and the amount

they had paid. The prices were surprisingly low, people said. This was because Fred didn't want to push his luck. You see, David's ex-wife, the actress, Ann Brightstone, had no patience with the artist, who she viewed, perhaps rightly, as a fake.

There was no love lost between her and Joanna Randier, whom David's ex thought had slept with David when she was still married to him, although David told her, "Close, but no cigar!" Besides, David's close friend back then was Rob Erie, whom Ann found also attractive, and so jealousy flamed her feelings towards Joanna. It was a small world, apparently, their Vancouver. But now it's time to go ahead to David and Richard's conversation on the Airporter the other day.

"That's nothing to the trouble we had the second night. There were only five paintings without red flags on them left to buy, and they varied greatly as to whether Joanna had drunk, enough sherry while she was executing them or not," David reminded Richard. "That sherry, in sufficient quantities, vastly improved her painting skills!" he went on. "Remember how those two playgoers fought over that one picture? I thought it was the best of the whole bunch, but they were furious. Each claimed that Fred had told him the picture was his!"

"Right, Fred had to do some slick talking to get that one straightened out," said Richard.

"Not that he could," said David.

"True, not that he could. Even with those two guys."

"That guy who *looked* like an art expert was there. He was a friend of Fred's, and in exchange for a lid of Korean weed, assured the more doltish of the two that the pick of the lot was really that picture that no one wanted to buy, that its 'emptiness' told us more about the painter's life behind the Iron Curtain than anything else she had dared to paint."

"Wasn't this the only painting she did while sober?"

"The liquor store was out of Regal Sherry, so Fred bought some sort of Port that night, and it made her throw up."

"That was some shit wine, alright. We finished it, but I don't remember us throwing up."

"Her's was a delicate nature," David said, and they both laughed.

"So, Madame Chekovski made a mint," exclaimed Richard.

“Yes, mind you, Fred kept some for professional expenses.”

“Were the actors paid?”

“Definitely not,” said David with his most Reverend Bromige face on. The pair laughed some more, and the Airporter pulled into Petaluma and said goodbye to me and reminded me to come to the opening night of *Our Town*, tomorrow night.

I suppose they continued their lively conversation over the next few miles to Santa Rosa. I’m not sure yet at what point the terrorists hijacked the bus, although I have heard that one passenger objected and was shot. I hope it wasn’t David or Richard. The terrorists have sealed the bus off. Santa Rosa police have it surrounded, and Special Forces are on their way to see what can be done. However, I have learned never to trust anything that is labeled “special.”

I think of my two friends, and how things will go. They must realize that fate is against them. I think that David must be missing his wife and daughter, although otherwise quite glad to get shot in the heart. I don’t know about Richard; he always has so much to do. But being a Buddhist, he has a series of interesting future lives to look forward to. I hope that he remains for many more years in this one before he explores them.