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In search of the art object

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In Search of the Art Object

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Kristinn Didriksson
August, 1994

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Kristinn Didriksson

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Abstract

In Search of the Art Object

by Kristinn Didriksson

This thesis is a series of experimental short stories. Each of the stories is narrated by a character whose name is Henry. Henry is a disillusioned writer reproducing parts of his journal as individual units dealing with different aspects of his life. Each story takes place in San Jose during the '90's.

As the title implies, the thesis puts into question the nature of representation in art. In each of the stories the reader will become aware of different aspects of writing. By being able to see the process Henry uses to create his stories, the reader will become aware of the different aspects of writing, as well as the problems one encounters when searching for an art object.

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Critical Introduction

This project, first and foremost, is an experimental project. It is a series of “short stories.” Each story is written from the perspective of the same main character, but is to be thought of, with the exception of *Simulations*, as an individual piece. The main character is Henry, a disillusioned writer in his mid 20’s. All the action takes place in the early 1990’s in San Jose. The focus of each story will be on a different character who at one point formed a part of Henry’s life.

Simulations is the introductory story. It is about living a marginal nomadic life in the city. Henry has moved from his apartment in downtown San Jose and sleeps in a tent in the back of his parent’s house. This story is a brief transitional story that sets up the rest of the stories. Its main purpose is to establish a time and a place for the writing of the three following stories. Its other purpose is to create a referential axis for what follows and free myself to experiment with the three following stories. *Simulations* establishes the continuity of time, place, and event for the entire project, as well as the method used to generate the other “stories.”

The second story is entitled, *Louise and the Novel*. In *Louise and the Novel*, Henry writes about his obsession with finding out the “truth” about a woman who was once his lover. He does this by writing about the novel he tried to write about her and why it failed. Although Henry, at the end of the narrative, realizes why the story failed, there is marginal notation pointing to the possibility of an entirely different narrative on the same subject.

Living in Phil’s World is about a schizophrenic friend of Henry’s. This is the most experimental story. I wanted the text itself to display the same signs of schizophrenia as its subject; therefore, the digressive, discontinuous, conversations, and events with little or no continuity. In schizophrenia there is no

real development in terms of personality or consciousness, but a repeating cycle locked within its own patterns. It is an internal dialog that has severed itself from the world outside and is very difficult to penetrate. Language for the schizophrenic is a series of codes in a self referential universe. This I have tried to recreate in the text. The graphics are from Phil's "Map of Consciousness." They form the matrix by which Phil defines himself. R. D. Laing's, *The Divided Self*, is an excellent book on the schizophrenic consciousness and would form a good supplemental reading to *Living in Phil's World*.

In Search of the Art Object is about just that: a futile search for an object proper to art. It is the main theme to the entire project. Henry thinks he has come upon the opportunity to write a quick and easy short story complete with an epiphany. Following his friend, Vince, through a re-creation of an event Vince described as revelatory, Henry comes to realize that Vince failed him as an object of art and Vince did not have an epiphany. It is the final ironic statement that leaves more questions than answers, and I would not want it any other way.

Although I am the author, my main character, Henry, claims authorship of the text. The narrator's self-proclaimed purpose and relationship to writing has been set up to allow play between the functions of writer and reader. It allows for the possibility of role switching and the usurpation of functions traditionally associated with reading and writing. Henry will at times interpret the events he describes, thus playing the role of reader; he will claim to be writing the text, thus playing the author. But he is neither the reader nor the writer. He is a character trying to control his own signification and the way the text is perceived.

The relationship between author and protagonist in my project is similar to that of Shakespeare and Richard in Richard III. Richard and Henry share a few thematic components. Both are self-objectified characters. Richard

defines himself by playing different roles in order to control his relationship with the other characters. He also tells the audience what he is going to do next in the play. Henry tries to tell the reader that he is the writer of the text and that he is re-writing entries in his journals. So, he is treating himself as an object as well as defining his role in the text. Both Richard and Henry are concerned with how to affirm self.

