POISE AND COUNTERPOISE
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WE TAKE DEATH TO GO TO A STAR

One wants to write Jay DeFeo’s “The Rose.” But I had fallen in love with the Venus of Lespugue. Ask me now. Blood dripped from the lance.

In 1940 in France a dog disappeared into a hole in a hillside and made a momentous discovery. L'Abbe Breuil came after and transcribed the paintings that were on the cave walls and ceilings, and someone has said that he did it for religious reasons. The bones of Arthur were discovered buried at Glastonbury for much the same reason they say.

They say that DeFeo was probably killed by “The Rose.” A child descended from the sky and its blood filled a large serving dish, and for that reason the land can be rescued from devastation only if a question is asked.

“The Rose” weighs over two thousand pounds. Jay DeFeo’s breath weighed nothing, and was no match for it. The Venus of Laussel holds a horn—a horn of plenty? The Grail was a serving dish that would provide you with as much as you wanted of your favorite food. As long as Donovan’s brain was preserved his soul was intact.

“The Rose” is a question and answer that clings improbably to a scrap of canvas. Cézanne refused to finish his portrait of Geffroy because he knew that one more daub of paint would ruin it. In his old age Renoir used to sign his name to paintings brought to him that he knew were fakes. The caves show strains of Eastern, Western and African art. L'Abbe Breuil transcribed not reality, but its reflection, spirituality. The Grail was carried by a young woman.

Why would anyone seeing a vision in the sky on a field of battle go mad? The lines of “The Rose” radiate out from its center and touch the furthest reaches of the universe, in much the same way as emanations from a single source are said to have created the universe and everything that has ever been and will be in it.
The deaths of the very first saints have not been recorded and there is a ritual scene depicted in the cave that cannot be deciphered. Arthur can actually be found inside Mount Etna. In my own experience I have seen a movie theater turned into a church and a synagogue into an artist’s studio.

The rose symbolizes both sterility and the restoration of life. The restoration of life. And for the first time he realized that he was allowed love and allowed death. When you look at “The Rose” you can imagine an emanation from the earth. In the Venus of Lespugue, a stone object, the concepts of innocence and venality were fixed in a single image that portended fertility.

An idiot and a hermit lived together in the branches of a tree, and every morning when they awoke each had to describe to the other what he had dreamt. The idiot said, I dreamed that the tree was reversed, the roots in the air and the branches in the ground, and we slept believing we were still above the ground. And the hermit said, I dreamed we were buried and the moon and the stars were buried with us. And the idiot said, the tree was upside down. Yes, said the hermit, but we believed otherwise, as you say. In my dream, yes, said the idiot. And in my dream, said the hermit, we knew the truth, and lost nothing by it.

In one of the figures in his “Large Bathers,” Cézanne has almost reproduced an image of the Venus of Lespugue. If he had succeeded in reproducing it completely he would have known the truth and lost nothing by it. Jay DeFeo can be said to have excavated “The Rose” by burying everything she could conceive of inside it.

Ad Reinhardt painted a black cross on a black background and Thomas Merton knew what he meant. And he went in search of beauty, which is love, traveling both here and in his dreams until he came to a tree near a spring that was guarded by an armed man. The place was a sacred grove, and was littered with the bones of all who had ever been there. And the armed man explained to him that he could go no further, that if he attempted to one of them must die and the other must remain to defend
the place. Black is only a reflection of light; there is no such color as black in nature; even if you keep your eyes closed forever you will never see black. “The Rose” is the floor of a dried-up ocean, the final resting place of your consciousness and the end of infinity.

He told me that his anguish was so great that he could not bear to live, but knew that his agony in Hell would be greater and so could not kill himself. I explained to him that there was no such place, that we had no warrant for its existence other than in works of art, and that as much as we loved and revered them we had no obligation to believe them, that in fact it was a certainty that they were false. In that case, he said, he was obligated to me, and shot himself before I could stop him. Cézanne vowed to die painting and failed to by a couple of hours; he painted “The House of the Hanged Man,” a place named for no reason that anyone knows; his Bathers series freed artists from the necessity of beauty; in his still lifes his skulls have been compared to fruit and his fruit to buttocks.

There is a church dedicated to John Coltrane. When I arrive there I expect to have a vision in which he will tell me that I can go no further. The center of “The Rose” was at the level of Jay DeFeo’s eyes and is actually four inches to the right of and four inches above the actual center of the canvas. She said that in painting it she wanted to express an idea that had a center to it. Coltrane never saw “The Rose” and DeFeo never heard “A Love Supreme.” There are objects in the caves, placed in inaccessible areas, that were not meant to be seen. He came to a stream that could not be crossed other than by means of a sword bridge placed across it. This is, he thought, the place where journeys end. But, in fact, the Grail Castle was on the other side.

During its early stages “The Rose” had no title; DeFeo referred to it as “the big gray painting”; later she called it “Deathrose”; and later on “The White Rose.” It had to be literally taken from her. In the Easter Island heads we see how one artist’s vision was raised to a communal necessity. Welsh and Native American folk tales agree in the belief that a severed
head can live. Even though he knew that death was everywhere and love nowhere he believed in the promise that had been made to him.

Twenty thousand years would go by before anyone entered the cave again and the dead return. L'Abbe Breuil, who had taken an oath to God, transcribed the images that were on the walls not because of their spiritual content but because they fixed an artist's vision of a bewildering reality. He literally restored breath and sight. Who is it that is fed from the Grail?

He was held a close prisoner for fear he would escape, but he assured me that he had no such intention, that tomorrow he would acquire the power and privileges of the king even though he must be killed for it the following day, and that so very few of us are ever fortunate enough to understand when we have reached the moment for which we were born. A visitor to DeFeo's studio during the time she was working on "The Rose" described it as a cave. Actually "The Rose" is several paintings, each one lost to the exigencies of another, and could only be properly viewed by a process of exfoliation. In order to remove it from the studio a section of wall had to be cut away beneath the window. The life of the Grail King's father was sustained by a Eucharist wafer, and no other food than that.

DeFeo solved the problem of transparency in opacity, and the question asked is whether that in itself is meaningful. The question can only be answered by one who knows which one of all the moments of his life it would be significant to relive.

At no time during its many transfigurations did "The Rose" ever look like a rose. In fact, it is more of a massive snowflake. Eighteen lines radiate from its center, the number represented by the Hebrew letter Chai, which is life. The Grail was both a serving platter and a chalice and the materiality of the sky and the earth in Cézanne's landscapes are the same. "The Rose" is a painting that can be seen by a blind man.

He said that he came to a hut in the wilderness, which is also the desert, and found inside it a mask representing the raven, and when he put on the mask he was immediately lifted up into the air, and he said that he
knew that he was flying, and as he flew he came to a field of battle, and he hovered over the field and his wings were large enough to cover it over with shadow; the sun was above him but everything below him was darkened; and blood spouted from his beak covering all that was in darkness, drenching both the living and the dead, and the dead were revived and the living drowned, and one went mad seeing it.

