Under *Albany*

If the function of writing is to "express the world."

Jon Arnold looks out over the straw-haired sea of fifth-graders directly into the dark eyes of Susan Hughes. Behind him, cordoned by both the furniture and the authority of the instructor's desk, Vance Teague, then in his sixth year of teaching at Marin Elementary, observes the latest in his unending string of small pedagogical experiments. Unlike dividing the classroom into teams and having them compete for grades, this one shows promise. Each Wednesday, students will be given one sheet of lined paper and a ballpoint pen—industrial strength, the point never retracting, virtually impossible to open, snap or chew through. The students are allotted one hour to write whatever they wish, whatever they might. There are no rules, and that *is* the rule.

On the following Wednesday, just before "writing hour," Teague, who had first met Arnold and myself while student-teaching kindergarten under the creaking but benevolent mentorship of Mrs. Seager, will select a handful of students whose writing in some fashion has "excelled," having them read them aloud to the class. This will be my first experience of The Reading.

Arnold, a sharp kid who frightened me because he was constantly pushing me and our mutual friend Timmy Johnson toward further and further transgressions of adult authority, stares into the intense smile of the partly Native American girl whose dark hair and faintly olive skin makes the pale northern European tones of the classroom visible to all. He begins to read. The subject of Arnold's paper—*how would a ten-year-old think of this?*—is the reaction of students hearing him (already typecast as one of the "wild kids") read aloud. Arnold's paper, which may have been shorter than this comment upon it forty years later, is a Swiftian satire on class relations . . . in all senses of that phrase. The students get the joke instantly. There is a lot of wincing and laughter and, at the end (and for the only time all school year), applause. I remember the humor as terrific, although cruel.[1]

I am transfixed. So much so, in fact, that I am unable to write a coherent sentence in the following hour that day and turn in a blank sheet of paper. A week later, I use the "free writing" period to attempt a piece that tries to switch literary genres sentence by sentence, essay one moment, science fiction the next. My effort disintegrates into garble. (Although in retrospect I realize that I somehow already knew what a genre was and that there were differences between them.) Teague is concerned. Within a matter of weeks, I am writing "novels," though, sitting on my narrow bed in the small room I shared with my younger brother, Cliff, longhand tales scrawled into thick notebooks ("the assassination of Hitler," "manned rocket flies behind moon only to disappear"). Within in a year, I discover that I can get out of almost any unpleasant school assignment other than math or wood shop by merely offering to write a five- or ten-

or twenty-page paper on the topic. I never seriously heed a teacher's syllabus again.[2]

I veered away from Arnold by the time high school arrived, his outsiderness reaching regular truancy. With my home life, school presented itself as an alternate society (if not reality), an utter necessity. Arnold got a job after school working for the local hospital, but rumor had it that he'd been fired for taking an amputated arm home instead of following proper procedures for its disposal. Soon after, he joined the military. Some time later, the *Albany Times* noted that he was a part of the honor guard at some major state function, perhaps Johnson's 1965 inauguration. Once in the very early '70s, I ran into him wearing full leather biker drag in Moe's Books in Berkeley. When I saw him at State nearly 20 years later (it was he who recognized me), the narrative of clothing was aging beach boy, his torso and limbs, every visible inch, covered with tattoos. He had come to study writing.

The "average" sentence in *Albany* is 6.94 words long.

My father withheld child support, forcing my mother to live with her parents, my brother and I to be raised together in a small room.

At night we would lie in our two single beds across from one another and I would tell Cliff, two years, seven months younger, long stories, the sort of gothic horror only a nine-year-old could envision. He would tell me to stop and start to whimper and finally begin crying so that eventually my mother would burst in to tell us to be quiet. This went on for

years, until I was old enough to get a crystal radio set and flashlight, and could hide under the covers, listening to the all-news station and reading Steinbeck novels until I fell asleep.

The cruelty of my behavior is evident. It's not an excuse to say that I was nine years old, or twelve. What motivated me? Over forty years later, it is still unclear to me whether I was driven out of a confused sense that my brother's arrival shortly after the disappearance of my father had been, in some vague way, the cause of that man's abandonment, or whether the practice of emotional terrorism (modeled with such artistry by my grandmother) was simply the only form of autonomy I understood.

Grandfather called them niggers.

So that I was surprised at how many elderly African American men, all, like my grandfather, members of the Veterans for Foreign Wars (VFW), came to his funeral.

I can't afford an automobile.