In Richard III, the characterization of Richard allowed Shakespeare to play an aesthetic game whereby the focus of the play becomes the text itself, creating a tension between event and poetry, action and language. Shakespeare's Richard seduces the readers and the other characters to make way for the beauty of the language in the play. On the other hand, with my characterization of Henry, I want to shift the focus of the narrative to the question of writing. Henry claims the role of the author (Richard—I will be King: Henry—I will be author.), but he is not the author. He is the main character. This allows me to play an aesthetic game.

The marginal notations became a part of the text very late in the project and do not appear in all the stories. But they play an important part of the aesthetic game, if not *the* most important part. If I were to say more, the pleasure of discovery would be stolen from the reader—the pleasure of the game.

In Search of

the Art Object

By
Kristinn Didriksson

Simulations

I'm thinking of my presence here as simulated camping. I'm not really camping, but I feel as if I'm camping. The sense of freedom is the same; the sense of exquisite escape is the same.

Real camping is going away from civilization into the forest or mountains or desert and putting up a tent. It's about being with nature, being among the primal elements, being away from it all—civilization. My tent, however, is pitched in the heart of a metropolis; it's pitched in the very center of civilization: my parent's back yard. That's where I sleep and spend my time.

I'm not camping in the real sense, I understand that. There is no name for what I'm doing. That's why I've chosen to call it simulated camping. Simulated camping is a between experience, a state of suspension. At some point I will move into a state of transition, but not yet. To transition one needs to have a goal or purpose. I have none at the moment. I merely plan to spend some time here and amuse myself.

If you looked into the yard from the sliding glass doors of the living room, you would see my tent towards the middle of a wooden deck that stretches to the left. To the left of the tent is my couch, and next to the couch is a stove-light sitting on a stool. To the right of the tent is a lawn that runs up to the bushes that line the back and far fence. This is my new home.

I could sleep in one of the rooms inside the house but I refuse. I'm not quite certain why. I have no explanation for my desire to sleep in the tent. All I know is that the desire exists, and it is my choice to sleep in the tent. Maybe its relationship to real camping creates the desire, but I'm not sure. All I know is who I am and how I feel. I have no explanation for the choices that I make. From my couch I can look up to the sky and see the stars ; from my bedroom, a dome tent, I can breathe the fresh cool evening air. Bushes, flowers, and trees

line the back yard; and a beautiful green lawn stretches out from the side of my tent. To be here smells good and feels good.

I have been sleeping in the tent for a week now. I leave the back yard only when I need to use the amenities of the house. I have not set foot outside the property in the week I have been here, nor do I have any desire to do so. Each day has been like the other. They pass with such monotonous precision that I feel as if the same day is constantly repeating itself.

The hot sun wakes me each morning. I throw off my blankets and open the tent to let in the fresh air. I sit up so as to have my feet dangling out onto the deck. I immediately look into the living room to see if anyone is there. As usual, my father sits watching television and eating breakfast with my mother. I want a cup of coffee, but I wait: I wait until they have finished their breakfast and gone to work. I have the attitude of an Eagle or a Hawk. I want to be to myself as completely as possible.

I notice my father stands up and looks out the window. He does this each morning to see if I am up. I wonder what he's thinking. He doesn't understand me at all, but I understand him. That's the difference between the two of us.

I roll back into the tent before he sees me and think about how good it is to breathe in the fresh morning air.

Intuitively, I sense that my parents have gone to work. I go into the house and have breakfast. After breakfast I take a cup of coffee into the backyard. Just outside the sliding glass doors is a picnic table below an awning that protects it from the sun. I sit down at the table and enjoy my coffee. I make a point of expressly enjoying my coffee, focusing exclusively on my coffee. People don't understand that the coffee, the time to drink it, the luxury of time to drink it, the lavishness of it all, is like being bathed in eternity, a brown liquid eternity.

I have the whole day to look forward to, the whole day to myself. It is exquisite, this vast empty stretch of time. Time is like a desert wind. Most

people can't face it. They can't face its unchanging monotony, or the knowledge that it will be there again, just the same, the next day and the next. But I love it. I'm free, free as the wind as long as I remain within the confines of the garden.

There is some point in the morning where I feel the need to get up off the bench and occupy myself. I go back into my tent, take out my notebooks, and bring them over to the picnic table. The entries date from five years ago, when I moved from Santa Barbara to San Jose. All day I sit and read the entries. I read them from cover to cover, one after the other. Sometimes I read selections chosen at random, like picking a card out of the middle of the deck.