“The Rose” has crystalized the ethereal. In a dissimilar way Mark Rothko has done much the same thing; he has stabilized the volatile. In the work of both artists an equilibrium has been reached between what is and what is not. The shaman’s body is torn into pieces and put back together again. It is this experience that gives him his spiritual acuity.

DeFeo worked on “The Rose” for eight years and for four years after that she painted nothing. They say that Parsifal’s mother died when he left her. As there are different lives there are different deaths: there is no reason to accept a uniformity for the one that we would not accept for the other. “The Rose” can also be seen as a star.

A geode is a star inside the earth. In contrast to Jay DeFeo, who made only one other painting during the eight years she worked on “The Rose,” Vincent van Gogh painted two hundred paintings in a year, during one stretch sixty paintings in two months. Van Gogh believed that the progress of life took the course of a sphere, and that when we died we traveled to a star. Merlin it was who went mad after seeing a vision in the sky and thereafter became a prophet.

The “matter of Britain,” as the Arthurian material came to be known, were the stories of a conquered race regarding their deliverance which were perpetuated and enhanced by their conquerors. “The Rose” was last seen in The Museum of Modern Art. He had a bulbous nose, rose madder from the alcohol with which his breath was permanently saturated, and he told me that he fully expected to die in an alley or a ditch but that years ago when he was still young he had seen a vision, that he was in a darkened room that had suddenly become bright with saturated light and
although he saw nothing or no one he heard a voice that seemed to reach him from the point where infinity ended—it reached me as a whisper, he said—and he was told to look outside at the darkness and he did, and saw nothing, and he was told to look inside at the light and he did, and saw nothing, and he was told to go outside and look up at the stars and he did, and saw each star being extinguished one by one, and that when it was completely dark the sky came down to meet the earth.

It is believed by some that the cave painters and sculptors were itinerant artists who traveled from place to place, that their work insured the increase of the game, much as it was later thought that the death of the vegetation spirit insured the growth of the crops. Once that as well as cognate thoughts are left behind art will become, as Oscar Wilde said it already was, quite useless. Ad Reinhardt painted all black paintings and Cézanne painted a sky and earth that are indistinguishable. It was easy to kill people who represented the vegetation spirit because it was known that they would return again next year.

Someday one greater will come and art will finally be destroyed. DeFeo said that, “only by chancing the ridiculous can I hope for the sublime.” I was walking down the street and someone who I hadn’t seen in years stopped me and asked, “Where is ‘The Rose’ now?” and I said, “You’re walking on it.”
POISE AND COUNTERPOISE

If the concept of fractals is correct then the distance from Woodville, Mississippi to the Alvin Hotel can never be measured. Two men were seen on the road just north of here. One was dressed in black finery; the other whose clothes of an indeterminate color were in tatters. When I heard, I followed them at a safe distance. Dust rose on the road where we walked.

From my window the plains reached out before me in every direction. Dust transfigured the sunset. My father was packing a trunk full of bibles. He had a simple and effective method of disposing of them. He would arrive at a town and search the local paper obituaries for a recent death. Then he would visit the family and tell them that the deceased had ordered the bible, that it hadn’t been paid for, that if they liked he would cancel the order and be on his way. They never did, but willingly paid him for what was believed their beloved had bought.

At a Walker Evans gas station a banjo picker noodled a tune. The two men stopped to listen and I stopped too. At the rate we were traveling I would never see their faces. Before long I would be far from home. Lester Young’s father taught him to play violin, alto saxophone and drums, but it was the tenor saxophone that he used to transform his portion of the world.

The tattered man danced. A horseman passed by. My window was already far behind me. I would never see my mother again. Charlie Christian who first heard Lester Young in Oklahoma used what he had heard to alter forever the concept of jazz guitar. Christian’s innovations were not overlooked by others who used them to alter the music itself.

The window was an aperture. The dust turned the sunset yellowish green. My father rang the doorbell and someone’s hand pushed the curtain aside, looked out and saw that a stranger had come. He was admitted and entered their grief, embarrassed in appearance but facile in technique.
The Alvin Hotel looked out over Broadway to Birdland across the street. If you look up at one of the windows you might catch a glimpse of Lester Young looking out. While being interviewed in his hotel room someone put on one of his records and he sang along with it. It's been said that the record was “Crazy Over IZ” but I think it was “Lester Leaps In.”

Country roads, farm houses and small towns were my father's world. When he came home his car's grill screen was smothered in dead moths and grasshoppers, and all of his bibles were gone. There was an immensity of clouds in the sky.

We came to a railroad spur where Herefords ate corn from a trough. There were road signs that we ignored. No matter how far we traveled this one we could never really reach the end of it. If you follow fractals closely you will know that to be true. The classic question asked by fractals theorists is, How long is the coastline of England? and the classic answer is, No one will ever know.

The one in black pulled ace after ace from his sleeve and discarded each one in my direction. The one in tatters reached into a pocket for a harmonica. He played “Goodnight Ladies.” A cacophony of crows accompanied him. I whistled “Lester Leaps In.” The pages of my father's bibles were edged in gold. When he brought them out to his car they caught the sun and gleamed with the promise of a forever just about to arrive.

Each year I had watched the seasons change on the plains, the green grass grow withered and sere, and back to green again in the spring. My father once told me in confidence that he envied the repose of the dead. When he got home from his trips my brother and I would wash his car. Strangers were always passing on the road.

Critics have analyzed Lester Young's solo on “Lester Leaps In” and have pointed out the many innovations it contained, but not one of them has understood by what process of necessity he had created them. Lester
Young left Woodville with his father's band to play in fairs throughout the Southwest, gathering momentum as he went. When his father returned to the South he stayed behind, traveling with territory bands throughout Oklahoma and Kansas. Charlie Parker first heard him in Kansas City and quickly began to learn by watching and listening to him play.

The one dressed in tatters danced, strips of his clothing oscillating with his motion to obliterate his form. My brother whispered to me that he had once found a woman's undergarment in the back seat of our father's car. Once, while hitchhiking, I was picked up by a legitimate bible salesman who told me that my father's deception would have worked equally as well with encyclopedias, but I argued that his confidence would not have been as great, and besides, providing people with bibles was probably balm for his conscience. You know him best, he said, and nothing else for two hundred miles where I left him. Lester Young's early sound was obtained by applying the tone of the C-melody saxophone to the tenor. Stan Getz, following his lead, later played alto parts on tenor.

My mother looked out at the plains from her window as often as I did. His car could be seen approaching and receding at a great distance. Sometimes it was just dust that she saw defining the road through the tall grass in summer. I had her picture, taken before color photography, with her cheeks painted red and her eyes blue. It was when she was still a young girl, and she looked to me for all the world like Tenniel's illustration of Alice in Wonderland.

It was my father's boast that he could sell bibles to the dead. When I was very young I actually took him at his word, and I conceived the idea, that has never left me, of talking to the dead. We passed a lake where boys and girls my own age were swimming.

