

you're  
of company —

here  
shadowed branches,

small,  
twisted comfortably

your size,  
reddish buds' clusters —

all of  
you I love

here  
by the simple river.

line

number nine

A Journal of Contemporary Writing  
and its Modernist Sources

spring 1987



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As a journal published in co-operation with The Contemporary Literature Collection, *Line* will reflect the range of the collection. Contents will be related to the line of post-1945 Canadian, American, and British writers whose work issues from, or extends, the work of Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, H.D., Gertrude Stein, and Charles Olson.

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The photographic work was done by the Graphics Department, SFU.

Cover: Detail from "Tree" by Robert Creeley in *Warren's Book*, compiled by Peter Quartermain.

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

*Line*, Number Nine is dedicated to Warren Tallman for all the wordfilled years—three decades plus—he pushed and cajoled to keep the writing life moving in Vancouver. With Ellen Tallman, their two young kids Karen and Ken, their belongings crammed into a beat up truck, they crossed over the border from Seattle in September 1956 to teach at the University of British Columbia. No sooner settling, they opened their house to the budding local writing scene, gathering around them a young generation of West Coast writers who would later blossom to transform the Canadian writing scene . . . George Bowering, Frank Davey, Fred Wah, Daphne Marlatt, Gladys Hindmarch, to name some. The parties at the Tallman home have become legendary events where at any time in the packed rooms, the hallways, or the kitchen, one would meet and have a beer with many American writers—Robert Duncan, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Ed Dorn, and many others—dropping in from scattered points in the U.S. to read their works and to talk their wild poetics. Last December 1986, Warren retired from the English Department at U.B.C. and gave his farewell thoughts on his teaching life, "How to Play Career, and Win." Peter Quartermain of Slug Press, a colleague in the English Department and a longtime friend, honoured Warren by soliciting and compiling a collection of tributes from fellow teachers, writers, and friends all over North America. These were given to Warren in an elegantly bound volume appropriately titled *Warren's Book*. Peter has assisted us in reproducing a selection from this single copy book.

Warren's collection of essays, *Godawful Streets of Man*, is still available from *Open Letter*; his essay on Jack Kerouac appeared in *Line*, Number Three. Lori Chamberlain is working on the collected letters of Jack Spicer; Terry Ludwar works at SFU and has a personal interest in the work of Spicer. Lewis Ellingham's piece comes from his work in progress, *Poet, Be Like God*, an oral biography of Spicer; other sections appeared in *Line*, Numbers Seven/Eight. Brian Fawcett's most recent book, *Cambodia: A Book for People Who Find Television Too Slow*, has been published by Talonbooks; Chris Dewdney's *The Immaculate Perception*, the focus of Fawcett's interview, is available from Anansi. Janice Williamson's essay on Lola Tostevin is part of her Ph.D. dissertation, "Citing Resistance: Vision, Space, Authority and Transgression in Canadian Women's Poetry" (York University).



Carey Vivian is a graduate student in the English Department at SFU. Jenny Penberthy's book, "*A Proper Balance*": *Lorine Niedecker's Poems and Her Letters to Louis Zukofsky*, is forthcoming from Duke University Press. In line with the announcement in our last issue that we will open a section for new writing, we are pleased to feature poems by Sharon Thesen and Lola Tostevin. Thesen's latest book, *Confabulations*, is available from Coach House; Tostevin's *Double Standards* is available from Longspoon.

Our Fall 1987 issue will be co-published with Talonbooks as a collection of essays devoted to bpNichol's long and wonderful poem, *The Martyrology*. Alongside commentaries on *The Martyrology* by Stephen Scobie, Douglas Barbour, Shirley Neuman, Smaro Kamboureli and others, the issue will also feature Steve McCaffery interviewing bp, annotated manuscripts of *The Martyrology* housed in SFU's Special Collections, a bibliography, and in-progress sections from this continuing Canadian long poem.

RM  
June 15, 1987

Selections from *Warren's Book*:

Compiled by Peter Quartermain  
on the Occasion of Warren Tallman's  
Retirement from the English Department  
of the University of British Columbia

December 31, 1986

Warren Tallman at SFU for the "Tish Re-union," October 11, 1985

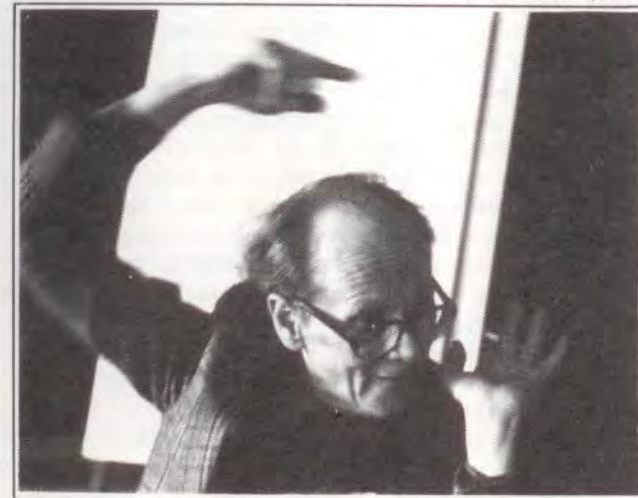


photo by miki

For those who have known Warren only since he came to UBC what I am about to reveal may come as something of a surprise. But now that Warren is retiring, and neither his career nor his reputation will be damaged, I feel that certain truths about his performance as a graduate student at Washington may finally be told.

Warren was not always as sweet-tempered and agreeable as he is today. When he was taking his Ph.D. orals he categorically refused to answer many of the questions put to him by his examiners. When, for example, Professor Heilman asked Warren a simple question having to do with narrative technique, he responded, rather cryptically, that he didn't read fiction that way. And when Heilman, trying to be agreeable, said that he would be satisfied with a hypothetical answer to the question, Warren informed him that he didn't read fiction hypothetically. Warren's answer left me, his chairmen, and everyone else on the examining committee, including Heilman, gasping for breath. And we continued to gasp as Warren treated other members of the committee with equal severity. Even so, they voted to pass him, with only a minor proviso or two. I myself was quite elated. But when I went out in the hall and told Warren the good news he was furious; and when the other committee members came out beaming, ready to shake Warren's hand and congratulate him, he turned his back on them. At this point, thinking perhaps he didn't understand, I said rather lamely, "They want to shake hands," only to have Warren turn to me and say, in a loud voice, "Tell them to shake hands with one another"--as he stomped down the hall and out of the building.

If space permitted I could speak of many other such episodes--all showing that Warren was not always the academic role model he has since become.





Mike Matthews was like a big brother to me. Actually younger, he had been at UBC for many years, trying to pass Russian 100, so he knew the ropes. He stepped over all the ropes as he hurried me through Registration. "Don't bother with that -- it's just the photo for your I.D. card." He told me to buy a cord suit with pipestem pants next time I was in Seattle. One day he told me to come to his American Lit. class with him. "You have to experience this guy." So I had my first sight of Warren Tallman. "He's even more nervous than you, Bromige." Indeed, at one point, WT attempted to write on the board with a cigaret while trying to light a piece of chalk. Mr. Tallman was explicating a poem by Denise Levertov. His method was more an embodiment than an analysis. With an energetic inarticulateness I couldn't decide was or was not deliberate, he enacted the poem. "The hands, crabwise" -- what it meant to WT was inscribed in the contortions of his body. I was still deciding whether to become a north american or to reclaim britishness by imitating Kenneth Tynan. So WT was a provocative phenomenon: irresistibly fascinating, eminently approachable, without condescension, but with no time for the Brit Public School part of me. He and Ellen gave great parties. Tony Friedson (like me, a recent english immigrant) and his wife Carol gave great parties too. I couldn't decide. Inextricably the direction of historical particulars involved more and more of us thus shortly me too with WT. I grew to enjoy the bafflement my Aristotelean portion met with in the poets of WT's advocacy. Gradually then suddenly here was at least something in the nada of H-Bomb (im)patience. We sat glass in hand on the rug attending his houseguest R. Creeley (age 36). "...Or did you make it up yourself?" WT gave me Robert Duncan's address, and I went to California. 3 years later, the Tallmans rented the Hurleys' house in Berkeley for the duration of the Conference. At a party there, my late and much lamented friend (also from UBC) blew one of the distinguished participants with the new disregard for traditional distinctions between public and private. All my conversations with WT were conducted among others, at parties, in beer parlors, or before a class. After a reading I gave in Vancouver in 1974, WT, sitting in the Cecil, thanked me for my efforts by raising his natty felt hat to disclose a bald crown. "Is he remembering that, if hair is what one expects, one's expectations are being thwarted?" I had to wonder. "Or is he simply being nice?" For WT did sympathize with the simple, thrusting upon one texts by ex-students practically stupefied by their own simplifications. Yet his brilliant texts that parallel (and thereby elucidate) Creeley's early prose or Kerouac's novels confirm WT's complexity. Maybe he is the projectivist supreme, taking on the coloration he's faced with. Generous in his support of my work, he never stopped (or so my projection runs) egging me on, needlewise. In 1977, visiting Vancouver, I meant to bring my old mentor (one good turn...) news of the poetic exultations in SF. I spoke to his class about the talk series in the Perelman-Shaw loft. WT kept interrupting to ask me for physical details. I felt he thought "DB, abstract as ever, must ground this boy" and felt impatient: "The walls are white, the posts are white, it's a loft, y'know? Like any other loft." Perhaps my suspicion was confirmed after when he said "The tide's out." I knew what was happening stemmed from much he had early recognized. I call to him, across this widening river. I doff my hat to him. I raise a glass to my ear.

I first 'brewed' a batch of 'sake' in the fall of 1959, in a 12 gal. olive barrel behind an Abbott's food furnace. The recipe included large quantities of sugar, raisins & rice, & smaller ones of potatoes, oranges & yeast. Among the matters leading to this production were my companionship with Bobby Hogg, two 14-yr-old girls who customarily climbed out their bedroom windows to go on dates, & a teenage Arabian bootlegger on Sumner Mountain.

Bottled after fermentation had terminated naturally, & carefully siphoned from the sediment that settled within the first few weeks, 'sake' was a clear bright amber. At UBC I began contributing gallon jugs of it to meetings of the Writers Workshop. Warren Tallman quickly heard about 'sake' -- probably through Gladys Weismann who was active in the Workshop & roomed with the Tallmans -- & began inviting me to his Sunday gatherings of students. Shortly after he began buying additional gallons to ensure the success of the gatherings, I thus had to cut back on production time, & at the Feb. 1960 party I held to 'study' Olson's 'Projective Verse' I had to pour the sake carefully from unsiphoned jugs. Toward the end of the evening many became impatient to be served & drank directly from the jugs -- with some effect. Jamie Reid collapsed at the curb, on which he smashed the necks from beer bottles so he could continue drinking, & within 11 years had joined the Marxists. Bob Davis found his way to Velt & had his stomach pumped. Lionel Kearns impulsively left the party through the bathroom window & later declined to be an editor of Tish. Dave Leloge gave a sample to a chemistry student who reported it contained 4 intoxicants. Further batches saw the inviting of Robert Duncan to speak at the Tallmans, & my selection to edit Tish. Some of the original jugs & siphoned were gathered by Bill Hoffer & are in Special Collections at SFU. Warren Tallman's support of Tish continued at least until my retirement from 'sake' & Tish in June 1963.



There is a certain writer, say a certain western literary critic, take Warren Tallman, for instance, who was born on the New Frontier, and writes essays for readers who have to grow up in Neutron Fear. What a strange and problematic position to be in! Warren Tallman, for instance, grew up around gas stations in the Pacific Northwest, where Modernism was likely eventually to reach, where regret lived out the decline of Joseph Conrad as the news in transoceanic writing, where Henry James was cherished because so remote. Well, then, Modernism, but dont give it a name. Warren Tallman, for instance, did not really know what they were saying about literary composition in the Ivy League, so he just listened to whatever he could hear, and luckily that was language. Now there is a reaching even here in our Southwest of Postmodernism, in which the critics are the famous writers; but Warren Tallman, for this present instance, is stuck with writing, back there, where the language is now.