I'm usually napping when my parents return from work. Because of the sun's heat, my naps are long and heavy. I awake to the sound of my mother calling "dinner" from the sliding glass door. She doesn't wait for me to answer. She slides the door back into place and disappears. I wait a few minutes before going inside. If they are busy eating I have to answer fewer questions. I hate answering questions. They are always the same questions: "How are you feeling?" "Did you look for work today?"

"Yes, I looked for work. Yes, I feel fine." Their questions drive me crazy. Always the same banal questions. I don't mind so much the question about work. That is a reasonable question, but the other. The other question drives me nuts. They always ask it, too. They ask it whenever they see me. Sometimes they will even search me out just to ask that one question. It's pure torture. The question is pure torture.

I get my food from the kitchen and take it out to the picnic table in the back yard. When I am done eating, I return the plate to the kitchen, wash it off, and set it in the dishwasher. Each time I enter the house it is for a specific purpose. I go in, get it done, and I'm out again. I want as little to do with the house as possible. I think of the house as a necessary evil. I need it, and I hate it because

I need it. All I want is to be left alone.

As the evening progresses, I spend my time idling about. I'm usually tired, so I sit and think. I sit on the sofa next to the tent in a semi-somnambulistic state. I don't know what goes through my head. This is a quiet time for me.

From my enclosure I listen to the sounds of the urban forest, or the urban ocean, or the urban desert—whichever way you want to look at it. At any rate, it's the outside. A gallery of sounds emanates from the urban forest: the sound of a car passing in the distant street, the sound of parents yelling and children crying, and the sound of an occasional stereo playing disparate styles of music. Of these sounds and others, the only sound I enjoy is the sound of someone somewhere diving into a pool of water. But all of them are just traces of another world where I no longer belong.

Late in the evening, shortly before I go into my tent to sleep, I see my father through a narrow opening in the curtain that covers the sliding glass doors. The image does not reveal all of him, only parts. It is only those parts that concern me now.

Things exist only if they form a part of my experience.

So, only disembodied parts of him exist late in the evening. His calf and foot exist for me in the evening because I see them stretched out on the coffee table. For the most part they are motionless; then, from time to time, a nerve sends a message and the leg twitches, sending its various components into motion as if a violent current of electricity has passed through it. Then, like the slow click of a metronome his hand appears and momentarily exists. It reaches out toward a wine glass placed upon the coffee table, retrieves it, then places it back in the same place.

The leg twitches and the arm goes through its mechanical motions according to some strange clock. For a while this fascinates me. It fascinates me because of its timeless monotony. It fascinates me because each evening the

same event duplicates itself. It fascinates me because, in their disembodied states, the leg and arm are mechanical abstractions serving no meaning or purpose except to appear and disappear, to form one more component in a never ending cycle that repeats itself each day. Viewing this machinery in motion has become an event in my daily routine, an event that begins and ends with itself as all the others do—the last event of the day.

Today I have to make a decision. I have to decide what to do now that I am spending my time here in the back yard. How was I going to entertain myself? Reading my notes has become boring.

After thinking it over for some time, I thought I would entertain myself by playing around with these scattered and jumbled notes I have taken in the last three years. A cursory review of the notes seems to indicate that there are certain people and events that have led me here. There are three in particular that I need to describe, if I am going to be able to ascribe any meaning to my condition. Each of them form their own separate enclosures in my mind and share in common only that they have been people who have spent with me a few fugitive moments. Louise and the novel seems to me a good place to begin. I feel her presence more than any of the others.

Louise and the Novel

Louise and the tent are linked by a dream. While I was living in the tent the first time around, I dreamed of the messenger. This messenger, as I came to realize later, was Louise in one of her many disguises.

In the dream I was riding a bicycle through a village in the center of an oasis. The village seemed to be outside of time, an amalgam of different eras and environments. I traveled along a hard clay road and passed between rows of store-front buildings standing two and three stories high. The buildings themselves had marble facades. Awnings supported by marble pillars stretched out from some of the buildings. The pillars reminded me somehow of Rome. Not that I knew anything of Rome except from the pictures I had seen in various books or films that recreated that era or brought back the reflections of its ruins.