It was listening to Frankie Trumbauer on C-melody saxophone that provided Lester Young with the insight he needed to change the whole concept of tenor playing. I was close to the one in black finery and the one in tatters, but like the hare and the tortoise, I would never catch up to
them. The one in black finery was preaching the end of the world by fire. The one in tatters was sleeping. I took an apple from my pocket, and drank from the lake. The boys and girls my own age cavorted and splashed in the water.

The corn was high. The crows rippling over it were brought to the hunters' shotguns by owl decoys. Like the purchasers of my father's bibles they were taken in by an unverifiable deception. When we left the lake we came to a monument to an Indian named the Turk who had led Coronado astray, it was said, to that very spot. There were always tourists to be found there and the one in tatters played and danced for their coins while the one in black finery cheated them in three-card monte. Lester Young's early work, his sound, was a revelation, and within ten years very few tenor players ignored his influence. When he changed his sound the critics denigrated, then ignored him. His response was a perpetual sneer. Black and red panties, my brother said, and snickered.

The harmonica is really the harp. We came to shorn fields, stubbled in the moonlight. When my father was on the road he often picked up hitchhikers, occasionally an itinerant country preacher, someone who saw one morning that the trees were full of angels . . . “asking in a kindly way for me to go with them,” one told him. He never mentioned to them what he was selling. Why? Because while he thought that he pitied them he actually felt ashamed by their conviction beside which his own was squalid.

In time we would see the Chippewyan Mountains, shining in the sun. My brother had removed the panties and took me to see where he had hidden them. In a scarecrow's pocket: where he left them; scarecrow, pocket and panties moldering away.

My mother liked to remember old things. I conned old times. Lester Young tilted his head at a forty-five degree angle when he played. “I can't see imitating the Hawk,” he had said in the interview, referring to Coleman Hawkins whose tenor sound and style was the most influential up till then. She was fascinated by stories where people traveled back through time.
Whenever the door opened my father would feign embarrassment when told of the death in the house, but still he would explain why he was there and wait, and he was usually always invited inside where he entered with an expression changed to solemnity and took his place with the mourners. He would sit in a chair unobtrusively while the deceased’s relatives discussed this unexpected development. He was always surprised to see how earnestly they spoke together and then agree to pay for the bible, as if they had been in league with him all the time.

Coronado stood up in his stirrups and was still unable to see above the tall grass. My mother used to tell me that he had passed right where our house was, “. . . on his way to Eldorado,” she said. But he never got there, I always reminded her, and at least once I thought I caused her to cry.

A farmer stopped, asked me where I was going and when I told him told me to get up in the back of his pickup where I lay back and rode with my face to the sky. The sun above: at that time I saturated myself with every light I could find.

Theorists of fractals have never attempted to apply its principles to time. They require real things, things which have smaller and smaller indentations; and each one of them must be measured. A grain of sand, you understand, would have an infinite amount of indentations. From this it becomes obvious that nothing can ever be measured. So they ask, How long is the coastline of England? and no one can ever answer them.

Once my father brought one of his hitchhiking preachers home with him and he held us enthralled by his description of Hell. My brother trembled through the night and when I asked him why, he said it was in dread for our father’s agonies. My mother, sympathizing only with his wife, pleaded with the preacher to return to his home and family.

At opposite sides of the house, my mother and I used to look out our windows. We came to a café that had been closed for years, windblown sand piled around it, pushing against it like ocean waves, as if the inland
sea had returned. The harp sounded eerie. The sky, engorged on the sunset, glowered and the one in black finery and the other whose clothes were in tatters entered the café. She looked for the dust of my father's car and came to believe she was waiting for him. She never knew that she wanted to leave.

As the sun went down they turned on the lights and the one in tatters stretched out his arms in the semblance of a scarecrow. His tone sounded frayed and some of the kinder, though no less obtuse, critics tried to excuse what they believed to be Lester Young's decline by attributing it to his bitterness, but bitterness never touched the purity of his intent and there was anything but a decline, there was the strangeness of beauty edged with grief.

It seemed to me that they were dancing. I could have gone inside. It was a stately dance. My brother followed our father's trade, entered strange homes, wearing a black suit so as to be unobtrusive at wakes and funerals. Our father passed on his skills to him.

Beyond the café a small town lingered in the distance, the outlines of its buildings fading to a faint nocturne as the sun drew down the western slope of a mountain. My father always made that town his last stop and my mother believed she knew the distance from it to our home. She waited at her window, and the window became a barrier, as if the world outside had shrunk to a place too small for her to enter, unless she too could shrink, like Alice. When my brother left he told me he would come back with a pair of black and red panties.

They danced until sunup. I arrived in the town just in time for a funeral, rang the bell and asked to speak to the deceased. His widow explained, to my perplexity, that he was dead. The window in the Alvin Hotel was the last one Lester Young ever looked out of. When my mother died my father kept glancing at the door apprehensively, waiting I think for a bible salesman to appear.
ON THE SOCIABILITY OF A PORTRAITURE

A face has many meanings, fluctuations of distortions, that always imply the familiar. Rembrandt’s went from youth to old age in an orderly progression. Van Gogh had the wit to make his different each time he painted it. What others see in your face is not always possible: Lautrec’s portrait of van Gogh, for instance, shows the softening of age that was never attained.

Some people have been angry enough at what they saw to have destroyed portraits of themselves. At least one person committed suicide that way. Henry James believed that a portrait can reveal a person’s vices; Oscar Wilde, that it can record them. None of which is remarkable if you believe that making someone’s image robs them of their soul. You can look all you want in the mirror and never see your soul: in that regard, art has a practical use.

In the Cyclades they made faces with no features. A face was preserved for thousands of years in a tomb in Saint Paul’s until a bishop’s tear fell on it. To see someone whose face is the same as yours is a sign of imminent death. Monet painted his face into the clouds. Mirrors have always been considered hazardous.

When you look at Montaigne’s portrait you cannot be sure you are seeing what those who knew him saw. Some people have judged from the features of Olmec heads that they originated in Africa. Francis Bacon was the only artist who ever saw his own face. Paleolithic carvers made their “Venus” images faceless: the face in those instances being the same as the name of God.

Durer codified the correct proportions of the head. The sitter must be relaxed before you can begin.

“Laura, describe for me what I look like.”
“I can’t. I see no more than you do.”
"You described for me, once, a swan by the sound of its wings."
"Whiteness just came to me. I had no prior experience of it but understood it by the sound of its wings alone."
"Describe my face."
She reached and touched his face, held it between her hands, felt its essence in her fingers, but could not accurately distinguish it.
"I can't."
"But does it give you pleasure or not?"
"As I represent it to myself, it does, but that's not necessarily true of it."

Kouroi all have the same face. Different artists made them and they were all obliged to depict the same face. As a result, there is something sinister, or obscene, about them. And at the same time they yield us beauty. A beauty, though, that can actually make your flesh crawl. The beauty of Botticelli's Venus masks her death. Her death protected her beauty. Cézanne made his wife's face a mask. It was an intelligent solution to the problem of representing absolute transience. The carvers of the kouroi insisted on permanence, and they were pleased to find it in repetition. We look at them today and find them repellent.

He in turn touched Laura's face and its meaning rippled fleetingly through his fingers.