"But rime is what holds, coheres, when story goes. Rime is things put into discernible relation, hence intelligible. All the various chains in Bob's stories are rimed, musical chains amongst themselves if amongst other things." WT in a letter, 1964

Warren at a table shuffling papers (canary yellow and lined, written on in pencil, that loopy loping hand running on for pages...

mother tongue he says, getting his tongue around her double plays

Warren standing at the front of the room facing a sea of disbelieving faces, Warren selling "wonder" with that lopsided grin, the reiterated phrase in varying stages of recognition escaping the sentence he had set for it...

father land he leaves and does not leave: Olympia, her "democratic" heroes

Warren and the locative, Warren saying so now where did you say you grew up? Warren and the iterative, knowing the power of the telling, that the teller's tale tell its own patterns telling the rime to the nth power...

mother earth he says, not forgetting her grave-cave where memory sets that cradle (endlessly) rocking

Warren as Houdini scaling casement ladders (magic or not), slipping chains (noted in margins in pencil), rafting through Hell's Gate on a metaphor...

mother mine he says, riming child and line, margin and home

Warren afloat in the solution that is rhythm without resolution, word after word down the block and round again, so the story goes and ongoing depends on where we are coming from):

language the site and imaginary



Warren  
I have so many memories  
of huts, of parties, of readings, of talking  
windstorm Buchanan penthouse Kerouac saxophone prose  
snowy sad walks  
sheets of yellow paper written in pencil fall onto the carpet  
windshield wipers click punctuate your sentences  
chalk in one hand cigarette in the other  
a blackboard of possibilities  
a diagram of our  
perceptions

you never forced  
one of us to go your way  
yet you insisted, oh, how you insisted  
and one Sunday  
when you were arguing with a number of us in your living room  
you had three cigarettes going at once

summer Spicer evenings of talk and reading  
lights on/lights off (Warren this is all wrong)  
parties for Duncan, Creeley, Olson, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti  
(the Fish boys all hiding in the kitchen/Bowering's fist  
punching a baseball mitt--not wanting to part of the crowd around F)  
you taught us a type of arrogance which you denied along with a  
trust in our own ways of seeing for which we are forever  
grateful

you are in each of us  
who became more ourselves through you  
you are with each as we enter a classroom as we answer  
or ask an interesting question  
you are in each of us in part of how we read  
you are in each of us in part of how we write

sometimes I'd love to be back in Buchanan Building  
with you at the front  
Barry Hale, Frank Davey, Lionel Kearns  
near me at the back  
the board covered in language and signals  
Mary Haig Brown answering a question  
Bob Davis listening intently

sometimes I'd love to enter a Tallman party  
living room full of dancers  
kitchen full of smoke  
people pushing up the stairs on their way to the bathroom  
your writing table covered in food  
McClure or Creeley or Welch or Dorn around the corner  
and always the excitement  
the young kid with bag full of candy type of excitement of  
simply being present, right there: a whole world

His is the voice that listens.

He is the teacher who listens  
with the compressed attention of  
speech.

He is the poet of the unattainable  
silence.


His is the voice that  
teaches the ear to translate  
perception into joy.

Wonder Merchants, he cries  
Advancing over the Rockies  
Riding to the Coast, slapping  
Rocinante, the nag  
Epic, elegiac, encomiastic  
Neighing to Pacific air

These bones shall live  
Amerindia rises from  
Lillooet, Prince George, even Kerrisdale  
Loquacious as Bowering  
Manic as Bissett  
Aspic as Thesen and, oh, (P)  
Neumatic as Wah...ah...ahh

Quickened by a large thermos  
Under his arm, caffeine  
Invading the old wineskin, he comes  
Xerxes to Bennetts, to Pattisons  
Oops, he says, half flattened  
Then opening his small mouth wider  
Engulfs them in laughter

TREE  
[FOR WARREN]  
You tree  
of company -  
here  
shadowed branches,  
small,  
twisted comfortably  
your size,  
reddish buds' clusters -  
all of  
you I love  
here  
by the single river.

CREELEY, HIS MARK: 

  
That lovely  
tree, Warren -  
just like  
you! Thanks -  
forever!  
Your friend -  
with love,  
Bob



How To Play Career, and Win

Read to the English Department, University of B.C.  
Buchanan A-100 Lecture Theatre, 3:30 Thursday Afternoon,  
November 27, 1986

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Expensive versions of this game can be obtained at shops in various trendy places: Cambridge England, Cambridge Mass, Berkeley, Princeton, U of T. However, this is UBC so I propose we push such niceties aside and concentrate on a version of the game designed for large, state-funded universities suffering from student bulge, essay inundation and underfunding flatulence. This version comes equipped with deans, the deans equipped with speeches, speeches in which excellence, yes Excellence, provides a steady diet. Which makes us profs Oliver Twists, bowls held out for all the gruel we can possibly eat. For merit, help yourself to more. Excellence spread everywhere, a little thinly in some places, almost less excellent than thin. But deans have always spoken thus since academic time began. And who would contradict a dean. Shake the dice. The game is on.

Impressions clinging in the mind mark the beginnings of this game. So move at once to childhood squares, childhood tales, a literary land of OZ—woodman, scarecrow, sorceress, good magician, wicked witch—with little squares for nursery rhymes, rope-jumping red-hot-pepper times, songs our mothers sang to us at the knees of Mother Tongue, billy boy and cradle down as stone and metal grip together, arch, and vault the traffic over London Bridge to Brooklyn Bridge as car horns mingle with the wind. Great boulders cling into the ground which prudent farmers skirt. Great walls shut us out and in, and lesser walls do much the same whose gates contrive a game of swing, children out and children in. Humpty dumpty falling down to where my little dog has gone, fine lady riding on a horse, over the hill and a great way off, "gone with the raggle taggle gypsies, oh."

Whisp of wind across a page. Pages fluttering out of doors.  
Whisper breezes in the grass, sunsplash falling page by page of  
outdoor summer reading days.

Then indoors, now it's wintertime, late afternoon, dusk outside,  
eyes from page to window pane, weak light of winter leaning in,  
somewhere else, some other time, perhaps that William  
Shakespeare song:

When that I was and a little tiny boy  
With hey ho, the wind and the rain  
A foolish thing was but a toy  
For the rain it raineth every day  
With hey-ho the wind and the rain  
And the rain it raineth every day.

And every winter afternoon. Back to book, light *inside*, lamplite  
circle, shadow-edged, lamplight on a turning page—intimations of  
this game. Toss the dice.

Advance to adolescent days with speech compacted, Yup and  
Nope—and all you did or didn't say summed up into, *Ida No*. But  
certain novels catching hold, caught by *Catcher In The Rye*, or  
writing existential poems of *Star-Crossed* love, Kahlil Gibran,  
spelled out in heart-felt *tra la la*. And *tra la la* shambles down  
teacherous classroom corridors where

I love her,  
And she loves him.  
And what's to do,  
He's my best friend.

*tra la la*. Some get stuck forever there. End of game. And just as  
well. Yet ardent teachers still abide in odd outlandish high school  
places, teachers who still want and need that stir of latent power,  
stir of star-crossed *tra la la*, molten with banality, fumbling at  
some stubborn latch, fumbling at some classroom door that won't and  
won't and won't unlock, knee and shoulder spastic weak, wrist and  
ankle also frail, strengthless weakness at the door, yet desperately  
wanting in. Teacher there, aureola of her hair, practicalities of  
speech. Now:

chase that mumble from your voice,  
learn to write with emphasis  
why not write a poem for her



tell her everything you feel  
I know she thinks the world of you  
she's told me so  
spell existential *i a l*  
I like this DHLawrence poem,  
'the pain of loving you' . . .  
I want you to come by again  
next time with a longer poem  
you know I'm-always-here.

Lurch of adolescent love. Lurch of poem past tra la la. Latent power on the stir. Word-forms bursting into stars. Star formations on a page. Teacher shakes her head and smiles. Game goes on.

In fact it's moving very fast, these dice are getting loaded. Advance to undergraduate days and fascination square. Feel for words, feel for tales, feel for poems. An easy flow of sentences, flow of easy paragraphs. Who'd have guessed it, has the touch. Yet one of those in whom kiss and tell speeds the blood into pell-mell wild thoughts that rush around making even Henry James's clause-complexities seem tame. Danger zone. Danger place. Risks the pell-mell student runs, wanting it all, kiss and tell, "live, live all you can," said portly pell-mell Henry James. But look ahead, very next square. See the stern professor stand, foursquare to the world of prose, foursquare to the written word, powered by a tic that jerks his head from left to right—from no to no—because he never could abide urgent wayward pell-mell minds. Insists that prose be standard flow into standard paragraphs arranged in standard essay form. And what's to do? Goodby pell-mell. Goodby rushing in the blood. Goodby "live, live all you can." See the good professor nod. See the good professor smile. See him positively beam. Reassured of prose like his. O great Thoreau. Oh Emerson. O Walt. With heat-lightening pell-mell minds, swim and glitter everywhere, Henry David, river man, Ralph and Walt, come here to the classroom door. Bring a pencil. Bring a pen. Don't be shy. Step right in. Sit beside the pell-mell one. Fear speeds the blood. Take up your pencil or your pen, and fail the comp exam with him. Move to the committee room, sage professors gathered there, sager smiles, little jokes, "Why can't this kid write standard prose. Prose like ours that is." Hear the creak of bowling balls in a creaky bowling lane, in a one-pin bowling game named academic prose. Come on kid. Write like us. Write like us, or else clear out. Give up the game, it's not for you. Not for wayward minds alive. Ask the

chairman. Ask the head. Ask the dean. Oh Excellence. O great Thoreau. Oh Emerson. O Walt.

What keeps such players at this game when it seems a pastime best passed quickly by and "let's get pissed." What can cause a lively mind the kind of mind that wants to live and read and write with a certain magnitude—James called it "large and full and free"—how can such ones settle down to one-pin academic prose (with not *too many* gutter balls), surely a great distance off from Shelley's "best and happiest minds." What *is* the sound that yawning makes when it's swallowed into smile, smiling student, smiling prof—the student's hypocritic days. You're on a square which says "look out." Too many smiles of that kind, repetitious, student-bland, easy and smooth, can slide into the soul like silt and stop imagination short, c.f., constipated prose. The pell-mell seething of your blood gone slack. No more "Live, Live all you can," yourself the hypocritic one.

I think salvation at this time is as abiding as is youth. It's because the young *are* young. Rescued by novels, rescued by poems, rescued by a prof or two who let you know they care. Rescued by Sacred Mother Tongue, who *is* large and full and free. And bends to you. And draws you on, imagination's wings and spurs. Only the Imagination Real said William Carlos Williams. Loved Polish housewives. Hated profs. Upbeat days when you *know* you love to read, love to write. So do professors X and Y, or off in his own corner Zed. Hell, he's a lively sort of guy who's learned how not to care too much for certain features of this Game. And / he / gets / *paid*. So why / not / me! Let's see now. Academic prose. I wonder what the hell it is. I can't find anyone who knows. They always say the same damn thing. Standard prose is standard prose is standard prose. Rows on rows. Rose by Rose. I don't think Gertrude would approve. Nervous giggle. Games goes on.

So our player makes it through to the graduate student squares, the TA square. Player, pause. Look around before you toss those dice again. Drawing closer to career, remember that you need to win. And moving to these TA squares you'll find danger. Danger of overseeing profs whom you've hardly even met who show up in your class with petty power to write you off because the way you like to teach is not the way they like to teach. Danger of those snake-pit types who are always to be met, market place by market place, wherever people congregate and lacklove turns to venom. But the danger supreme is closer to home, very close, in your own class. You'd better learn to love that class which means you have to earn their love, the only safety in the room. You'd better learn to know



despair on their and your down days. Read essays *seeking* happiness, sink in the boots of those who fail. And as day fumbles into day hope you'll manage two or three that you can stand to think about. Not feel green gorge rising up when the one whose writing you like best drops out because he can't quite hack what's here, and you, being here, have failed. As one whose writing you like least begins to think that you're just great, indignity of vacant praise. Or some wan face that hates your face because it hates the whole damn place with murder murder in the heart. And pray that you can keep the faith, love the novel, love the poem, love the play, love at least enough to bring a corresponding glow into essays you can tell reflect a certain glow from you, glow that is a wishing well in a human universe of reciprocated love. Reciprocal but transient. Whisk the year has gone away. And so have they. Doors open out. Heavy heavy on your hands. Another year. Start again. Toss the dice.

If what I've said is true for you you're very lucky at this game. For others all runs very SMOOTH. In the door and out the door. A sameness as of days and faces, no hates, no loves, no gut-grind times when you suffered being there, ignominiousness of fear. Some TAs die in their first year. Don't even know they've lost the game, busy busy every day. Status is a full-time task. A kind of zeal that knows no end. Except, perhaps, the boss's. And making sure you never see a student's simple human face in a classroom universe. You know, university. The usual signs of this dis-ease, those brown-study teachers' frowns: students who are no damn good, know-nothing students lazy and dumb dumb and sullen sullen clods with empty heads, and this indeed is very true in a peculiar sort of way, seated in a dismal row, know-nothing, lazy, sullen clods. Mirror, mirror, row by row. Don't you look too closely now at what you *see*. As in mirrors on a wall. Take a look. Look away.