On the storefront windows were stenciled advertisements for discounts and specials. As I rode by, I could see through the windows some of the goods on display: elegant dresses, watches and appliances: A disjointed array of goods that, had this been something other than a dream, would never have appeared next to each other, spanning as they did through the centuries.

I was arriving from a journey through the desert. It must have been a long journey because I was tired. I could feel the sting of dried salt on the nape of my neck. I reached up to scratch my head and a white foam stuck to my fingers. There was a film of shampoo covering my hair. I thought it strange that I had shampoo in my hair, but took it only as a sign that I needed a bath.

As I rode along the clay road, I came upon a large swimming pool in a small garden. The garden was dilapidated, weeds grew in patches around the pool, and the huge columns that loomed above the ends of the pool were crumbling. It was as if the pool was in the center of the Pantheon. The columns seemed to

be the exact replicas of those dilapidated columns of the Pantheon I had seen in pictures. I paused at the edge of the pool and gazed into the water. I was struck by the crystal blue water and the white lines at the bottom of the pool. They divide the pool into swimming lanes. I needed to bathe but the setting was not right. I could feel the hesitation, I could feel the doubt, the internal signal that there was something not right about the pool. So I rode on into the center of the village. There had to be some other place to bathe.

In the distance I saw a hotel, a red hotel. A triangular portico supported by marble columns covered the entrance. I walked into the lobby and went up to the counter and asked for a room with a bath. The clerk gave me a key and pointed towards a staircase. I walked up a steep thin staircase and entered a dark room. Immediately I noticed two pictures hanging on the wall to my left. They were exquisite line drawings of Victorian houses. The beauty of the pictures riveted my gaze. Suddenly the pictures began to pulsate with an inner white light. The pulsing light revealed that the pictures were a part of the wall. It was so unnatural that I could not turn away my eyes. What agency could have produced this, a wall animate with contour and light.

Abruptly, a woman spoke from the interior of the room.

"Why are you looking at those pictures?"

"Because they are beautiful," I said as I tried to see her in the darkness. She sat on a throne-like chair, her arms stretched out along its arms. A faint light came into the room from behind her. I could see her silhouette. A hood covered her head and spread down along her shoulders as the rest of her figure dissolved into the contours of the chair in which she sat. It was as if when were a part of some monastic order: a priestess.

"Why do you want to know about people that you don't know?" Her voice was deep. She pronounced each word even and clear in a tone that demanded respect. I was put on the defensive.

“People we do not know influence our lives.”

As I waited for her to respond I sensed my own fear. There was something ominous about the woman, her questions, her being there.

“Do you know why Hitler deported a quarter million Jews from Berlin before the war?”

She waited for me to respond but I had no answer. I was not aware that there had been deportations before the war.

“Gold is the key...”

The next sound I heard was the sound of my father’s voice yelling at me to wake up. Perfect timing you asshole, I thought. In the dream she had been about to say something, something about gold and the key. In my first waking moments I felt the disappointment of waking up before the most important moment in the dream, the moment when the meaning would reveal itself. Then Louise popped into my mind. It was her: Louise. Louise was the woman in the dream. The woman in the dream did not sound or look like Louise. Even in her silhouette I could tell that she was taller and thinner, but it was Louise none the less. Since Louise had left San Jose she had been constantly on my mind. It could not have been any other woman.

Ten days ago I was sitting in my vacant apartment surrounded by boxes filled with the refuse of my existence. It was late in the afternoon, and I had been moving all day, taking boxes to and from my parent’s house. There were only a few boxes left to move. I sat down and took a break, wondering how it was that I had come to be in this condition. I felt that the last three years of my life had come to nothing. I was in the same condition as I had been three years ago when Louise left San Jose for Denmark.

I lit a cigarette and leaned back against the wall.

My trusty Danish ashtray lay on the floor beside me. Every time I use this ashtray I realize that I am in San Jose, California. None of my friends who

*I should probably
not say refuse. I
should simply say I
was there—leave
out the emotional
coloring.*

smoke have realized that when you put out a cigarette in my Danish ashtray, you are supposed to open the top and let the butt fall into the central cylinder.