Kant observed that a perfectly regular face ordinarily conveys nothing. Also, that it indicates only a mediocre type of person.

The beauty of her face was the product of his sense of touch. They sat opposite each other, their fingers deftly touching, forehead, eyes, nose, cheeks, lips, chin. What might have been repellent to you was pleasure to them.

Kant agreed with Henry James by assuming that "nature in its external form expresses the proportions of the internal requisite to constitute a man free from faults..."

"Describe what other colors come to you."
"I see them as sounds."
"Well, describe them, then."
"Thunder is purple; sirens are red; birdsong is yellow; and falling rain is blue."
"I see them, too, exactly like that."
The beauty of Modigliani’s faces is dependent upon the length of their necks. There is no concept by which they can be measured. Some comic strip artists have agreed with Kant.
"Try again to describe my face."
"That’s impossible."
Whenever someone dies mirrors are covered for a period because it is believed that the face of the dead one can be seen in them.
"Rustling leaves are orange; running water is green."
"And my voice?"
"Let’s see—I’m not sure."
Musicians with perfect pitch claim to hear sounds as colors. Paleolithic people colored their dead with red pigment obtained from iron ore. Very likely they saw death as red.
"Why not observe colors by touch."
"Who could do that?"
"Well, try. What color is my face?"
"I can’t . . . please, I can’t."
In some societies, warriors painted their faces to appear hideous and today we would find them beautiful. This is not the same as tattooing, which is an assertion of permanence. Who hasn’t imagined the face belonging to a voice on the telephone? An unadorned face can inspire terror by implication alone.
"Tell me what I look like."
"What does it matter?"
"It matters in regard to who I am."
"Anyone who has seen you would know."
Beauty is a subjective judgment regarding the finality of an object's form. A judgment regarding its end, though, would be objective. The imagination is all that is necessary to know beauty.

"It's useless."
"Describe me by my voice."
"You have sandy colored hair and a sort of pale complexion, a broad forehead, an aquiline nose, but with a flair at the nostrils, full lips, lightly brushed with carmine, high cheekbones, a square jaw and dimpled chin."
"Nonsense."
"Of course—all descriptions are finally nonsense."

To the casual observer, one skull looks the same as any other. Faces are changed by aging, illness, accident and enchantment.

You can describe mass and contour by touch, but not shadow. Asian artists painted faces without shadows.

"How old are we now?"
"Why wonder?"
"Is our hair gray?"

Laura had a mirror that she sometimes touched, her fingers repelled by its flatness but fascinated by it, searching its surface, knowing there was an image on it that was inaccessible. Infinity can be approximated by mirrors: two mirrors must face each other; each is one half of infinity. If Laura was standing between them she could be seen forever by looking in either direction. As it was, she could not be seen.

He never touched the mirror. His idea of it was purely imaginary. Something was immured in the glass that was them: that's the only pure concept he had of it. The rest he imagined. Anything else might be a mirror without him knowing it.

Fauves and expressionists painted a face any color they wanted to, the brighter the better. Chuck Close can group a series of abstract designs into a photo-realistic portrait. Gauguin used his own face for the model of Christ in Gethsemane.
“Am I sad?”
“Are you sad?”
“Can you tell if I am sad?”
“No.”

What will happen to faces when all is quiet and touch no longer sticks to anything? Laura surreptitiously touched her own face. There was recognition of herself. She knew herself. When she touched him there was no image. Her understanding excluded him. She cheated him, she knew, but was content.

He touched his own face too, and wondered what there was about it she couldn’t find. That would have been most meaningful to him.

“Laura, how many faces is it possible to know?”
Her fingers were a mirror.
“That question can’t be answered.”

He could frown at that response and she not see it. Ideally, if her fingers were placed opposite each other, her face in between would be reproduced infinitely. An infinite number of faces to be known. They would be as alike and as different as leaves in a forest. Those would be her faces. She smiled and he didn’t see it.

An aesthetic judgment can only be subjective, but beauty has to be universally accepted, at least within a given community. Reason has nothing to do with it.

The artist studies anatomy to visualize what is under the face, yet the necessary expression arrives from somewhere outside, can be lifted off like the skin. Michelangelo painted his likeness on a flayed face. An inert face is impossible.

Light broke like a wave against her forehead and ebbed back into immensity. He put his fingers to her face and she to his. His eyes were shining and she told him so and they both laughed.
IN THE GREY OTHERWISE