At the TA stages of this game paths ray out like spokes from hubs. These paths converge in a muddle wood, call it groves of academe. First look past the PhD exam, past the thesis, out ahead to a desert you must cross, later on, five years wide. Anxiety and acrid heat—sweat you motha, sweat a lot—as you make your faltering way toward tenure day. The tenure square, the tenure tower, the tenure bell. And does it toll? Or does it peal? History comes singing in but it's a rather dreary song you need to learn and listen to and listen well as you pace your path along. Time was—this is history—when UBC was a teaching place. Reviews and articles and books were in somewhat sparse supply. Classroom life was everything. But the writing life was moving in to change

all that. Had the dean and senior profs kept their wits inside their heads, they might have seen the obvious. Take any faculty at all, anywhere, say here. Count them up. *Some* want to write. And *some* do not. A plain and simple human fact. And those who don't have plenty else to do in classroom ways. Teaching is an art, you know, and those who like *it* best of all find really quite enough to do. Brings the students piling in to the office, classroom-wing. What heads, what deans, what fools stepped in, pushed the classroom to one side, pushed the teaching to the wall, publish or perish everywhere, publish—perish. Many did. The latter that is. See a weary teaching prof staring at some lumpy prose—his own—prose that doesn't interest him. Some do not. Halfway through a lumpy book he's really not inclined to write. He'd rather teach. Some do. Check your writing hand for signs. How does it feel? Is all well? What does it say? A nimble forward finger flow? Lucky you. But if it pulls back from the page, inertia of no forward motion, nothing there to push toward, and no desire to push, longing for the classroom door, longing for the students' faces. Look closely. It can be a savage game. Ask the dean. Ask the head. See the tenure team perform, publish—perish, perish—publish. See them nodding in a row. Owl spectacles. Judicious eyes. Air conditioned pipes. Tamp the publications in. Watch careers go up in smoke. And so it goes. If you are just the teaching kind, however noble that can be, however beautiful the name, still and all, beware this game. . . . Ask whatever did become of Alan Shucard, Brian Mayne, David Powell, Ernie Carter, Seymour Levitan. Foolish, friendly, teaching men. Their students who remember them still wonder why they went away. And with anger, so do I.

Suppose you want to stick it out in spite of what you've seen ahead, come tenure time. Still love novels, still love poems, still love students, classroom days. And, Halleluyah, love to write. Say that all the rest is done. Say that thesis time is here. No more pencils, no more books, no more profs and profs and profs, holding reading-writing hoops. The ones who read your essays through as blankly as a clouded sky painted professorial gray. The good news ones. The bad news ones. The ones who were no news at all. The one who nearly did you in. The one who rescued you from him. The one who liked to use your knee as an office podium with little pats for emphasis and lots and lots of comma faults. All gone. All gone but ONE you now need most and need in certain ways. Move ahead one careful square, thesis adviser, careful now.



This *is* a human universe. Your profs are human. So are you. So you'd better make a human choice. Choose the one that you can trust. Choose the one who trusts in you. The one who simply wants to know what it is *you* want to do, where it is *you* want to go. You're 25 or 28 or 30, and you're the only one who knows what stirs in your literary soul, which is its attendant star, or how you stand with Mother Tongue. In three quick words, *it's your career*. The advisor that you need is one who wants it so, wants the work you want to do. And at department city hall will back that writing hand of yours on its new and lonesome path. And if you really want to win, something new *is* in the air. Up to now this is a game with lots of company around. Classroom pals and drinking pals, lovers, husbands, wives. Proximity does funny things. Go off somewhere by yourself, some beach or park or coffee shop. Close your eyes. Cup your hands into a bowl. Let it fill up two years full, or maybe three. Feel them, feel them as a weight containing what you need to write if you really want to win. Open your eyes. Gaze on down at the monster you've become.

Hopefully, a pleasant one. Recall, you said you like to write. And just as well. As this game is played these years there's no arriving anyplace you'd want to be unless you have a book in hand, or very nearly so. And if you want to write it well—a great career—it will become as close to you as Hesiod is to me right now—beat heartheart beat—that your relationships with friends, assorted lovers, husbands, wives or otherwise engaging kids, will go on HOLD. See a picnic at a lake. There they are, all your friends, summertime, swimming, yelling, water splashes. The sun is shining, so are they. But where are you? You're submerged, almost drowned, a literary fish. And the fisherman's the Book—line and lure. But who's the hook? You'd better know. Say it's Emily Dickinson. That she's the one you've fixed upon for the thesis that will be the book you need and want to write. As things stand now, two paths diverge. Each has a guide. Richard Sewell. Susan Howe. You can't choose both. So think it through. Think of your attendant star. Think of Sacred Mother Tongue. Which path will she attend you on to where Imagination is, writing, writing all the time, Richard Sewell, Susan Howe.

Both guides are good, among the best—lending grace. Forms of beauty light their eyes, wondering where Emily is, beauty's daughter, Amherst Mass. Follow Sewell, noble man, 20 years to write that book *THE LIFE OF EMILY DICKINSON*. Follow a familiar path that goes from now on back to 1862, 360 poems that year, star-crossed stars, points of light, beauty's daughter standing

there with just the door ajar, that oceans are, her tender human heart, and prayer, white dress of course—hair severe— and that white sustenance, Despair. Amherst 1862. Richard Sewell seeks her there, distillations of the past. Every person in that town, every letter he can find, seeks her mother, father, brother, brother's wife, and later on, brother's love for Mabel Todd. Seeks Lavinia, Vinnie's cats and Vinnie's quirks, all her father's brother's friends. And Emily is in their midst, in the midst of star-crossed love—best HeartHeart beat—glimpse by glimpse by glimpse of her, ache of Emily on the stair, apparition-white all the all-alone of her, almost ghost, almost a fade, through doors that open her away, into a little upstairs room, Beauty's Daughter, writing poems.

Sewell's work is superfine, 10,000 details in his mind, tapered fingers, testing them, all 10,000, one by one, 20 years of gazing on all of Amherst he can find that might cast light on Emily *then*, in the Amherst *there* of her, ache of Emily, narrow stair, apparition white. But take a look at Susan Howe's *MY EMILY DICKINSON*. She declines to wander back. Her Emily Dickinson is hers. Hers right now. On her hands and in her house, as she listens, as she thinks, as she does those other things that 1980s people do, being busy Susan Howe. Strange things begin to happen. Recluse Emily goes away. All the poems begin to chat, and there's no shutting Emily up. Beauty's daughter loves to talk. She'll say almost anything, talking, talking all the time. Indigging subtleties of mind. Weep and laugh, laugh and talk, laughing at women, laughing at men, chiding God. In every room of Susan's house, perhaps a California ranch, Emily with Susan there, never very far away, livelong night, livelong day.

So take your choice. Sewell is a model prof, what we've wanted profs to be. Not every single one of them, but enough to set the tone, a signal for the rest of us. Excellence still has a chance as long as Sewells come along and make a candle worth the game. BUT, as of now he's no longer all-in-all. In our living Now of things, Susan Howe is also here, noble woman, subtle ear, wakening Emily's latent power to compel our living day, stirring star-crossed star of her, warmth of mouth, warmth of breath, softening eyes, in our human universe, oh the tender touch of her, beauty beauty on her brow, Emily and Egypt, *Now*.

So you get tenure with your book. Now I'm going to whisk you through square after square, hurry up, red-letter day! Let the bells begin to chime, let the happy news go round, hearty-handshakes, shoulder pats, felicities of knowing smiles, knowing looks.



Euphoria. Perhaps a happy little jig. You've joined the full-professors' club. Perhaps you think you've won this game, standing on a square of squares that you've been seeking all along. Well, I suggest you look again, since chances are it means you've lost.

Say you're somewhere, early 50s. Say you are a decent sort. Don't grind axes with sharp edges and consequently look for necks. Love your hubby, love your wife, love your lover, love your kids, still love novels, still love poems, still love plays. Love to read and write and teach. What can possibly be wrong? I'll tell you what. It means a dozen years already, another dozen still to come, you've had to play the judgment game, with other women other men who share the corridors with you, have faces that you get to know. Judging them, judging them. Judging which will be your peers and which will not, in a cozy little game of let X in and X Y out. The game of *Ding*. Imagine that. Grown up people, playing *Ding*.

Ever since Pandora's box busted open years ago when the human race was young that minor dissonance of *DING* has conjured up a tin-god paltriness of things. It's always pretty much the same, some shall judge and some be judged, with the usual side-effects. Those who tend to vote en masse because they share a politics that never has a spoken name. Those who play at Martinet, fault by fault by fault by fault, always yours never theirs, which if applied across the board, across the table where they sit, would wreck the full-professors' club. The slurs that can't be answered back because remarks are all-enwrapped in confidentiality, which is a leaky sort of sieve as the metal news goes round, who dinged who. With consequent relationships crumbling in the corridors, smiling at some one-time friend who looks at you in puzzled ways, dinged again. Humanity gets compromised. Full professors, furtive eyes. . . . How can it be otherwise here or any other where that grownups play this silly game. Which can be stopped on the first day that tenure's granted. Imagine that. One word will do. Seniority. If on that happy tenure day each takes his place on a simple foolproof list in order of seniority, all objections that I've heard aren't worth a hoot when placed beside the value gained of cancelling the stupid needless game of *Ding*.

With that game off their backs, full professors, lively again, might rejoin the human race, remove the pokers from that place—a spine can also hold you up—have a yearly full-professors' ball, come one, come all. Little speeches, giving prizes, select a TA of the year, aggregate ill-gotten cash and give a thousand dollar prize to someone who's done *something well*. Hold a day to ding the dean. I

wouldn't mind. In fact I've always wanted to . . . ding a dean. Place "excellence" beside his name and on a scale from one to ten. You know. Anyone can count to three.

No we're not done, one square to go. The most important one of all if you really want to win. Keep it simple, one two, three, say a prof a prof a prof. One and, one, two, three. This one teaches, that one reads, this one writes. And as they teach or read or write Imagination bodies forth the shape of what they do and are. A novel or a poem or play taught or read or written of only serve to carry home what you've been doing all along ever since the game began. Open doors, let them in, placed upon a table there—as memory—every student that you've had. Every course you've taught. Every novel poem or play that you've read or written of. They form into a certain sum, an adding up or counting down of what you've done or haven't done, of what you've been or haven't been. Imagination is its name. Imagination is the game without which no one can win. So let the full professors fade with their silly game of ding. Turn from them. Turn from them. There are others, nearer still. Not authors in Eternity, but authors in the here and now, James "large and full and free" his "live, live all you can," Shelley's best and happiest minds. Emily is beauty's daughter. Robert Creeley beauty's brother. The swim and glitter of all things Walt Whitman learned from Emerson, "blind rambling celebrant" of Yeats, Pound of a woman singing songs, "tell her I would bid them live," Henry David, river man, with his plans for wayward ones with pell-mell minds, Stendhal's mirror on a road, Wolfgang Goethe's "light more light," Walt Whitman on a ferry boat gazing at the water where a nimbus sun surrounds his head, Hart Crane's bells, "the bells I say," DH Lawrence feeling new, every tower broken down to where we all have need to go, Hart Crane's company of love BEAT HEARTHEART BEAT or that spring day when the pain had gone and the sky was finally blue and he felt it gorgeous to live forget and feel quite new, ONLY THE IMAGINATION REAL. Toss the dice. Find that square.

I'd better start to wind this down. As some of you know over the past dozen and a half years or so, not a favorite of some deans, department heads or graduate committee chairmen—*be like the Dickey bird*—I realize I've been talking today to TAs who scarcely know me. In 1967 I taught a graduate Walt Whitman course. We put on a Whitman reading, really a group effort if ever there was one. So I gave an identical first class mark to each and all 12 participants. Bill Robbins frowned. The frown stayed on. In the 18 years since then my applications to teach graduate courses have



been successful only twice, most recently courtesy Ian Ross. I however have taught a contemporary poetry course since 1959 in an on-campus, or at-home, or somewhere downtown sort of way, aided and abetted for many years by Ellen, Karen and Ken and a long parade of students, student poets, and poet friends, some of whom are here right now. It doesn't matter where they are. True Lovers never go away.

All through these years Yeats's "The Tower" has been a favorite poem of mine. Several weeks ago I got lucky in my 312 class and chanced to read it on a tape. I was discussing primary stress and the book chanced open at "The Tower." I'd been thinking a lot of Susan Howe's *MY EMILY DICKINSON*. Afterwards, hearing the tape, I realized that it's the last time I'll read that poem to a class at UBC. I also felt, listening, that it's not likely I'll ever again read it quite as well, you know, a lucky day, a kind of best-foot forward bow. I have it here. It picks up with a few remarks on primary stress. Toward the end our clock tower begins to chime. So this is several weeks ago, 4pm, Monday Nov 3, 1986, BU332 here at UBC, a 15-minute mini-course in poetry as taught by me. And I am grateful to this university for giving me the years and rooms the pay and above all all the student faces I've seen as the years have gone around. So, Susan Howe you've given us *your* Emily Dickinson. Here's *my* Yeats. After the tape I'll say goodbye.