At first, the long ride out on the bus from San Francisco to San Rafael was a luxury. Prohibited by Selective Service regulation from earning a living wage at my Conscientious Objector's "alternative service" job, I worked for the Committee for Prisoner Humanity & Justice (CPHJ) for the first year at no salary, the second year at just $125 per month. To survive, I found a part-time night job doing layout and paste-up with the *Kalendar*, a first-generation gay bar

newspaper whose editor and publisher harbored dim fantasies of developing an empire of alternative media if he could just meet this week's payroll. With barely enough money to afford my $50-per-month rent in a large communal flat opposite the Panhandle in the Haight, I often hitchhiked the seventeen miles north over the Golden Gate Bridge to work and back. Later, as funds became more plentiful and my need to be reasonably on time grew, I chose to ride the Golden Gate Transit buses[3] out, hitching back in the evening rush.

The Golden Gate system was notably different from both the San Francisco Municipal Railway (the "Muni") or my earlier experiences with AC Transit in the East Bay. I would board the bus on Van Ness and after only a couple more stops in San Francisco, the bus tended only to lose passengers as it traveled north through Marin County. This meant that if I picked my seating with a little luck and care, I could sit without a rider next to me for the entire 30-minute ride, an unusually smooth journey given the state of the then-new buses and the fact that our journey was against commute traffic on the freeway. If other transit systems were carnivals of human interaction, filled with the racial and class conflicts that find themselves funneled into public space, the Golden Gate buses were a refuge. Often the bus was quieter and more private than my home. I would read or stare out the window and increasingly I began to use the time in order to write.[4]

Far across the calm bay stood a complex of long yellow buildings, a prison.

Because the hill sloped away from the rear of the house, the modest five-step red cement front porch was counterbalanced by a long rickety wooden stairway leading down to the yard in the rear. There was room enough at the top of that splintery deck for no more than one adult to stand (the only one who ever did, really, was my grandmother, reaching into the clothespin bin that my grandfather must have built into the railing, hanging clothes on a line nearly twenty feet over the yard). I would spend hours up there, looking out over the minuscule expanse that was our backyard, with its lone tree next to our small sway-back garage, a hydrangea bush in the near corner, a few straggles of berry bushes against the chain-link fence that separated our yard from that of an old woman who lived by herself on the next block over. On a clear day, I could see beyond Albany Hill all the way across the bay to Mount Tamalpais and, further to the north, right at the water's edge San Quentin. Who did I think lived there? Doing what?

My grandfather's one real friend from the Pabco plant, Virgil Garcia, was jailed for vehicular manslaughter and sent to "Tamal."[5] One summer day, my grandparents, my brother and I rode the Richmond-San Rafael ferry—we were headed for a week's vacation along the Russian River—and stopped in the parking lot of the prison. My grandfather got out of the pale '51 Pontiac and walked up to and eventually through the entrance of the medieval-looking structure, disappearing inside for a visit that lasted at least an hour while the rest of us waited in the summer sun. What did I think this meant?

Who was Virgil Garcia? He was a figure of conversation from time to time at home, but as was true for everyone but immediate relatives and a few members of my grandmother's VFW Ladies Auxiliary branch, he never set foot in our house. I never once saw the man. Having served his term, Garcia returned to his job in Emeryville, retiring a year ahead of my grandfather. Within a week of his retirement party, Garcia committed suicide.

A line is the distance between.

I'm waiting in a long queue to register for classes at San Francisco State. The fellow in front of me, wiry and lively-eyed David Perry, turns out to be a writing major likewise, a grad student by way of Bard. I quickly blurt (brag?) that I'm "in correspondence" with Robert Kelly, with whom he's studied. It turns out that there are other Kelly students in the area, at Berkeley—Harvey Bialy, a microbiologist/poet married to a slender, intense exotic dancer named Timotha, and John Gorham, a graduate student in English and possibly the finest natural lyric poet I would ever meet.

Bialy is giving a reading soon thereafter in Albany in the same two-room public library where, just three years earlier, I'd first discovered Williams' *The Desert Music* and seen in an instant how poetry could be put to non-narrative purposes. Bialy's poetry is spare and intellectual in a way that doesn't tell me anything other than that it wants to be known as such. I much prefer Bialy's reading mate, a Canadian graduate student at Berkeley named David Bromige. Paul Mariah, a poet I've known slightly through the open readings at the Rambam Bookstore in Berkeley, does the introductions.

To get home afterwards, I thumb a ride. A car stops immediately, the driver a slightly older fellow—he's 29, I'm 21—I'd seen in the back of the crowd at the reading. In the time it takes him to drive me back to my apartment in the Adams Point neighborhood of Oakland (I don't realize for some time just how far out of his way he has gone), we discover not only an affinity to the poetics of Bromige, but that we shared a strong sense of Robert Duncan's importance, an interest in Zukofsky and Ashbery, and even a friend, one of my early publishers, Iven Lourie of the *Chicago Review*, having been the driver's roommate for a time back at the University of Chicago. The driver introduces himself as David Melnick, and he turns out to be a shy, witty, brilliant person, deeply insecure. One of the three most intelligent people I will ever meet, we instantly become friends for life.