No one ever saw Humpty-Dumpty's yolk or albumen. A cracked shell has been shown to us but never the insides. All day I struggled up the side of a pyramid, imagining I was in Chichen Itza, to be confronted with the occultation of Venus. Vines impeded my progress and some strange conversations I heard. Humpty-Dumpty's wall had a plaque identifying it but it would take a sharp eye now to spot it. A wall's an accumulation of material ending at a certain height. I might say the same for an equestrian statue. At the peak of the pyramid I trembled to see how far I had come who had never heard a gibbon howl. There were chambers inside the pyramid. In one of them a campfire and stacked rifles. Smoke sieved out at some cracks, and water got in. A coyote had jumped out of my garbage pail. "Why drink liquid jade?" "It confers immortality." A tourist helicopter came closer. Smoke smudged the ceiling and walls of the chamber and animal bones littered the floor. A raccoon had taken himself a crap on my door mat. Later I saw a crushed raccoon on the highway and wondered if it was the selfsame one. Not a cloud in the sky, an arid country, no blood, just a striped tail stuck onto the road waving like a plant. They have hands just like ours and wash their food before eating it. It made no more sense to enter any of the chambers: they have been searched and searched and searched. Human breath has been found to be deleterious to ancient works of art. Stone warriors guarded this place. I listened carefully while a crone gave me directions to an undiscovered chamber but there were some things that didn't add up and something cracked about the look in her eye. I gave her money for her trouble anyway. I heard someone snicker. "She has been blind for many years." Archaic birds have been here. They suffered from diseases we have never heard of. What would have hatched from Humpty-Dumpty? Lizards clung to the pyramid wall absorbing the sunlight, storing up heat for the night. A perfect mimicry of stone: not till
you get close to them do you realize what they are. Mars is slightly red but I searched and found nothing. If it ever rained the pyramid walls would be slippery, tiny lichens sprang up almost spontaneously. Long before anyone in the West heard of acupuncture, Bob Ripley’s “Believe It Or Not” showed pictures of people with long needles stuck everywhere into their bodies, in no apparent discomfort. There are vectors of simultaneity to a pyramid. She was selling little straw dolls and her arms were crusted with eczema. Crowds parted around her, occasionally someone stopped to buy a doll. A little boy was not far away, who would lead her home when the dolls were all sold. At that moment I would talk to her. There were little red spiders that lived in that straw. Pyramids only mimicked volcanoes: they cupped the earth’s power. Everything remained the same since the day she lost her sight. The boy had not yet been born and she could not believe in him. She felt his hand but he was immaterial. I scratched the stone with my knife point, a nice depiction of the spider. Then concentric lines flowed. Eight bison have escaped in Michigan. The skull of a cow marked the trail through which Spanish soldiers infiltrated in to attack the Moors. Head of a Cow, the ancestral appellation in recognition by a grateful monarch for the placing of that skull. Lizards suffused breath through every pore of their bodies. There was a repose in her gait and it could be seen that she knew the way better than the boy who guided her. He brought her to me and left us. She told me of the chamber and of everything in it. The boy came back and made a circular motion to his head with his finger and that was that. Next day I was scampering up the side of the pyramid. She whispered that it was a crypt and her voice seemed so much younger than her face. Coyotes and raccoons infiltrated the suburbs eating garbage or food put out for cats. I dislodged a small pebble and watched it bounce roll down to the ground for as long as I could look without growing dizzy. There is no right side or left side to a pyramid. At the peak there is a mirror image that widens as it ascends; one balanced on the other. Cabeza de Vaca was a slave rescued by slave catchers. There is no earthly reason to assume that
Humpty-Dumpty was an egg. One pyramid canopies the other, like the halves of an hour glass. The sky grew paler as I climbed. Symmetry is too useful an idea to be refuted but it presents a persistent dilemma because it cannot possibly be true. The boy offered to be my guide; he had climbed to the top many times. The woman could not believe in his existence; she held his hand and he led her home but she saw the way perfectly, that was there before he was born. At night, when it was dark she lit a kerosene lamp. When it was light she blew it out. The boy circled his forehead with his finger. There was every reason to continue, thought I knew that at some point I would be climbing down the side of the pyramid as I climbed higher. The old woman paused as the helicopter leveled out over her hut. The boy had described it to her, but it was there for her no more than he was. The immortals are feathered. She thought often of birds and sometimes whistled after them, extending her hand to feel talons grip her fingers. There were ashes around the moon. She expects you to ask her a question, the boy told me. “There is nothing anymore in the chambers.” There was a desiccated corpse, only half interred, surrounded by ceremonial regalia, a scorpion pacing inside the rib cage. I should be thinking of returning home but her predicament holds me. From as high up as we were I could see former irrigation ditches stopped with sand. “Her son left years ago and she thinks every traveler has news of him.” In another chamber eight red bats surrounded one white one. She held out her hand to touch mine. “My son left before I grew old. If I leave this village I cannot see so I must wait for some news of him here.” It might be I have seen him somewhere. Cabeza de Vaca made promises he couldn’t keep. “She thinks he would return if he could,” the boy told me. Vast clouds of orange butterflies on their way south to breed flowed into the pyramid. They flow in from the north like hallucinations. The tourists of course took me for one of their own. The sight of the butterflies was too beautiful to believe, one of them told me. She looked into my eyes, although she was blind, and expected me to ask her a question. The boy
told her that the butterflies had returned, and she wondered that they did every year but not her son. In one of the chambers a young man was lashing vines and slender poles into a ladder. From here I could see the Autumn River. The stars were the color of bone. Where the apexes of the pyramids meet I found a line engraving of a man and a woman, side by side, and an equation I couldn’t solve. The boy watched me anxiously, I thought. It would make no sense to ask him any questions. I knew that condors fly this high. Moose had been returning to areas where farms were abandoned. She held her hand near the kerosene lamp and felt its warmth. The sky was disheveled by lightning. She felt it on her face. I imagined, and we waited for thunder. The tourists were sitting in cantinas sipping tequila and staring at posters announcing ancient bullfights. “Have you found it?” she asked. “Were there gunshots last night?” the boy asked me. I had heard them, certainly, but decided to lie. I enjoyed the ritual of drinking tequila: first the salt sprinkled onto and licked from my hand, then the quick drink and bite into the lemon. Roots welled up inside an old drainage ditch pipe and cracked it open. “We must have passed it,” I wondered. “No, sir, it is further on.” But the sun was becoming too hot. “When you come to my son tell him that my grief walks after his dream.” “I’m from Wyoming,” one of them told me. “If you’re interested in fishing, especially for grayling, I’d advise you to visit us.” Their colors were primarily black and red and raw sienna: men and bulls poised to baffle each other, meeting over and over, and then once again. There were some dated with the years before I was born. The grayling is as beautifully colored as a rainbow. Salt, tequila and lemon: the night was cool and I went outside; if there was a body in the ditch I overlooked it. Two uniformed men wished me good evening. The boy came to lead me away. “It’s cooler to climb at night.” Slightly tipsy, I told him the story of Humpty-Dumpty, or some version of it I remembered, and he laughed. “We’ll go tomorrow. The pyramid will always be there,” I lied, knowing that the stone heads on Easter Island were disintegrating and crumbling to the touch. She offered
“We climbed higher today than before,” the boy told her. She touched her hand to my forehead and smiled, but paid no attention to the boy. It was obvious she considered him a nuisance. “One thing I miss around here is trees.” He was a good drinker but I figured I could drink him under the table. “Fishing should be right up your alley.” One of the chambers contained an installation resembling a chapel. Our way into it was barred. She showed me a picture of her son: about my age, with a devilish grin, dark flashing eyes and raven hair. She held it up, as I knew she must have done often in the hope that some stranger passing by would remember having seen him someplace. Women do that frequently nowadays. “You can still see grizzlies up there,” he told me. The trappers used to call the grizzly Caleb or Gabe, who knows why? Jim Bridger was also called Gabe. Once someone did remember seeing her son, but that was long ago and it was far to the north. It was a woman from Michigan who had picked him up hitchhiking and carried him up to Sault St. Marie. “I doubt that was really her son,” the boy told me, and I let it go at that. The woman seemed genuinely sorry that she hadn’t known who she had had in her car. “I’m sure he’ll come back,” she said. Scorpions perform a ritualized mating dance. As blowsy as everything now seemed it was hard to believe that this district was once ruled with an iron hand. The boy became genuinely attached to me, it seemed, and we became close companions. So much so that I began to regret my departure. “The police will not bother you.” I realized that my behavior might be judged peculiar. Once or twice I was pointed out. I was reminded that anything discovered in the pyramids must remain here, that it was not permitted to remove national treasures from the country. Her son had made his way to northern forests. They had built a small fire in one of the chambers. One of them stirred the contents of a small silver bowl and poured it into two cups out of which they each drank: what I saw appeared to be liquid gold. They were tall, finely proportioned and robust. Cabeza de Vaca was passed from the wretchedness of slavery.
to the exaltation of a venerated person. He gathered wood with bleeding hands and feet and he healed the sick. He was a shrewd observer and a genuine cosmopolite. Her son may have been involved with smugglers and I would have to be regarded with some suspicion; there was my daily contact with his mother and my obsessive climbing of the pyramids. “That place has been examined over and over and over. There is surely nothing left to find of interest or value. Whatever was not stolen is in our museum where you can enjoy it if you wish, but as far as I know you never go there. Only to the pyramid, day after day.” As a rule the police were solicitous of the tourists’ interests. “And too, the boy is one who is likely to get into trouble.” It had rained for several days but the old irrigation routes were sterile. The boy came and said he had something important to show me. We trudged out to the base of the pyramid on the hottest day I remembered and without saying a word started to climb. A gila monster basked on the clay. My hand almost brushed it. Humpty-Dumpty had been placidly sitting on a wall. Who would have believed he would have fallen? He led me around to a side of the pyramid we had not yet climbed. If the boy was dangerous I was virtually in his power. “Her son reached that spot just above,” he told me. “Were you with him?” “No, on the ground.” “And you saw him come down.” “No.” Was there an opening further on up? I strained to see. There was only the wall diminishing to meet itself as it rose. I could imagine the plain below filled with horsemen. “He could not have come down without you seeing him.” “Do you think he could fly?” the policeman asked me. “He would have had to.” “Then the boy is lying to you.” I would have had only to lean back to fall. How do you think they could have raised a structure that high? someone asked. Each week brought new tourists. “They want to release wolves now, in Montana,” one told me. Her son bathed his head in cool water in a lake that was fed by melting snow. He picked a rock that extended into the water and he sat down to fish. I told the tourist about coyotes in the suburbs and his expression phased from incredulity to weariness. “Don’t forget, anything
you find is ours." That night I went to see the old woman. She was binding up straw into dolls. I thought of all the people who had bought them and carried them to places she could not even imagine. The scenes that surrounded her were behind her eyes. Her eyes were placid. "When you see my son tell him that I have found his heart." "She has been crying today," the boy told me. The pyramid is only a reflection: when I got to the top I ascended higher.
CLEANING THE MIRROR