\* \* \*

Here at UBC, once-upon-a-gone-gosling-time, Norman MacKenzie, Geoff Andrew and John Parnall maintained an open door for marginally qualified but desirous would-be students. Parnall had a magician's touch at conjuring qualifications up when they came knocking at his door. And Donna Taggart and the team of friendly women on the phone had a sixth and rescue sense for faculty with absent minds and sieves for heads. As I say, gone-gosling days. I remember one, a Sunday morning, late in March, at my office. I'd just hacked my all-nite way through a desperate last-ditch set of English 200 home essays, several coffees several beers from Sydney Mendell's home brew batch that tasted like old rubber tires but made the essays read quite fast. 10 am. Done at last, went outside. An unexpected nice spring day, warm for a change. Quiet, fresh. On a walkway by himself, president MacKenzie, strolling slow, hands clasped behind him, near the little clump of shrubs at the corner of the library grounds where there are several curving paths through the foliage, shrubs and trees. The measured slowness as he moved made it seem as though the ground beneath was responsive to his

feet, his steps responsive to the ground. As though his canny Scottish self was breathing in abidings from a place he clearly loved. A very solitary man. Feeling it abide with him. Paused. Then gave a little Scottish shrug. Ian Ross does it too. I thought, I'll bet he's thinking to himself—well, at least the landscape gardeners know what they're supposed to do, and do it very very well. The little corner, beautiful. And looked around at all the rest. Still to do. Still to come. Bide your time, bide your time. . . . Things change, but some things never change. Still to do. Still to come. Bide your time.

Words mingle in dishevelled hair  
Of a self most singular,  
gypsy spangles, gypsy eyes,  
the breathing in and out of stars  
the face that isn't yet revealed  
the stir of latent power

Still to come, bide your time



Letters to Robin Blaser: 1955-1958

Transcribed by Lori Chamberlain  
Introduction by Terry Ludwar

"Words, loves"  
For Mila

Do letters serve as a bridge with the "invisibility" of friends? Addressed to Robin Blaser, the destination of these letters is now wherever they are read. One can experience boundaries giving way—flowing.

In a letter to James Alexander (*Caterpillar 12*, p. 165): "This I promise—that if you come back to California I will show you where they send letters—all of them, the poems and the ocean. The invisible./Love Jack.

Or Chapter VI, *The Dead Letter Officer* from *The Heads of the Town Up To The Aether*: "Inside every Rimbaud was a ready-made dead-letter officer. Who really mailed the letter? Who stole the signs?/The signs of his youth and his poetry. The way he looked at things as if they were the last things to be alive."

Finally, in another letter to James Alexander (*Caterpillar 12*, p. 170): "The letters will continue. The letters will continue after both of us are dead."

Lori Chamberlain, who teaches at U.C. San Diego and who is editing the *Collected Letters and Lectures of Jack Spicer*, transcribed these letters from his handwriting. In her talk at the Jack Spicer Conference/White Rabbit Symposium of June 1986 in San Francisco, she proposed that Spicer's correspondence can be seen not as mere letters but as part of his poetic project. She proposes the blur of distinctions: "Letters as poems, poems as letters. We can read them as a dialogue between a public I and a private I." Jack wrote in a letter to Allen Joyce: "By the way, I hope you show other people these letters I write you. They are personal letters for

you and they are public letters. I measure their success by how well I can succeed in being deeply personal and deeply public at the same time. Like my poems" (*Sulphur 10*, p. 143).

These letters (1955-58) "correspond" with the beginning of Jack's new work which would become *The Collected Books*, especially *After Lorca*. From Robin we know that: "During 1956 with me in Boston, Jack began a reconsideration of all that he had done . . . It was in the midst of a commotion of dissatisfaction that he began to reground his work . . . he wanted the disruption, the discontinuity, the derangement" ("*The Practice of Outside*" in the *Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, p. 351).

There is power to Jack's dissonance. His king is "the king of the world"—evil. Through his exhortations, blasphemies and wildness value is given to negativity, where unending dissatisfaction takes us out of the strictly relational, like surrealism. Witness his "Unvert Manifesto" written during this period. His writing produces a double gesture of affirming a hope and simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of it—unbridgeable—as in "unloved" lovers.

Jack's letters/poems repeatedly address absence, yet his words carry the hope of intimacy. To this end Jack writes to Robin: "If there were only some way that the fierce pride we found along the Charles River could exist and function with the sense of *communitas* I am rediscovering in this land of bridges . . . what a war on God could be waged." However, is this not already a demonstration of the impossibility of connection, a beloved in the void, a nothingness?

The "Berkeley Renaissance" circle, centered on Blaser-Duncan-Spicer, had as a source of group identification men as the beloved. As Robert Duncan characterized it in his conversations with Jack: ". . . as young poets seeking the language and lore of our homosexual longing as the matter of a poetry, that Lorca was one of us, that he spoke from his unanswered and—as he saw it—*unanswerable* need (*Ironwood 22*, p. 78). Jack's accord with this, would make Lorca into a friend.

As we read these letters, we can enlarge the context which formed the desire articulated in his poetics to "translate real objects" across time (he says he wants to establish a tradition), and also, through the game of language, to have a communion with the dead Lorca. He even suggests translating Robin's poem "Letters to Freud" into Spanish so that Lorca could read it.



(Thanks to Robin Blaser, executor of the Spicer estate, for permission to publish these and to Lori Chamberlain who provided the transcription.)

## NOTES

The letters cover the period 1955-58. The first five are from the brief period when Jack tried to establish himself in New York in 1955. Failing that, he joined Robin in Boston where he worked as an editor and curator in the Rare Book Room of the Boston Public Library. Robin worked at the Harvard Library. This was a period of regrouping for Jack in close association with Robin and also members of the *Boston Newsletter* gang such as John Wieners, Steve Jonas and Joe Dunn.

The rest of the letters date after November 1956 when Jack left Boston and returned to California. The final letter in this group is the one previously published in Jack's book *Admonitions* (1958). Robin's poem "Letters to Freud" (referred to in a number of these letters) was previously published in John Wieners' magazine *Measure* #1. Robin's "Transparencies" (1958), referred to on p. 48, was published in a small edition which was destroyed.

In transcribing the letters, Lori Chamberlain has retained Spicer's spelling and punctuation—he consistently, for example, misspells Ginsberg's name, and has idiosyncratic spelling of a few other words.

Detail of collage by Robin Blaser, cover of *Caterpillar* 12 (July 1970)



[1955?]

Dear Robin,

Having tried to reach you by various means, I now try direct assault. This, of course, assumes you still exist and have a good excuse or excuses for not having tried to reach me through Don Allen. I find this hard to believe.

Since the fatal day I left Berkeley I have:

- a) Spent two months or so looking for a job and weeping over my lost innocence.



- b) Found a job as a high school teacher in a New Jersey prep school for feeble-minded sons of feeble-minded fathers and quit said job after two traumatic weeks.
- c) Spent the last week thinking vaguely of suicide or another job and revising a manuscript for a Hungarian novelist.
- d) Hated New York the entire time.
- e) Written two good poems and a number of business letters.

Please let me know where you are so I can:

- a) Call you, though I can't afford it.
- b) Come and see you, though I can't afford it.
- c) Curse you, which I can and do afford.

Just send an airmail postcard with your address on it *immediately*. Do not wait to invent excuse for your barbarous behaviour. Do not wait until you have an aesthetic impression. Send me your address and phone number *immediately*.

Oddly enough, I still love you. My best to Jim.

Jack  
243 West 4th St., Apt. 9  
New York 14, N. Y.

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[postcard]

October 12, 1955  
New York

Dear Röbbchen,

I'm coming up to see you this weekend, God willing. Leave a note on the door for me when you're out. Be there probably Sat. afternoon, but maybe Fri.

How can you hate Boston? New York is really hateable.

Keep a look-out for a job for me. I don't know what "offers" Don is talking about.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

---

October 20, 1955  
243 W. 4th St., Apt 9  
New York (ugh) 14, N.Y.

Dear Robin & Jim:

I suddenly remember that I hadn't given you my check in all that hurry at the air-port. T'is enclosed.

Got home safely but bumpily. Brooklyn Museum job promising but slow. Intend to go to Boston for two or three days next week (probably Tues.) to look in person for job. Have written many letters including Harvard Lib. Hope you can put some pressure on your end (sic!) and work out something. Also beaucoup museums and book publishers.

Have enclosed two resumes (one for you and one for Skip) in case you want to refer to them in talking to people about my virtues. Would appreciate it if you called Skip this week-end and gave it to her.

Have been writing a Halloween Masque with Dylan Thomas & W.B. Yeats in two trees in Central Park (dead, of course.). It's starting well.

Promise not to flip or bring storm when I come. Pinetop's sober now.

Much love and even more  
gratitude,  
Jack, the Ripper.

---

November 3, 1955

Dear Robin and Jim:

Will arrive Friday (today for you) at around 7:30 or 8:30 (am taking the same train as I took before but don't know about non-Daylight time—it's the 4:30 D.S.T. New Haven-Hartford). Could you leave a note if you won't be home? And key?

Am happy to leave. Even starvation will be better than New York. Don Allen is wildly enthusiastic about the book. So am I.



Do you realize that this will become a literary document if you don't burn it?

Love  
Jack

---

1956?

Dear Robin,

This is the first Wednesday letter. I can think of nothing to say.

My stomach hurts.

I am in a place called New York bound for a place called Berkeley—San Francisco. I am staying with a person named Glenn Lewis who tells me that when he first saw Joe Dunn he thought that he (Joe Dunn) was just exactly the kind of person who would fall in love with me. Shadows are so ironic that their tips extend great distances.

Don will, I think, definitely move to Boston if given encouragement by you. He has eight uncompleted poems and needs his soul saved. Knowing both you and Don, I think that he will not ask for encouragement and that you will not give it to him.

Jackson Pollack had not completed a painting for two years before his accident. Paul Goodman has finished the fourth and last novel of the Grand Piano series. Loud speakers now announce each station on the Lexington Avenue subway.

I wish you were on the other side of the wild blue yonder. If only you were there when I got off the plane (and I hadn't seen you for two years) how wonderful it would be. We would talk all night and I would forget that I was returning to Jackie's First and Last Chance.

As it is, I'll have to be satisfied with pinball machines.

Love  
Jack

P.S. Your poem is marvelous. P.S. Your poems are marvelous. P.S. I love. P.S. Yesssss

---

[1956?]

Dear Robin,

Of course it's impossible to tell you my reactions to California. Time seems subtly different here. Hours pass too quickly. I liked clocks better in Boston.

The Cities (S.F. and Ber) are even more beautiful than we remembered. The people are 1 1/2 years older and are all 1 1/2 years less intelligent. They seem to know no one they didn't know before.

Everyone says to me, "Jack, [referring to their damned silly lives] now you're back things will be different," and then grins as if about to eat me for dinner. San Francisco is quite short of father figures.

Nothing is really pleasant or unpleasant for me yet. I felt unhappiness twice briefly (about 3 minutes) and happiness three or four times (make that 10 minutes) and have felt nothing otherwise—not even anxiety.

This, of course, is not what I expected, and I don't know whether to feel glad or sorry about it. At least it isn't Berkeley, Nevada this time. It's the real Berkeley and I'm its only living ghost.

Say hello to the Charles River for me and tell it that its cold beauty would be welcome to me again after these few days in warm chaotic California which never heard of loneliness and cold rivers and lacks the prime and humility which they engender.

Love  
Jack  
2208 Parker  
Berkeley, Calif

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[1956?]

Dear Robin,

I don't see correcting poems for you. Only see new poems. If only you'd write and send as poems three or four bad ones which would force you into the direction of new and better good ones. Your biggest weakness is that you won't write bad poetry. This is where Duncan has it over both of us. It's why he's, so far, a better poet.



Am in my first depression since I came here. Not over anything—just a sheer physical thing like a cold. I learn from them but hate 'em.

Have talked to Duncan several times. We get along well but there's no real communion like there was with you. If you don't come out here, I'll come back to Boston and kill you, or stop writing poetry, or marry Anne.

This is not much of letter in reply to your wonderful one, but, with my depression, it takes severe discipline to write at all.

I think I owe you another letter this week.

Love  
Jack

---

November 26, 1956  
Berkeley

Dear Robin,

It seems very improbable that this is the third letter I've written to you—that I've been away from Boston for three Mondays. I'd like to believe I'd just left, that the benefit of a traveller was still upon me. When asked how long I have been in town I lie automatically as I do about my age.

Duncan has fixed me up with a section in the Poetry Workshop—\$200 for 20 sessions, the money given by a nervous Lesbian. Nothing else has even vaguely happened except this rather free translation from Lorca which I enclose.