Through these people (especially Melnick and Gorham and Bromige) I will gradually get to know first hand a much broader community, including Ken Irby, Tom Meyer, Jonathan Williams, Sherril Jaffe, Jack Shoemaker, David Sandberg, d alexander, Joanne Kyger, and Jerome Rothenberg. These poets are, with only the exceptions of Perry and Gorham, older, more confident, more widely published. There are only a couple with whom I feel comfortable enough even to speak as a possible equal. (Melnick and Bromige, democrats both, pretend not to notice, coaxing me, prodding.)

Beyond Ashbery, Zukofsky and Duncan, Melnick's favorite poet is David Shapiro, whose early success with trade publishers intimidates me. I also don't know how to take the casual sense of form practiced by the New York School in general. I'm reading Olson's *Maximus* poems, all of

Blackburn, anything I can get by Whalen, Duncan's *Passages* as they appear. I'm still trying to figure out how to write The Poem. I still envision it as a distinct formed object, perfect for publication in a magazine.

In 1968, the problem of form is the problem of the line. It, I decide, is the question that nobody, not even Olson, knows how to answer.[6] What, in free verse, does it mean? Olson's answer, more rigorous and less mushily metaphysical than Williams', is nonetheless filled with gaps and contradictions. Yet even an O'Hara and a Ginsberg seem to acknowledge it. Without ever having read a word of Derrida, I distrust the essentialism of speech Olson's projective verse appears to propose (later I will realize that I've turned Olson's poetry into a straw man, his position in my head far more extreme than any he ever took in life, and only after that, a good while after that, will I come to recognize how useful this process had been).

By 1969, I'm also reading modernist fiction. In a notebook, I try over and over to craft out a "perfect paragraph," with the opening sentence of Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury* as my model. The only part that will survive is "the garbage barge at the bridge." The origin of the sentence in my work is a reaction to the Faulkner, to the Joyce of *Ulysses*, the Kerouac of *Visions of Cody*, Stein everywhere. I sit on the roof of an apartment house now at the edge of the Rad Lab woods just north of the UC campus, watching the sun set into the high-rises of San Francisco, reworking the passage endlessly. One model in my mind, at some point, was Ponge's *Notebook of the Pine Woods*, a journal of the author's stay in hiding from the Nazis during which he attempts a single sonnet. Writing and rewriting my paragraph, I escape any concern that I'm

merely imitating Creeley, Olson, Williams, Duncan, Kelly or Eshleman in this poem or that. It also allows me a strategy for literature without progress. I use everything I ever learned about the line, but without ever having to decide what precisely this was. It will be another five years before I actually start to write poetry in prose.

The "problem" with the line may be, ultimately, that there is no problem.

They circled the seafood restaurant, singing "We shall not be moved."

By the time I was a senior in high school, I was already participating in the picket lines of the Congress of Racial Equality, mostly at Jack London Square in downtown Oakland, careful not to tell my mother or grandparents where I was going. I knew hardly anyone—they were all college age and older and seemed infinitely more worldly—but I wanted to know them all—that may have been the point—but I was too timid to speak to anyone beyond the singing and chanting that ran as a constant soundtrack to these events. These were the first interracial crowds in which I'd ever found myself. They represented some utopian possibility, a voluntary association that existed solely through action and driven by desire and honor and a sense of justice. The contrast with my family, claustrophobic and seethingly dysfunctional as it was, could not have been more striking.

At some of these pickets in early '65, I began to notice one woman, a few years older than myself, with thick black

bangs, intense brown eyes and a sharp, ready laugh, a natural leader. She was one of the very few people who would make eye contact with me and one day at an afternoon demonstration at Spenger's in Berkeley I recall her coming up to me to ask why people seemed so upset. "Malcom X was murdered this morning," I replied. This was how I first spoke with Rochelle Nameroff, who would become my first wife.

My turn to cook.

In the 1960s, mixed vegetables stir-fried in a wok, tossed over brown rice.

In the '90s, poached salmon, just barely cooked. Broccoli, steamed but still crisp. Couscous, which few people seem to realize is actually a pasta, the world's oldest.

It was hard to adjust my sleeping to those hours when the sun was up.

The buses had not yet begun running when my shift was over, so I walked up Main Street from Paul's Pies, then over toward our apartment at the edge of the park. How was I going to do this when winter arrived, with the lake effect snow that invariably hit Buffalo? The entrance to our apartment was up the rear stairs and we couldn't afford real curtains so there was no way to keep the sun out as I tossed and turned and tried to sleep.