Standing on a swing, legs pumping, higher and higher: the sky rushes down. An empty swing, plumb to the center of the earth. A toy trumpet on the ground in a playground in the rain. Monkey bars, symmetrically linked horizontal to vertical, but otherwise with the cool brevity of Mondrian. The swing suspended on chains. Hymn to come later.

The phone rang in Jim & Andy’s. Rocco was busy cleaning shrimp and I was the only one there, so I answered it. Jim & Andy’s—demolished years ago, Jim died and there never was an Andy. Bill Schwartau walked in, his feet cut and bleeding, perfect timing, the call was for him.

Walking up a sliding pond instead of sliding down. Armature for a future work: collection of the artist. Blood on the ground but the rain washes it away. A controversial aspect regarding a very famous photograph of a lynch victim that appeared in Life magazine revolves around the question of the photographer’s doing nothing other than taking a picture, and the implications of that to himself—his purpose, his responsibility, his humanity. The question always raised is whether he is a participant, spectator or recorder. He cannot be absolved of his presence at the event. He comes away with a picture of a dead man chained to a tree. Just what is his involvement?

Shooting marbles is an act of concentration. Come to think of it, I never saw a menu in Jim & Andy’s, but there was never a day went by that Rocco was not cleaning shrimp. Bill was arguing with someone on the phone, a halfhearted argument on his end, he had just about stopped taking anything seriously. I was beginning to ponder the problem of “luminous darkness” at the time.
The toy trumpet was broken. The prayer for the dead is not actually a prayer at all, it is a tradition. Jim & Andy's was below sidewalk level, a fact that for some reason I found to be soothing. He had an ear that could tell the pitch of a burp. Today I hung upside down on the monkey bars and realized how frightened I was. Rocco had a forbidding personality, sort of a gatekeeper who kept you at a distance until the day when he found you worthy of admission. Upside down can be disorienting.

A jack-in-the-box is nothing more than a deceptively decorated spring. Its purpose is to surprise you. It cannot be confused with anything else. The spring by itself means nothing. Someone will tell me that there was in fact an Andy. I know. Ad Reinhardt eschewed Impasto.

Ladies and gentlemen, Clifford Brown has chosen for his musical vehicle, Once in a While. Sonny, on the other hand, made you feel comfortable immediately; he was there when Rocco was off. When is Zonky a Minor Goof? I've asked numerous people that question and the only one who knew was Bill Schwartau.

I've noticed that the only way to justify the inexplicable is to explain it. In those days I was studying tenor and clarinet with Joe Allard. His studio was on the second floor across the street from Radio City Music Hall, and people waiting on line at the box office could look up and see me practicing while Joe was downstairs in the Walgreen's for coffee.

One afternoon at the Five Spot Coltrane came in, sat at a table and drank a quart of milk. I was there, too, drinking Strega. I went into Brentano's to buy Ulysses but unwittingly got Stuart Gilbert's book instead. My ax was a Conn. So surrealism came to these shores and took root here.

Two cars racing toward each other on the center line, the first driver to
swerve is a chicken. We have to keep on cleaning the mirror. That made the
dark his hiding place. Reading Classic Comics gives you an infallible basis
for imagining the characters when you later actually read the books. Bill
Schwartau was Peter’s, Paul’s and Mary’s favorite sound engineer.

Plate glass windows partition us off from West 48th Street. On the east wall,
a sign, Jim & Andy’s East. Almost nobody played the juke box. The tunes
on it were archaic. King Curtis, from Texas, offered to buy my tenor. I also
had a Buffet clarinet.

The Camera Eye comes readily to mind. To connect the real with the unreal.
He began to walk around barefooted. Kang So Lee’s ducks are spirits that
live in two worlds. The color of light is irrelevant to an artist’s concerns. An
installation of man (Bill Schwartau) speaking on the phone, realistic
enough to be real.

The swing, the trumpet and the rain were an album cover. Andy in fact was
Jim’s cat. King Pleasure knew it wasn’t spring when he recorded that tune:
Bill Schwartau in the engineer’s booth. I helped carry in his equipment
once during a remote at the Village Gate.

A child’s place in the real Coney Island. Liner notes: Bobby Timmons had
holes in the ass of his pants . . . United Artists has the master in its vaults.
Shovel dipping into sand into pail into sand out of sea ground feldspar and
mica and quartz into sand. The studio at Springs became a museum
because of the splattered paint on the floor.

Works and Days: I got off the train at Columbia University. The Waverly
Smokeshop: translated by Richmond Lattimore. A history of Western
movies would come of it. The giant mushroom parachute jump looming:
Tiffany structured; de Chirico stillness.
Jim & Andy's was a musician's hangout. I came there with my horns and was accepted. Surrealism was ground up into a form of confetti here. Anomie has led to some major religious breakthroughs. Bloods of two people mingling after the crash: Richie Powell and Clifford Brown. Live at Birdland.

We would all play like that if we could. I had not yet gotten to Paterson, but I saw the figure 5 in gold in the Metropolitan. The Palisades, palette knife slashed. And heard a cock crowing on Bleecker Street. What was it that was whispered to Mal Waldron?

Al Jazzbo Collins had a faucet for a hood ornament. As you return to your forward motion you crouch on the swing flexing your knees and drive your legs into it. Rising to your full height, grasping the chains. I began to notice a similarity to Piranesi's Prisons. Everybody and his brother sees himself in Death of a Salesman. I dreamed I had an imaginary brother.

Similar to the position of a taxidermist who cannot kill anything. Jim was something of the patron saint of musicians; he could be called on for help in any exigency. If you died, he would rent Town Hall for the benefit. I missed Lowell by a wide margin. Peewee Marquette reminds everybody that later on they will be able to say. "That's my hands clappin on that record that they recorded live at Birdland." And Ad Reinhardt that, "The only art criticism is art." But Ruskin knew when a pot of paint had been flung in the public's face.