I find it easier to make love and harder to communicate than when in Boston. Don sent me a fine poem (reservations though). Why don't you.

My number is Thornwall 3-8487 if you get drunk and decide to call.

Love  
Jack

---

[1956?]

Dear Robin,

Your letter was so beautiful that I almost didn't answer it. It set, defined, and concluded all we can possibly say to each other until we see each other again. If there were only some way that the fierce pride we found along the Charles River could exist and function with the sense of *communitas* I am rediscovering in this land of bridges (there is even a new one) what a war on God could be waged. But *communitas* isolated from pride becomes whoredom and pride isolated from *communitas* becomes madness. The bridge, in this land of bridges, is, maybe, something we could build together.

Now as to news:

- 1) I am very happy.
  - 2) Two more Lorca translations (one for you) which I will send soon and revision of about a fourth of Oliver Charming.
  - 3) Tentative offer from S. F. State Lang Arts (4 to 6/10) will be certain one way or another on the 14th.
  - 4) Nibble from C.S.F.A.
  - 5) Dinner with Duncan. Pleasant without much communication. Don't think there really ever was. I respect 3 people in the world (you, Don, and Duncan) and can communicate with two of them. A good average.
  - 6) Joe Dunn seems to be falling to pieces. I haven't seen much of him since I know that I can't help. North Beach has swallowed him (the drunk world not the queer world) and nobody goes after Jonah into that whale. You'll disapprove I know, but we have different ideas about the responsibilities of love.
  - 7) For some reason the return to Berkeley shattered all of my remaining sexual inhibitions and I've gone to bed with more people since I've been here than I usually do in a year. This is a mysterious gift I never expected from California. It will be interesting to see if any poetry arises from the succession of fatted calves.
  - 8) Letter from Don re S.F. issue of *O Tannenbaum* I suggested to print *only* Duncan, Spicer, Ginsberg, Blaser, Broughton, and McClure. Am curious what you suggested.
- Would you please make a special visit to Jonas and ask him to send me the short story and to send Don a copy. Tell him my address and that I would like a letter too. Tell Wieners hello mildly.



Please tell Harvard Library tomorrow that you are quitting. I have a feeling that you'll never do it if you wait till January. It's so easy once you have jumped.

Prideful Love,  
Jack

---

[1956?]

Dear Robin,

I feel more Gulliverlike every day. All these nice little people crawling around me, wanting me to tell them how to grow up and get big. At least that's one advantage Berkeley has over Boston—people want to grow up and get big, even if they're all too old and too stupid to do it. Not to mention too small. Why can't I let people alone?

Am reading Barbellion's *Journal of a Disappointed Man*. Marvellous and would be special food for your poetry. Also for sheer bitchy fun Angus Wilson's *Anglo Saxon Attitudes*. Write me a punishment, Robin.

What I need most, of course, is for someone to astonish me. That's what happened in Boston. Almost every poem you, Joe, and Jonas wrote was an astonishment for me. Poetry only happens, I think, when people astonish each other. And love is a special variety of astonishment.

Pat Wilson tells me that the Berg episode caused huge amounts of trouble in the Cal Library and that several careers were permanently blighted. This is all supposed to be a dead secret, but I can get you the details if you're interested. Pat's mother, who abandoned him when he was six months old, is suing him for non-support.

A magazine sounds like a waste of moral energy. Why not manifestos though. Draft a new manifesto every week at your poetry meeting and send a copy to me. I'll promise to reply to them point by point. I need a few manifestos to answer.

I should give you a word of explanation about the Sonnet Exercise. Allan Joyce is writing a paper on Sh's Sonnets and I had him and me take the last words of each line of one of the sonnets and make a new poem of them. This was my result and I like it mainly because the imagery was irresponsible. I am gradually beginning to realize that landscapes do not have to be consistent.

What a miscellaneous letter! But I'm feeling miscellaneous recently. Give my regards to our mutual friend the Charles River who will never be able to come to Berkeley.

Love  
Jack

---

December 13, 1956

Dear Robin,

I'm a little disappointed not having heard from you but it may be merely the fault of the Xmas mails. Talking of that, did Don ever get my letter about the magazine? If he didn't, have him write immediately.

I have the S.F. State job. It's only half-time so I don't feel too guilty about teaching. Anyway it means I won't starve—which is nice, I guess.

I'm in the process of translating Lorca's long Walt Whitman poem and am rather pleased with the results. I'll send you a copy as soon as I'm finished. It would help, by the way, to know in detail what you thought of the other translations. I'm pretty serious about doing a book of them and your advice would help—even it is to abandon the whole thing.

The poem I enclose is the only thing of my own I've written in the month I've been here. It expresses pretty well my sentiments toward the world and doesn't, thank God, have a single image in it.

Olson's poem in *Arc-Moby* is wonderful. Nothing much else is.

There's some talk of Duncan and me appearing in the Poets' Follies in February. If only you were there to appear with me, I'd have a hundred ideas for the act. You couldn't take two weeks off then and come out?

I think the oddest thing about Boston is how your importance to me increased. A year ago I wouldn't have missed you nearly so much. It's comforting to know that one can discover new things in old friends as I haven't up now here.

What an awful letter. It's exactly the kind that definitely depressed me the most when I received it in Boston. All I can say is



there is a Santa Claus. You CAN LEAVE ANY TIME YOU WANT TO. Honest, Virginia, you CAN.

Love  
Jack

---

December 21, 1956  
Los Angeles

Dear Robin,

I suppose I'd better write you today, for there to be any hope of your receiving the letter on Wednesday. By the way, do you? I'd like to feel there was some regularity to our common universe.

My Lorca-Whitman is finished but I'm still not satisfied with a few of the lines. It's going to be dedicated to Steve Jonas as he taught me how to use anger (as opposed to angry irony) in a poem. I'll send it just as soon as I think it's nearly right.

I'm in Los Angeles (as the postmark tells you) visiting mother and enduring Christmas. It is less smoggy than San Francisco which is now under a perpetual blanket of wet odor. It is full of freeways and boys wearing tea-shirts and is quite a relief after Berkeley.

Wish you'd send *Moby* for the wonderful poem by Oldson. Also read Ginzberg's *Howl* and see if you think it the crap I do. Only people like us have the right to attack it.

Where are your poems? I wish i were there to squash or explode the crappy reasons you have for not having written them. My next project is to translate "Letter to Freud" into Spanish so Lorca can read it. Pray for me.

Love  
Jack

---

December 31, 1956

Dear Robin,

Thank God you're writing again. And the poem stands up with the others—which is saying, as you know, a great deal.

This is the day before New Years, so I don't have time to copy out the five new translations (including the now finished

Whitman). Wednesday I promise to send them—in the coolness of the New Year.

I wonder if you agree with my idea of what I'm doing with the translations—it seems to me that they show that it's possible to use the simple terror of Lorca's few-worded metric in English. I think it shows a new place for my short poems to go. And long poems too—as you'll see with the Whitman.

Please write me a long letter about Boston. Poetry was healthier there.

Happy love 1957  
Jack

---

[1957?]  
839 Leavenworth, Apt. 309  
San Francisco

Dear Robin,

In case I already have not sent it to you, you will not be receiving the "Ode to Walt Whitman" until you write. Duncan also finds your silence unbearable.

I moved to San Francisco Saturday night. My apartment is in the same district and of the same type as the others. It is all very depressing. To make things worse, I had to agree to teach full-time at State.

My Poetry Workshop class is to be called—Poetry and Magic. How about sending me some ideas. My main one so far is that Houdini is the figure of the poet and that translation is cheating at poker.

You, of course, are too depressed to write and do not have the wonderful excuse for writing bad letters that this every Monday routine gives me. I keep hearing from others of the long poem that you 1) have written, 2) are writing, 3) have torn up, 4) talked about writing. I suspect that Don's good suggestions on how to revise your poems hurt your poetry. One can only take advice on specific poems when one is full of confidence, otherwise it just depresses. Any revision that is valid will come from other poems shoving inside you.

Some general advice, however:

- 1) Start a journal
- 2) Move to Berkeley



3) If you do neither, at least take the finger out of your ass.

Love,  
Jack

---

January 14, 1957

Dear Robin,

No poems this week which I spent nursing John Ryan whose lover died in his apartment messily while John was away on vacation. It seems to me that I've done nothing but nurse people ever since I came here. This would be all right if they were big enough boys to nurse me back like you were, but they aint.

I heard from Berg that Jim has been in town and has found a job for a year from July. If you wait until then (and you're addlepatented enough to do just that) you'll collapse and so will I. Oh well. I don't suppose I could convince you if I were still in Boston. At least quit Harvard—but you won't do that either.

Would you please *immediately* (if it means staying up all night) pick ten of my poems (out of which Don is to select five) for the *Upas Review* S.F. issue and send the list to Don. You know better than I do what I should print.

I'm sorry the later translations and untranslations did not impress you enough to elicit a letter. Your letters would not be as beautiful if you wrote regularly, but they would be more comforting.

Love  
Jack

---

[January 28, 1957]  
839 Leavenworth, Apt 309  
SF

Dear Robin,

The lights keep going out all over the world and I've lost my only pencil. To make things even better it has snowed in San Francisco for the last two nights—proving that I bring weather with me, even into paradise.

Paradise it hasn't been. The California climate (snow and all) seems to breed and produce a monstrous collection of weaklings. Even Duncan is not so much strong as preoccupied. And the rest is sheer milk pudding chaos. This is undoubtedly why Ginzberg (who had guts but no voice) was able to become poet laureate of this freak show. This will, I know, sound strangely overdiscriminating in 10 below Boston (and I'd rather live in milk pudding than in a scoop of tutti fruiti ice cream) but things aren't healthy here and it's going to take quite a collection of Dr. Kildares to save the patient.

There is no point, I know, in trying to shame you into writing. You are sick, or you are depressed, or you are trying to wait until I forget that you said that you would quit the Harvard Library in January. In the meanwhile I wait and wait for some reaction on my Lorca "translations." They seem to me some of my best poems and I deeply need detailed criticism on them—something Duncan won't give (he's writing a play) and no one else but you can. However, if you'd rather go out to dinner with the Greenglasses and the Goldfarbs, who am I to stop you?

I enclose three more and my rather irritated

Love  
Jack

[enclosed: "Venus—A Translation for Ann Simon," "Juan Ramon Jimenez—A Translation for John Ryan," "Forest—A Translation for Joe Dunn"]

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[1957?]

Dear Robin,

Another week without hearing from you. I can only conclude that my Lorca untranslations are so bad that you don't dare write me. Just a postcard, maybe, telling me that you're alive. After all, there will be a spring—improbable as that must sound.

Was at a gorgeous clambake last night. *LIFE* is doing a story on S.F. poetry and all of the leading (and misleading) Bay Area poets except Duncan (who is touring the southland with Ruth Witt-D) and their wives gathered at Rexroth's house, read 2 poems a piece, and were photographed from every possible angle.

It was as if fifteen years of poetry was gathered together. And what crap. Not a single poem moved me except Helen Adam's who



had a sort of loony splendor. Every single poem of our generation had turned Xtian—Broughton, Gleason, Lamantia, Bill Everson etc. I was very glad that I read Bird (which has “Deny the motherfucking Holy Ghost” in it) because none of them would speak to me afterwards except Broughton who played kneesies. The younger non-Xtians, however, seemed to like the poems (the other was Poem to Reader of Poem) and Tom Parkinson (who is writing poetry again and shouldn’t be) made the observation that no one had ever seen Ginzberg and Spicer at the same time and that perhaps this was significant. Anyway, not one of them were half as good poets and *any* of the Boston Newsletter gang. San Francisco poetry consists of me and Duncan—and you when you’re here.

If you don’t at least send me a postcard, next week’s letter will be one day late. God, how I miss you.

Love  
Jack

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[1957?]

Dear Robin,

Again I address your baffling silence. You were never the most faithful of correspondents, but this is a longer break than your previous record of faithlessness warrants. Surely, if nothing else, you have some comment on Wiener’s plan for a magazine, the reason you haven’t sent Don a list of my poems you select, my un-translations, your life, my life, or the state of the Charles River.

Have I offended you? Is silence my punishment? Or have you been murdered by the International Zionists? I feel a bit like Arthur Kloth.

I start classes tomorrow and feel tense as hell about it. 13 hours a week is a great deal more than I’m used to. I wish I were back in Boston living a quiet dismal life. I wish you and Boston existed—or, for that matter, that anything did.

One can’t go on addressing a ghost. I make an ultimatum. Either at least a postcard answering all the above questions or I skip a week of letters. Of course, the most sensible thing to do if you can’t write the postcard is to throw everything over and come to California. This would make writing unnecessary.

Yes, I’m sounding more like Arthur Kloth every letter. But that’s because you haven’t written.

Love (triumphant over the  
immense silence)  
Jack

---

Feb. 21. 1957

Dear Robin,

Enclosed are three questionnaires from my Poetry & Magic course. One for you, one for Steve, and one for John. Duncan filled one brilliantly. I’ll send it to you when you’ve sent yours back to me.

Your letter made me miss you again. Why do you have to sacrifice your life for a few sticks of furniture. Come to California on the insurance money (it’ll buy you a plane ticket) and I’ll give you \$200.00 a month until you get a job. You can read papers for me in exchange. This would be insane but practical. I’m serious.

The poem seemed good as it was. It’s wrong to tinker with long poems—more than a few words anyway. They never come out better than they’re baked. Duncan was just saying that the first two sections weren’t the way he would have written ‘em. I am no longer afraid of indirections and don’t think you ought to be. Indirections are matters of voice not metaphor.

Like you have too many likes, so? Write a whole section of likes. Embrace and smother your weaknesses. Like your language is rarified. Make the language so rare they can’t breathe it. I haven’t the vaguest notion what false breath patterns are (except in blowing somebody) and I somehow doubt if anybody does.

Seems to me that Wiener’s magazine is worth supporting [if] only because it is the only magazine in the U.S. that will print Jonas. The farther I am away from Boston the better his poetry seems. I suggested to him [John] that I write a review of Ginzberg and you one of Rexroth. That will scare him. He don’t want to offend anybody.

So you don’t have the Whitman! Well you don’t get it until you make individual comments on the poems and try to tell me which are imaginary translations and which are real ones, Duncan couldn’t tell.



If you haven't yet, please pick up the telephone and inform Don what my ten poems are. If you don't he'll choose for himself and I just don't trust the results. Please also (when you know what Don has accepted) decide (generously) what of mine to give Wieners. You aren't quite worth going back to Boston for, but I'm quite worth going to San Francisco for. That's what Beatrice told Virgil. Not that this is Heaven—

Love  
Jack

P.S.: I quite understand why Jim couldn't "get ahold" of me. He only had two copies of my address and telephone number. Anyway, I got all the news about him from Berg during the time he was there.

---

[1957?]

Dear Robin,

I can see now why it is difficult for you to write letters. When one is engaged in a continual fight against time and human stupidity it is almost impossible to sit down and write over a distance. Even the pieces of news you have to tell seem as idiotic as the time you waste in stupid work or nausea at the stupid work.

I have no real news except that, at the end of the semester, I am going to quit teaching forever.

Send me an encouraging letter. Send me some gossip about Wieners (*Measure* is such a littlemaggotish name). Send me, above all, a poem.

I haven't written a line since I started in this penal colony. There was an earthquake Friday.

Love  
Jack

[1957?]

Dear Robin,

I'll send you poems when I have them. At the moment I don't. The spring Duncan talks about I have helped to create but am barred from sharing in by reason of my job. I shall never teach again.

I don't see why someone didn't tell me about Don's idiotic decision. Arthur wrote me something which I now see referred to it, but neither Don nor Wieners bothered to let me in on the secret. It is, of course, partly your own fault for pretending to have decided not to return—"A real San Francisco poet couldn't stay away two years"—but Don, with his cult of the primitive, has managed to misunderstand you and your poetry again. He would never publish Duncan in the S.F. issue if he hadn't heard that Duncan doesn't bathe. He likes my poetry because he thinks I'm a Negro.

Poems he accepted: "Piss: an Elegy," "B[erkeley] in time of P[lague]," "Hibernation," "Troy," "Ovid," & "Song of Birds in Lions." Also short story. Seems pretty square to me. Made me want to go out and write sex poems.

I presume that you will send me a copy of the revised H[unger] for S[ound]. Joe also keeps asking whether I've received the revision. He was rejected by the Army (as a Queer) and is beginning to resemble Mike McClure.

Aren't you even going to come out to California this summer? No, you aren't! You'll never come here again! Murder Jim. Burn your furniture. Don't you realize that the years you waste are some of the only years you'll have?

Shit. Piss. Fuck. Love.

Jack

---

[1957?]

Dear Robin,

The "Hunger of Sound" is magnificent now. Everything works. It is undoubtedly your best poem. I suppose it provides some justification for your staying in Boston—especially with summer coming. But how wonderful it would be to have you here, to hear it read in your voice, to have your poem influencing the other poems



being written in town, to fight with you over words. All I can do as a substitute is read it to my poetry class tonight. And read it to myself over and over.

When I saw the "final proofs" of *Evergreen Rev* at Rexroth's late last week the earlier version of "Hunger of Sound" was among them. What gives? Did Don change his mind? I haven't heard a word from him.

School has robbed me of the ability to do anything but drink and manage the poetry class. More good poetry is being written here than I can remember (partly due to my class) and I have to stand on the outside. I say never again and mean it.

Tell John I'll write him soon. Letters are pain for me now. Enclosed are a few poems from the class. More to follow.

Love  
Jack

---

[1957?]

Dear Robin,

I'm sorry that over a week has passed since I've written. School, as I know you knew it would, has depressed me terribly. Teaching is not the right profession for me—and this factory is even worse than not right. I struggle to survive day by day—and dream at night of the horror of telling people what to do. Is there no place for me on this crud-encrusted planet? Listen in this June and find out.

The poetry class, in contrast, is fine. My poetry reading yesterday was quite a success—if such a thing can be. Duncan and I are closer now than ever. But all this is spoiled by the idiotic necessity of playing God to people whose God one would not wish to be. I haven't written a single poem.

I will quit in June. Something, as it does, will turn up—if only a chance to die. It is at times like this that I am glad that I have nothing, person or thing, that would trap me, even for a while, into believing all of this meaningful. I carry a suitcasefull of butterflies.

I miss you and Don, especially you, at this point. The rest of the universe can bugger itself. It will.

Love  
Jack

May any professor who reads this to his class from my *Collected Letters* die of a loathsome skin disease.

---

[1957?]

Dear Robin,

Aquatic Park seems an infinite distance from the Charles River. People are playing bongos; Alcatraz rises in the distance; and I can't see a single Irishman. The faggots, however, are the same. A plague on their pretty bodies.

Since school's been out (for me forever) I've been ignoring my unemployment and translating Lorca. Don Allen and *Evergreen Review* arrived almost simultaneously. I love and fight with the former and despise the latter. My opinion in both cases is exactly the reverse of most of the rest of San Francisco. Nothing in the magazine points the way to anything new. Short stories by early Steinbeck, early Saroyan, and early Spicer, Duncan merely being Duncan, and the rest (perhaps excepting Gary Snyder) not even being that—plus a reprint of the best-publicized poem in the world. I can't find out from Don what you and he have been fighting about. He says that there wasn't time to print the revised "H of S" and you were right (and you were) to withdraw the original. The revision is infinitely better. He hadn't the taste (or the guts) to print "Letter to Freud" but I notice that it has affected his poetry. Tis a mad world, my masters.

Re my feud with Hot Dog. He rejects "Poem to R[eaders] of P[oem]" and has the nerve to think I'll give him the *Elegies*. Nuts! He only understands Black Mountain poetry and Cole Porter. I don't like either. Don thinks he will be a great editor and conceives of *Measure* as a sort of a farm club where the rookies can try out before breaking into *O Tannenbaum*. Nuts, again. Anyway, tell him he'll like it out here. Everyone's either elegant or Black Mountain or (see R. Duncan) both.

I enclose my eight latest "translations." Transformations might be a better word. Several are originals and most of the rest change



the poem vitally. I can't seem to make anybody understand this or what I'm doing. They look blank or ask what the Spanish is for a word that isn't in the Spanish or praise (like Duncan did) an original poem as typically Lorca. What I am trying to do is to establish a *tradition*. When I'm through (although I'm sure no one will ever publish them) I'd like someone as good as I am to translate these translations into French (or Pushtu) adding more. Do you understand? No. Nobody does.

Anyway, *please, please, please* read these as poems and give me some criticisms of individual lines. I can see why Pound got so angry at the reaction to his "Propertius."

Don't wait until you come here for (one!! day). By the way, when? I figure I'll be given about three hours and I want to spend that cursing you for leaving me in San Francisco.

AND YOUR POETRY?

Love  
Jack

---

[1957?]

Dear Robin,

What you richly deserve is that I not comment on your poem ["Transparencies"] until you comment on mine. If your poem weren't so damn good I'd do just that. It works—completely and absolutely (although I'd like to hear the parentheses read before I agree to them) and finally puts to rest all the material that you've been struggling with for the last six months. The white rat (good enough before) now sings to a tremendous climax. But what's the point of all this praising? If only you were here (or I there) and you could read it and I make noises to show how much I agree with it. But, far from being here, you are only a one sentence note. Your handwriting recalls your handwriting and not your voice. It was agony, you say—and I have the double agony of watching my invisible friend struggle.

I've been watching the rehearsals of *Medea I* and *II* (*II* is only three scenes long so far and isn't being written fast) and have a pretty good idea of what they're like. What strikes me is how essentially unambitious (almost conservative) they are. He bites off even a little bit less than he can chew. It makes me see how overcrowded my "Troilus" was (it was a mouthful big enough for

five plays) and shows me 1) he is a playwright and I'm not 2) he will never do anything to change the theater and I will 3) if I live (he has no danger there).

Why don't you write a simple scene for a simple play and I'll write a simple next scene for the same simple play? Let's throw out "St. Bernard" and "Troilus" (and even "Cascades of Crappage" because we're not good enough yet to face reality) and collaborate. The opening scene you are to write is where a poet shoots himself in front of the Gauguin in the Boston Museum. You will give me instructions for the second scene.

That has been more of a letter than most because I'm able to see you again through your poem. I suddenly know (like a torn heart) the voice and attitude I miss and whose lack makes all of the beautiful nonsense of San Francisco somehow saltless. It must be middleage creeping in but I miss you more (a friend) than I ever missed a fancied lover.

Love (and curses too  
on yr damned silence)  
Jack

---

[1957?]

Dear Robin,

Thanks for your letter. I would have felt much worse if you hadn't written it.

As far as the *personal* hurt feelings, I know myself well enough to know that they will disappear whenever I see you regularly again. Our friendship has never stood up well to the sudden—it almost (because we are so different) has to be a day to day thing or nothing. In the meanwhile—you know me well enough to know that I'd be lying to tell you that the hurt won't stay. I think (hope) that you'd be insulted if it didn't.

But there's a poetic misunderstanding that I think can be cleared up through our letters. I don't feel safe about what you think about my poetry. I thought you'd be the first one to understand the poetic importance of what I was doing with the translations and I think it was the lack of any real response from you that made me lose faith in them the first time—although I'll admit that S.F. State may be the real villain there. Anyway I was able to start again and—although they stopped once more for two



weeks after the discouragement of your visit (I don't know what I wanted from you about them here—I only know I didn't get it) they have started once more. So don't worry that complete honesty about how you feel about them will have a bad effect.

What I suspect is that you've begun to feel about my poetry the way I feel about Duncan's. Poems he is writing seem beautiful like I might say "that girl is beautiful." I recognise it but am unmoved. I wonder if that hasn't happened to my poetry with you, if you can recognise the beauty but feel no excitement, no feeling that anything is opening out but the poem itself. If this is so it won't stop my sending you poems—I can still tell a bad Duncan from a good one—but it will stop me expecting what I may no longer have reason to expect. And it may change again as suddenly as it changed before.

May I say here that this has not happened to me with your poetry.

I've rather heavily revised the first three elegies—stealing unmercifully from devices used in "Letter to Freud" and "Hunger of Sound."

Wieners still hasn't sent me *Measure*. Even *Coastlines* sends each contributor a copy.

Love  
Jack

---

[1957?]

Dear Robin,

I don't see the poem as a whole. The naming of the animals works completely for me as does the withered plants, but the poem as a whole says either too much or too little. However you know how unable I am to understand most of Olson. Every eye [i] is dotted with SOMETHING THAT HAPPENED—as if the happening were important. What suggested the poem should *never* be in the poem—whether the personal as it used to be with me or the occasion of the image—the letter, remark, document etc. as it is with Williams, Pound, and Olson. In "Letter to Freud" the postman and the dead dog, say, were not what suggested the poem. They were summoned up by the poem—included and given greater reality. From Sinatra to the spy glass in your poem I see nothing but

Occasions—appropriate—but only because they caused the poem not because they belong in it.

Oh well, I'm probably as wrong about this one as Duncan and Don were about Freud. You are off on new tracks and new tracks always lead somewhere for a good poet. The main thing is to keep it up.

I don't really feel like sending you my new poems. It's rather like throwing pennies into a well. Except I don't ever hear even a splash. Tell me something about the ones I've written and I'll send you more.