Bill Schwartau investigated the nature of purity and found it to be as incremental of attainment as a vacuum. He told Jim that it would not be long before everyone would go barefooted. He believed he was setting some kind of pace, but, of course, he was walking alone.
Bill lived on McDougal Street, not far from the Swing Rendezvous. From the Swing Rendezvous to the Surf Maid to the Masque. Sometimes someone says something that reveals more about them than they think. He bought whiskey by the case. Jim told me that Bill had borrowed some money from him and that was the last time he saw him. I hadn’t seen Bill in some time myself but was starting to hear stories about him and his erratic behavior. I was in the studio when he recorded a Campbell’s Soup jingle. It was not “um, um good.” Malcolm Lowry saw that on a billboard. It was “soup and sandwich.” Later I would describe the purple grotto in a story published in Chicago Review, but first got an F in Caroline Gordon’s creative writing class. Arcing shadows followed underneath the swing. They will build above the Audubon Ballroom, retaining it for one purpose or another.

The Bund was advised to keep their swastikas out of sight during our stay in Yaphank. When Jim died Rocco tried to keep the place going but couldn’t. Santeria, for example. Eighteen, the legal drinking age in New York at that time. Died wretchedly. Repose and static are the same. A vicus of recirculation came into view.

Keep on draggin your red wagon along: a song where the vocalist improvises the lyrics. I heard Joannie Shaw sing it the one time I was in Minton’s. Minton’s is historically significant. Minton’s Playhouse, I think, it actually was, but everyone called it just Minton’s. Bill was self-taught and some say that he couldn’t keep up with the new developments in sound recording equipment and went to pieces over it. She makes up the words as she goes along.

Ankgor Wat, the repetition of a single idea through the three phases of archaic, classic and decadent, is subject to the contempt of nature. The ground comes up to hit you. Tradition can be invigorating if looked at
askance. That's your red wagon. Joannie's arms were wiry, the muscles thin but taut, as if she had done physical labor at some time.

I came to Minton's too late, long past the days of its jam sessions. The music was made increasingly difficult, as a trial to maintain the elite status of its players. Then along comes a critic who maintains that bop musicians largely abandoned the clarinet because it was technically too difficult to play! The only art criticism is art. Interestingly enough, it was Tony Scott, the bop clarinetist accompanying Joannie Shaw that night.

The playground was gone, and things so altered that I wasn't sure precisely where it had been. Time had given everything a patina and nothing was revealed.

My little red top. Autumn rhythm came into view. Keep right on spinning. Thanksgiving some people in the Swing Rendezvouz would get homesick and long to return to places they had fled from. The story I heard that Bill Schwartau ended up sweeping the floors in recording studios is untrue. I studied solfeggio to improve my ear. Joe advised me against going to Julliard, during a time when they refused to accept him on their faculty. Later on he did teach there, and reviews of his students' concerts referred to him as Mr. Allard.

Precambrian, before there was life. Scene in a movie where a pianist or art student is told he or she had no talent and commits suicide. I took courses in ethics and symbolic logic. Music as color: perfect pitch was always believed to be an ability you were born with; now there are people who claim it can be acquired. Cambrian is characterized by trilobites.

Similarly, I saw Leopold Bloom as Zero Mostel. Fat Girl weighed 110 pounds when he died. And heard Molly Bloom say yes on a record. A
London cutpurse could choose to be transported to Georgia and thus go unhung. Come to think of it, that was the last time I ever saw Bill. An important question resulting from so much that had gone before is, can someone with Alzheimer’s make paintings of value?

You could start with the black paintings and find a different road back, same as you could do with *Finnegan's Wake*. I heard some time later that he died. Precisely when that was I can’t say; yesterday, comes to mind, but the commonest thing is to say that it seems like only yesterday.

Dear _____, I remember when you used to come with your brother. Bill grew up in an orphanage, as you know . . .

I saw Tony Scott often in Jim & Andy’s but we never spoke. I continued going to Jim & Andy’s after I had quit playing. Gradually musicians would ask me what I was doing and I’d tell them writing, and they’d think I was a composer or arranger. At one of Bill Schwartau’s sessions, recording Jackie McLean, Kenny Dorham and Bobby Timmons, Alan Douglas asked me to write the liner notes and I turned out a veritable “Jazz of the Beat Generation.” It was not quite what United Artists had in mind and never was used on the album.

Untitled.

Liner notes are ads in the form of exegesis and are best left to critics, who understand those things better. Art show catalogs, though, have been written by poets. As far as I know, the record wasn’t released either.

Major influences: a Christmas tree with only blue lights; a fossilized impression of a leaf; the underside of a covered bridge; a royal coachman; North River . . .
A recreation of Mondrian's New York studio was displayed. Consider Matisse's use of "Jazz" as the title of a series of his colored paper cutouts. Bill lived across the street from the Kettle of Fish, but I never saw him there. Let us now praise cultural icons: depends on which side of the fence you're on.

Even Bill's friends abandoned him. Disgusted at his dereliction, his descent into deep alcoholism and absurdity. He may not have actually swept floors in studios where formerly his genius had presided but their doors would have been closed to him in any other capacity. Of course, he no longer knocked at them. There was nothing anymore behind them. Bill, I believe, had achieved all that was possible in sound recording. The improvement or increased complexity of the equipment didn't faze him. Nor could it be used to improve upon his past work. No one has been able to do it any better no matter what they used. He had reached an ending, a darkness, deprived of incidence and reflection. Reinhardt cited St. John of the Cross. The loss of exaltation. A more pitiable state cannot be imagined.

I used to imagine going so high on the swing as to pass the apex and make a complete circle. I had been gone for about two years and when I came back to Jim & Andy's Jim spoke to me as if I had been there only yesterday. Rocco asked me to "answer the goddamned phone." I was amazed to hear a record company executive tell me that he recognized himself in Stephen Dedalus. There must be some law of physics that would keep you from it, a natural law, even though the circle is a natural shape; the sequence toward transcribing one on a swing has too much resistance to overcome.

I had the Rockwell Kent illustrations when I read the Modern Library *Moby-Dick* but still saw it all as it was in Classic Comics. Hymn of the Orient. Fats
Navarro died at age twenty-six. When Clifford Brown came along everyone thought that Fats' talent had been reincarnated. Clifford died at twenty-six too.

Based on the chord changes of "Indiana." There are crystal clear marbles called pureys, usually blue or green. Pellucid spheres that we rolled in the dirt. Art comes from art: Bill Schwartau recorded King Pleasure's vocal version of James Moody's variation on "I'm in the Mood for Love," "Moody's Mood." The cigar was a veritable part of Rocco's face, it bloomed from his mouth, as much flesh, it seemed, as Cyrano's nose.

We coveted his plume. In politics the apostates have been vindicated but have failed nevertheless. In the Kiwi Francis would perform magic tricks for drinks. Bill was a veritable wizard in the control booth, spinning dials and pushing buttons. They say he could splice a tape on an eighth note. The puckish druid: Dylan Thomas on Cadmeon Records: Ossian in a surrealistic vein.