I would like a letter from you. Not a seventeen page letter or a one line letter but a letter about this size—a reasonable compromise between time and distance.

Aquatic Park is beautiful today. It sends you its love also.

Jack

---

[1958?]

Dear Robin,

This is to correct a mistake. Duncan didn't write *After Lorca*; I did. D. wanted to show me the poems you sent him, but, since I knew they were supposed to be sent to me, I decided to wait until you've corrected your error.

Don seems to think no one wrote the poems—at least I don't know anyone *he's* written. Do you know his whereabouts? I've sent 100 pages of novel to him registered airmail and hope and pray he's not in Bermuda or Boston.

Don't of course write me about the book or tell me if you want any more copies. I hate hearing from my friends.

Unrequited Love,  
Jack

P.S. D. says yr poems are wonderful. But of course you must know already—he writes.

J

---



[1958?]

Dear Robin,

I'm sorry to send this to you as I know this means I won't get a letter from you in months as you'll spend that time trying to write a proper letter and I'll hate you for not writing.

The book, you might tell your friends, is available at \$1.50 mailed (\$1.00 in person) and will not sell in bookstores. The lettered edition is available only to those on my list (for free) and those willing to pay \$5.00. The only library to receive it—from me at least—will be the Boston Public Library.

I want to show that poets can get along without bookstores and their damned 40%. Anyway I hate them because my friends always spend money on them and not on me.

My novel is over 100 pages. I am starving and happy.

Love  
Jack

P.S.: A list of Persons To Whom I'm Sending Copies

Bob Duncan	Ez Pound's Secretary
Robbie Blaser	Laurie Riding
Don Allen	Hildy Doolittle
Mary-Anne Moore	Edie Sitwell
Bob Creeley	Bubbles Cocteau
Bob Lowell	Tom Eliot
Wynnie Auden	Sal Dali
Bill Williams	Alice Ginsberg
Chuckles Olson	Clytemnestra Jeffers
Ez Pound	Jojo Miles

[1958?]

Dear Robin,

I like the poem and the revisions in it—except for the loss of "sun color." Couldn't the last line go "O sun. O sun color. I have gained such splendor"? You transfer to this short poem what you have learned in the recent long ones. Good. Excellent. Keep on for God's sake.

I wish you'd take the advice (exhortation) I gave you in the next-to-last unanswered letter about concentrating not on the poem but the book it is imagined to be in. (The letter is pages 9 and 10 of my new *Admonitions* if you've lost it.) It seems to me that you scatter your strength (as I did) by trying to write a perfect poem. It is easier to do a number of things perfectly than a single thing. Your period of greatest creativity (that spring and summer) came when you almost unconsciously saw a book. "Letter to Freud" was a perfect end piece. See another now.

Will give you no news until you write me a start-gap letter. Doubt if you will as Duncan's Pindar thing is so good it will keep you from writing anybody for months. I think it's the best poem he's ever written. And the easiest.

Does no one in Boston want to buy an *After Lorca*? I'm living (or trying to live) on the proceeds of the sales. Not even Kent or Barbara? They are only \$1.50. At least if you can't write you can push the book.

Had good letters from M. Moore and C. Olson on the book and exstatic one from J. Miles. D. Allen took as long to write as you did. I'm afraid New York is getting him again.

Just a news letter please. I miss you.

Love  
Jack

[February 21, 1958?]

Dear Robin,

I have sworn a great oath not to comment on any of your poems until you comment on mine, but I feel I must try to intervene to save you a great mistake about "Windows." The first part made it into the most exciting poem *formally* that you have written (except maybe Freud) and cutting it off is *butchery*. What you gain in coherence (the hobgoblin of college professors) you lose in excitement. I refuse to destroy or surrender my original copy.

Doesn't anyone you know in Boston want to buy *After Lorca*? I guess they don't or you'd have answered my question before. Thanks for the Harvard Lib order. I'm living on the sale of these books.



You owe me seventeen letters.

Love  
Jack

[1958?]

Dear Robin,

Enclosed you find the first of the publications of White Rabbit Press. The second will be much handsomer . . .

You are right that I don't now *need* your criticism of specific poems, but I still *want* them. It's probably from old habit, but it's an awfully old habit. Half-way through *After Lorca* I discovered that I was writing a book instead of a series of poems and individual criticism by anyone became suddenly much less important. This is true of my new *Admonitions* which I will send you when complete. (I have eight and there will probably be fourteen.)

The trick of course is what Duncan learned long ago and tried to teach—not to search for the perfect poem, but to let your way of writing of the moment go along its own paths, explore and retreat but never to be fully realized (confined) within the boundaries of one poem. This is where we were wrong and he was right but he complicated things for us by saying that there is no such thing as good or bad poetry. There is—but not in relation to the single poem. There is really no single poem.

That is why all my stuff from the past (except the "Elegies" and "Troilus") looks foul to me. The poems belong nowhere. They are one night stands filled (the best of them) with their own emotions but pointing nowhere, as meaningless as sex in a Turkish bath. It was not my anger or my frustration that got in the way of my poetry but the fact that I viewed each anger and each frustration as unique—something to be converted into poetry as one would exchange foreign money. I learned this from the English Department (and from the English Department of the spirit—that great quagmire that lurks at the bottom of all of us) and it ruined ten years of poetry. Look at them, admire them if you like; they are beautiful but dumb.

Poems should echo and reecho against each other. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can.

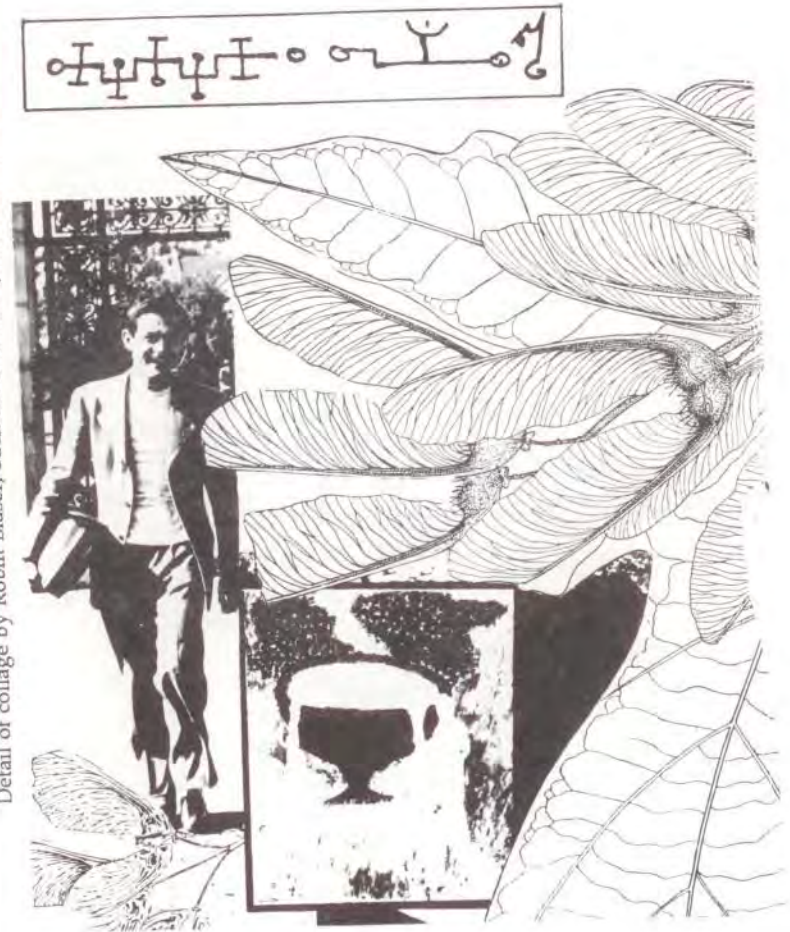
So don't send the box of old poetry to Don Allen. Burn it or rather open it with Don and cry over the possible books that were buried in it—the *Songs Against Apollo*, the *Gallery of Gorgeous Gods*, the *Drinking Songs*—all incomplete, all abortive because I thought, like all abortionists, that what is not perfect had no real right to live.

Things fit together. We knew that—it is the principle of magic. Two inconsequential things can combine together to become a consequence. This is true of poems too. A poem is never to be judged by itself alone. A poem is never by itself alone.

This is the most important letter that you have received.

Love,  
Jack

Detail of collage by Robin Blaser, back cover of *Caterpillar* 12 (July 1970)





## Letters to Freud

9 30 56

((When I —

yes, sleep, Mr Freud.

*Sounds like a man.**A crushed dog on West 9th.*

Yes

Mr Freud, if —

Mr Freud, if —

Oh, damned words. Yes, Mr Freud,

damned descriptive.

My dear Mr Freud, *when I lie in the sun, a bird passes  
over and the wings grow on me.* Yes,

Mr Freud

this is

my image. *I chose* — yes, Mr Freud  
*the wings.* Yes.

Men.

Yes . . .

Mr Freud, *the face of love . . .* Yes,

Mr Freud,

*can be a monument.* Damned words.

Mr Freud — descriptive.

Yes, Mr Freud,

*there is,* Yes, Mr Freud, *a dead dog.* Yes  
*on my yes street.* Yes,

(spit.)

Yes,

*I killed,*

Yes,

Mr Freud, I chose

*a monument.*

Well

*the dog died when I strangled him.* Yes,

Yes,

Mr Freud —

my dear Mr Freud,

*I killed.*

Well,

Mr Freud,

*he was suffering.))*

My dear Mr Freud,

I hear perfectly men who suffer for

words. *Begin a poem.*

Death.

*Begin a poem.*

Death,

you are an image complete as my face.

*Continue.*

Death, you forbid a better image.

*Begin over.*

Too much pride in an easy harvest.

My dear Mr Freud,

it is consistently a small

victory.

Dear Mr Death,

I am proud to death.

((Dear Mr Freud,

I know a postman. This message.

Like water, the sound,

Mr Freud. The moon there

is love, is absolute like a planet. My dear Mr  
Freud,

I mean the flesh,

the golden earth. Yes,

like wheat. I mean, yes

what I have touched.))

My dear Mr Freud,

the sound of the earth. Yes.

*Begin a poem.* Light

has the sound of a swallow.



My dear Mr Freud,  
                                   *Begin over.*  
                                   Words  
of the poem. Man  
                                   in the mind.  
                                   The moon there  
is —  
((My dear Mr Freud,  
                                   *A dog is.*  
                                   *On West 9th.*  
*I strangled. Begin*  
                                   *a poem.*  
                                   Death. Yes,  
Mr Freud,  
                   I chose YES stopping the sound.  
My dear Mr Freud,  
                   I'll begin over.))  
*My dear Mr Freud,*  
                                   *simply no longer. Yes. Light*  
*yes is after all yes like yes*  
                                   *an image in flight.*  
P.S. yes.

## "The Old Ladies' Bridge Club"

From a Work-in-Progress, *Poet, Be Like God:*  
*Jack Spicer's Circle in San Francisco, 1956-1965*

Parallel to Jack Spicer's life in San Francisco was another, more long-established life in Berkeley. He had arrived at the University of California campus in Berkeley in 1945, after having begun his college life at the University of Redlands in southern California two years before. After taking an A.B. in 1947 and an M.A. in English in 1950 at Berkeley, he went to the University of Minnesota to teach, returning to Berkeley in 1952 to study for a Ph.D. (He completed the course work, but not a thesis, in Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse for this degree.) Spicer had refused to sign the University of California Regents' loyalty oath (the issue was tempestuous—anti-Communism: faculty resigned or were fired), thereby losing the opportunity to support himself by teaching- or research-assistantships, previously his means of support. Thus Minnesota in 1950.

Though living in Berkeley, by 1953 Jack Spicer was teaching humanities courses at the California School of Fine Arts on Russian Hill in San Francisco. He *did* sign a modified State employees' loyalty oath (the Levering Act, which required only an acceptance of the State and national constitutions with their provisions against forcible overthrow of the government) during this period, allowing him to teach in California. Thus he taught both in Berkeley at the University and in San Francisco at the California School of Fine Arts until 1955 when he went to New York and Boston for almost two years. He returned to San Francisco, living in the Polk Street area with only brief and occasional sojourns in Berkeley ever again to live.<sup>1</sup>

A large part of Spicer's life, practical and social, continued to be in Berkeley. After a very brief teaching career at San Francisco State College (now University) in 1957, at the time he was conducting his Magic Workshop (he abandoned his classroom



because he said the students were "puddings"<sup>2</sup>) Spicer returned as employee to the University of California to work part-time in the Linguistics Department under the direction of a friend from Minnesota years—David Reed, who by the late 1950s was a Berkeley faculty member. Together these two men had published an article in 1952 on a technical linguistics matter in the July-September issue of the journal of the Linguistic Society of America, *Language*, the cover of which was to be duplicated for Graham Mackintosh's first edition jacket (*White Rabbit*, 1965) of Jack Spicer's own book of poetry, *Language*. Spicer's job at Berkeley was, primarily, to help David Reed research a Pacific States atlas of American dialects, but he served too as factotum in varying capacities, taking charge of seminars for Reed<sup>3</sup> as well as helping in other departments—for example, examination grading with Professor Josephine Miles after Professor Thomas Parkinson was shot in his office, January 18, 1961. (The assailant proposed to open World War III by an assault on "liberals" in this still highly charged aftermath of the McCarthy era. He wounded Parkinson and killed a graduate student who happened to be conferring at the professor's desk.<sup>4</sup>) Therefore Spicer's economic life, after 1957 and up until the final months before his death, was organized in Berkeley at the University, even while most of his evenings were spent in San Francisco. Not all of them were, however.

Jess Sawyer, with the University of California Linguistics Department from this period until his recent death, in a statement for me recounted what he called "the Old Ladies' Bridge Club"; he said he may have named it himself after the event, his memory on the point uncertain. While Sawyer was a member, the group consisted of Jack Spicer; George Berthelon, who worked as a mechanic for aluminum door makers and at whose south Berkeley home the meetings were usually held; Wilben Holther, a professor in the Speech Department at the University; and John Halvorsen, then associated with the Berkeley English Department and still a professor at the University campus in Santa Cruz. Jess Sawyer replaced Edgar Austin, a graduate student in English who lived with Wilben Holther; though Austin remained sometimes as visitor, by the late 1950s he dropped out. Only Halvorsen, who had replaced Berthelon when he died, remains alive. Both Holther and Austin went to Japan where in due course both died. Sawyer died in 1986. George Berthelon died in 1960 from a streptococcus infection, a disturbing and sad occasion for Berthelon's friends in and out of the Spicer circle, and one much talked about for years.<sup>5</sup>

"Each of the evenings," began Jess Sawyer, concerning the weekly bridge gathering, "we drank one bottle of gin or bourbon—I don't remember that it greatly mattered which," though Sawyer thought bourbon was preferred. "One or the other of us brought this bottle. That duty rotated. We never ate anything. But there was always continuous drinking until we completed that one bottle."

Apparently the game was fairly set in form. "Jack and Wilben Holther were partners; I was a partner with George Berthelon until he died, later with John Halvorsen. Although I think after George died we switched partners more often in order to even out the differences in our various skills. I still think that probably I was the worst of the players, though not everybody would agree with that. I would rank the players: first, Jack Spicer; second, Wilben Holther; third, George Berthelon; fourth, me. John Halvorsen—hmm?—was probably a little better than me; certainly not probably as good as the best of some of the others.

"The bridge was always associated with active and acrimonious post-mortems. The post-mortem of a particularly interesting hand could very easily go on into a second or third hand after the occurrence that was being discussed and analyzed. The game—the play—was very serious, but as I remember, we didn't do any betting."<sup>6</sup>

Myrsam Wixman, who would occasionally witness these evenings, said, "after each hand they would recriminate. They would scream and shout; sometimes they would throw the cards. George would scream something; Jack would say, 'well, partner, why on earth did you make that bid!' They were very serious players." Wixman remembers "tiny stakes" in the game, "penny a point or something—exchange two dollars each game. These games went on for years." Wixman described the various houses they were played in, all George Berthelon's, all in a small section of south Berkeley.<sup>7</sup>

Sawyer continued his reminiscences. "One of the things that always accompanied the bridge was literary discussion. That didn't have to take place, but it usually did. George was not active in the literary discussions, nor was I. I think Wilben was primarily interested and, at a later date, perhaps John was, although I don't remember that the discussions were as vigorous after John joined as they had been before. Wilben was very keen on following what was going on in the world that Jack—the writing that Jack—was associated with. The first thing that happened each evening before the bridge started was Wilben's catching up on all the local news: who'd written what, what sort of readings and performances



were taking place, what things were interesting, gossip about everybody who was busy writing."

Jess Sawyer began now to discuss the players individually. "George Berthelon was the most interesting of us perhaps. He was a thoroughly disreputable character, most of us thought—bawdy minded and leering; an excellent bridge player, although erratic and frequently taking chances that involved our losing or being set." Remarking that Berthelon was not involved in the literary talk, Sawyer said that he "listened or made snide comments or disappeared into the kitchen organizing glasses and ice cubes for the rest of the evening. He was notorious in a funny sense: for those of the group who were interested in movies, he was a nephew, I believe, of a silent film star, Mae Marsh. Some of her charisma, as far as we were concerned, had rubbed off on George. His bawdiness—his bawdy mindedness—was always clever and rather beautiful to listen to. In that sense he was a literary person. He apparently was a good cook, but the kitchen was so dirty, the dishes were so dirty, there was so much moss growing, one fled."

Sawyer again modestly proclaimed, "I was not the best bridge player in the world and this brought out a kind of play in George. He tended, when he realized I would not bid unless I really had a solidly good hand, to jump to some preposterous bid. It was quite common for him to have consumed enough alcohol (he was the one who consumed more alcohol than any of the other four of us) until finally his left eye would begin to close. He would not be able to raise it. At this point you knew that a different kind of bridge was going to be played. He tended, then, to make up for my pusillanimity in bidding by simply opening all bids with three no trump. We frequently got beaten because of his outrageously overbidding."

Jess Sawyer was one of the people who described Berthelon's death with rich memory. "George died of a strep throat two or three years after I started going to the bridge meetings. It was alcohol, I suppose, that was involved. He had a strep throat (Myrsam Wixman says "bronchial tubes closed by inflammation") and decided to drink quite a bit late one afternoon. He got sick to his stomach and I believe managed to suffocate somehow or other."<sup>8</sup>

"George Berthelon's death I recall as being a very sad night. I was sitting in Mr Otis (a bar) with Jack Spicer that night," George Stanley recalled. Stanley speculated on Berthelon in another connection with Spicer: about values these two men shared concerning homosexuality, about its social dimensions. Referring to Spicer's friends in Berkeley generally, but especially to George

Berthelon, Stanley said, "these were guys who were non-ghettoizing homosexuals. There was also some sort of connection between these non-ghettoizing homosexuals and a kind of class consciousness. George Berthelon, when I mentioned he had nice geraniums growing in his garden, said, 'I'm so glad, I'm really glad you called them "geraniums." I hate people who call them "pelargoniums."'" There was that kind of feisty, anti-bourgeois, anti-traditional-homosexual attitude, 'we suck cock: take it or leave it!'"<sup>9</sup>

When Myrsam Wixman recounted the story of George Berthelon's death, he said, "well, he could have been saved. He went to a famous East Bay doctor whose specialty was rectal gonorrhoea—a gay doctor, his clients were mostly queens. The doctor may not have taken Berthelon's complaint—made over the telephone from work—seriously. [He] saw Berthelon in his office and gave him a cursory exam, diagnosed a cold or flu, and sent him home with aspirin-and-rest-and-fluids advice, [made] no throat culture. . . . It was galloping strep. If he had been diagnosed and subjected to rigorous treatment he might have survived. Finally George ran upstairs to Wilben Holther [they lived in George's house, Holther as tenant] and his last words were, 'I can't breathe,' and died. That was in 1960, in the late summer."<sup>10</sup>

"Wilben Holther, being the second best of the bridge players," resumed Jess Sawyer, "was a professor in the Speech Department. In the course of the meetings of the club, he was fired. I suppose he was fired because he didn't have a great many interesting publications, although the members of the club believed he actually was fired because his bosses supposed him to be homosexual." Technically, Myrsam Wixman states, Holther was not fired but, after seven years of faculty employment without tenure, released. Sawyer continued, "Wilben was very animated and he was very precise and if I called us 'the Old Ladies' Bridge Club' it was appropriate for him and me, but not nearly so appropriate for George Berthelon, who was anything but a little old lady in his approach to life, or for Jack Spicer, although even for Jack it was a little more appropriate than for George Berthelon."

"Wilben was a rather clean, tidy and neat person. He was big, rather heavy actually; along with Plato's rather big head, severe features—very jolly in a rather nice sort of way. He did differ from Jack completely, and from George undoubtedly, in his ideas about sanitation. I remember one night we had played at Wilben's—he lived upstairs from George Berthelon. When the bridge playing was all over, everybody had gone, I had to go to the bathroom. I



went to the bathroom and when I came out—Edgar Austin knew I was still there but Wilben apparently thought I had already gone—Wilben had a bottle of alcohol in his hand and a rag, and he was scrubbing the plastic of the chair in which Jack Spicer had sat. I never thought that Jack deserved that much cleaning up [after], but Wilben apparently felt that way about it.”<sup>11</sup>

After describing John Halvorsen as “very dour, with a sense of humor like George Berthelon’s,” Jess Sawyer passed on to Jack Spicer, saying, “he was the only one who seemed to be late. We would all be there by the time he arrived. He was a terribly serious player. His clothes were never very elegant; he always needed cleaning up. Witness Wilben’s willingness to clean up after him.<sup>12</sup> But he was also very poor. It was he, I think, who sparked the many post-mortems of the bridge playing.

“I remember once he accused me of cheating. He said that I peeked into his hand because otherwise I’d never play the way I did. What I had managed to do was achieve what in bridge is called a *grand coup* where you pick the trump, you’re the bidder; unfortunately a king of your trump suit is on your left: if you can then manage to play your ace from your own hand and get that king under it, that is called a *grand coup*. In Jack’s case he thought I was cheating. In my case it was stupid good luck. I was pursuing two or three ways of following the hand at the same time and didn’t even really realize what was happening when it happened. However, I had to take Jack’s criticism. There wasn’t anything else I could do about it.

“Occasionally Jack was so furious with himself that he would burst into tears. If he played a hand badly, then went through the post-mortem—and each time he went through the post-mortem it looked worse—he would eventually feel so angry that he would begin to weep, out of frustration. I suppose the weeping didn’t last very long. He was probably embarrassed at such an emotional reaction over a game. But it’s evidence of how deadly serious he was about it and how much he enjoyed it and how much it meant to him at that particular time.”<sup>13</sup>

Robert Duncan discussed these times, the significance of games for Jack Spicer, their variety. “Games meant a lot. This bridge group, by the way, you could never get Robin Blaser or me to be in. It didn’t take him long to learn we wouldn’t be any good as bridge partners. He tried to get some of his bridge partners into the Magic Workshop and so forth, but they weren’t any good as poetry partners. So poetry/bridge was something more than bridge: it’s *Alice in Wonderland* that was the key book for the chess game

[another Spicer interest] and cards for Jack. And poetry was something like a game. But a really serious game.”<sup>14</sup>

Myrsam Wixman recollected that it was a weekend evening, Friday or Saturday, when the bridge games were held at George Berthelon’s—after which, with the exception of Wilben Holther and Jess Sawyer, “everybody would go to the bars.”

“The White Horse?” I asked. Jim Herndon remembered this bar from the 1940s as a center for political talk and student camaraderie.<sup>15</sup> By the early 1950s the bar had changed to gay, a process recorded in a story Wixman told involving Jack Spicer and George Berthelon. It was located on Telegraph Avenue at the Berkeley/Oakland city line, one mile from the University.

“Usually on bridge nights everybody adjourned to the White Horse because it was close and the bridge game was over relatively late at night. (Then, the other night of the weekend, there would be a farther expedition, to San Francisco.)

“In the late 1940s the fraternity boys were of an age to drink because most of them were war veterans. They weren’t 18-, 19- or 20-year olds; they were of maturer age. So at that time the fraternity crowd hung out there and that accounted for the gay crowd. But by ’51/’52 the bar had become de facto gay. Queens started going in there in the late ’40s, 1950 and so on, to pick up your occasional fraternity boy; hang around there drinking beer. And gradually it became gay. There was a slot machine near the door. Gradually it became gay.

“So by 1952 (which I can date because Stevenson was running for President) there was a confrontation. An aging, I think at that time ex-fraternity boy (a name I forget—but Spicer called him Typhoid Mac) Typhoid Mac came down there with a few friends one night to clean the queers out of the bar. By that time the bar was pretty much all gay—toward the fall of ’52. Typhoid Mac came in, very drunk, trying to make trouble. He walked up and down the bar challenging queers to come out and fight, challenging the gay boys out and so on, which was about closing time. The bar did close and people left and this rotund little freak tried to push Jack to the door. George Berthelon and Jack Spicer were on foot; they were walking back to their car on foot. Typhoid Mac challenged them to battle. So he and Jack got into a fight a block or two up Telegraph toward campus. And they fell—I wasn’t there—they fell to the sidewalk and rolled around for awhile. George was standing close by, shouting mad things at this maniac. According to Jack, George went up and grabbed the fellow’s calf and bit it while they were on the ground, the sidewalk. Finally the police came and sent