He could not decide whether to live the contemplative life or the life of action. It was not so much for himself that he was concerned but for the well-being of his fellows. So he studied the lives of those who had gone before him. I spent my time watching goldfish in a fountain where people threw in coins and made wishes. He came, after a time, to Picasso's Guernica, and tried to see in it the suffering that was depicted. A woman walked by holding up a photograph of her son who had been taken and was now missing. We admired the clarity of certain details, the contrast of light and shadow.

Alan Douglas left soon after for Algiers. I remember him for the blue packs of Gaulois cigarettes that he smoked. "We'll turn them on with the liner notes," he told me. I waved to some inmates of the Woman's House of
Detention. The thing to remember about Classic Comics is that you couldn’t just buy them in a store, they had to be ordered by mail and came in boxed sets; I acquired all of mine by trading.

I imagined the desolation of the Dry Tortugas. There were stairways that ended in space, with windows high up above them. Bleak walls, and outside, a throned king and queen, as amazed to be there as you are to see them. An ocean between. To the north an Olmec head.

In reality the king actually never dies. We read libraries but finally came to no conclusions. Each night a woman comes into the garden and wanders disconsolately. I was confirmed in disbelief.

The movies are as good a way as any to get a grip on the world. I saw my fill then turned my back on them. At about that time I contemplated becoming a chess hustler. I studied the games in Washington Square Park, mentally measuring myself against the regular players there. It was a stilted form of competition. Some of them cultivated an acerbic wit to discountenance their opponents. I decided I lacked either the repose or the crankiness to be successful. In most cases the movies are, of course, an escape, but once in a while you can come face to face with yourself in one. As happened to me with “Lonely are the Brave,” which I found obliquely parallel to some of myself.

Before Minton’s there were other places, some of them secret. It has been said that people who went to Minton’s for years cannot remember any of the details of what they experienced there. I set some of David Stone Martin’s album covers to words. It’s like trying to recreate the doctrine of an ancient religion when the only data available to you is either obscure or misleading, provided by devotees intent upon cherishing a secret or enemies intent upon misleading.
Neither Jim nor Rocco, as far as I could see, knew the first thing about music but they knew the major musicians of the time. When the building was demolished, Jim & Andy’s moved, taking the original bar and booths, to a new location where it languished and died. Then people started writing about it. Bill was an autodidact. As far as it is known, no one was ever hung at the house of the hanged man. But it is true that Arshile Gorky hanged himself rather than suffer experiencing one misfortune hard on the heels of another.

In time Bill’s antics did become bizarre but no one I think expected him to die so soon. The master improvisors claim that they never think of what they are playing.

“If you don’t live it, it won’t come out of your horn.”

I taught the false version of Charlie Patton’s death because it was romantic. The truth and “Cherokee” were meant to be changed. Scalping tickets at the Bird memorial concert at Carnegie Recital Hall. Gigi Gryce played “Now’s the Time” and everyone rose. Headlines underlined each figure and ground. Songs are altered to extract them from the commonplace or to place them there.

Headlines flourish. I learned of one or two deaths by first seeing them on page one. “Donna Lee,” an example of the first; “The Hucklebuck,” of the second. Lately I find myself inadvertently returning to places I thought I would no longer see. I went back to the playground on purpose though. When drunk I was wont to do theatrical things with no other purpose than to startle myself. Bill Schwartau called me the world’s biggest fuck-up when I failed to show up at a Sunday afternoon recording date, then he went and became a memento mori.
Where be his jibes now? A musician’s ability to play is known as his “chops.” I actually sat on that swing. Pushed the ground into motion with my foot. But went never so high as I had previously dared. It’s been years since I touched either horn. I once sat in on clarinet with Jimmy McPartland. Stuart Gilbert taught me that each episode contains a bodily organ.

Ad Reinhardt’s version of an art academy could have passed for a monastery. Patton actually died of heart failure; then again, I might just be taking someone else’s word for that. I could not be lying if I didn’t know the truth.

Reinhardt’s belief was that he had made the final painting.

Once, before his problems became apparent, Bill and I were together in Jim & Andy’s and he spoke to me of technical things that I couldn’t understand. They had just completed installing the sound equipment, under his direction, at Music Makers Studio and he expounded his recording concepts to me, even though he knew I couldn’t know what he was talking about, because he couldn’t contain his enthusiasm. His excitement was visible; a physical exaltation, that combined with his uncommon language to create an aura of inspiration. I would have thought him delirious but his discourse was much too rational. The more he spoke, though, the more anxious he became that his words meant nothing and that he would have to demonstrate the truth of what he was saying. He held me enthralled and meant to take me further, to involve me as a witness to his revelation. There were always musicians in the bar and that night Zoot Sims was there. Zoot had been an avid listener and understood a lot better than I what Bill was talking about. He began to question Bill, whose enthusiasm was infectious, and before long was under his spell. It was about two in the morning and the studio was closed but Bill had a key
and virtually commanded that we go over there and record. Zoot was
convinced, he began to anticipate the enhancement of his sound that Bill
described and couldn’t wait to hear it. Bill couldn’t wait to record it. Zoot
Sims was one of my idols and I couldn’t wait to hear him play. And we
almost fell over each other scurrying for a cab to take us to the studio on
West 57th Street. Jim watching us leave must have thought us mad. With the
lights on only in the control booth, and Bill almost himself the musician,
Zoot, his instrument, played two hours of miraculous improvisation on
“East of the Sun,” and I am convinced he never played or recorded
anything better. We listened to it for two more hours then erased the tape.

What I cannot express I point my finger at. In Ad Reinhardt’s ideal academy
the finished paintings were to be turned to the wall. One night in a parked
car I played thirty-two choruses of “East of the Sun” and reproduced at
least part of Zoot’s solo.

I never heard Mezz Mezzrow play. He was supposed to be a middling
clarinetist, but never mind; his importance is to be found in his book,
*Really the Blues*, that influenced a generation of writers.

Children playing that day in the playground. Their shouts. All of Bill’s
friends abandoned him. Some for the wrong reason. I never saw him again
because he died. “Serenade for Squares,” based on the chord changes of
“Cherokee” was written to trip up the inept. It was the tune called by Sonny
Stitt when he challenged Art Pepper. Stitt and Pepper played to a draw. Bill
was without any serious competition as a sound engineer when he turned
his back on it forever.

Mezz Mezzrow and his friends exhibited a manic enthusiasm. They would
drive fifty miles with a record so that someone else could hear it.
The blood rushed to my head, and I almost fainted; the sky, when I looked up, gridded by monkey bars. Some kid was playing a kazoo. Same as I'd started. If I hung there much longer I would disrupt the equilibrium of my blood flow.

"Recording is an absolutely pure process. The fact that it results in music is a deception," Bill once said. We all listened for the music. Miles Davis could tell the pitch of a squeaking door. Bill could tell the pitch of the thing-in-itself. "Everything else is everything else." People just die, that's all.
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