My Danish ashtray is real cool and stylish. They don't make them like that here in the US. The top lid has a hole in the center. The hole, when the lid is on, closes perfectly on a raised hump that shoots up from the center of the bottom piece. There is a small reservoir for ashes on the top piece and a large reservoir in the bottom piece, but when you've finished your cigarette, you're supposed to raise the lid and let the butt and ashes fall into the center. That way you don't have the smell of butts in the house. But none of my friends can figure this out. They leave the butts in the reservoir until there is no more room. I'm constantly having to tell them to get their acts together. Put out the cigarette, raise the lid, let the butt drop into the container, close the lid. I can't separate the two: the ashtray and how it is constantly misunderstood by my American friends. It's a minor grievance, but the association has tainted the pure and simple pleasure I receive when I use the ashtray.

After smoking for a while, I stood up and walked over to the box that held my writings. I opened it up and pulled out a bundle of loose papers and binders. These were the notes for the project I had been working on for the last year. I sat back down against the wall and placed the papers around me as if I were spreading out a deck of cards. I put my cigarette out in my Danish ashtray, opening the lid and letting the butt fall inside. I put the lid back on and scanned the pages littering the floor. The litter represented a years worth of hard work. There were over five hundred pages in all.

At that time, sitting in the apartment, I had already given up on the project. The project, instead of forming a cohesive text, began to become more and more fragmented as it progressed. I had begun to write the beginning over and over again, as if the perfect opening would be the key to my being able to complete the project. Instead, all I had was a series of fragments: an array of papers

with at least five different narrative strategies, each one re-written ten times or more, that were beginning to decompose.

That was what Louise had been doing. She had been working on her novel for two months when I saw her again in August, 1990. Although she had been writing every day for those two months she had not finished so much as the first chapter. Something had gone wrong, and she had begun to rewrite the beginning over and over again, searching for the perfect beginning.

It was not until the third week of my visit that she revealed to me that she had been writing a novel. During one of my visits to her apartment she told me about it. I arrived late in the evening to discuss some other matters with her, when, during the course of our conversation she confided that she had been working on a novel project.

To her it was not just a story; it was her great master work, the only story she ever wanted to write, the story that would contain the very expression of her existence. She didn't even care if she lived after the story had been completed. She didn't imagine that she would have anything left to say when it was done, nor have any reason left to go on living. For her the story had become the only reason left to live.

We sat at the table in her living room. She had brought out the manuscript to show to me. The manuscript was in a thin manila folder. It didn't look like much for two months worth of work, but then again, much of that week could have already found its way into a trash can as the revisions kept coming.

"Oh, I wish you could read it. But that's o.k., I can translate so you will get the idea of what I'm trying to do."

As she sat, she put on her thick wire-framed glasses and held the text close to her face. She was completely serious now. Her smile disappeared and the scar on her left cheek showed its hard edges. Louise looked over a few pages, trying to decide what to read. I sat quietly waiting and lit a cigarette.

Put these statements of hers into dialog form later in this section.

A: Why were you there, to hear about the novel?

H: No. The novel had nothing to do with it. The novel came up unexpectedly. I was there to find out if she had become a heroin addict.

A: A heroin addict?

H: Yes. On the night before I arrived in Copenhagen she had shot up with her boyfriend and the woman she shared an apartment with. She told me that she was only trying it and it was the only time she had shot up, but I knew that she was lying.

A: How did you know she was lying?

H: I could hear it in the sound of her voice.

She set the manuscript down on the table and turned the pages looking for something suitable to read. Still looking down she put a cigarette into the corner of her mouth and took a deep drag, letting the smoke leak out of her mouth and swirl up through the air around her face like thin vapor clouds. "Oh, here it is. Before I read this let me tell you about the story. It's about a man who is a great piano player except nobody knows it. He's an alcoholic who is dying. People don't know that he is dying either, but he is. The story is about the last days of his life."

"The piano player teaches a young girl of a rich family how to play the piano. The family has taken him in because they feel sorry for him. He actually hates them, but they don't know it. They are trying to reform him, but he doesn't want to be reformed; he wants to die."

She talked into the pages of the manuscript, as if I were becoming an abstraction, as if the world she had created in her imagination was becoming more real than the two of us sitting together acting out our own drama whose author was as yet unknown.

"I want to read you this scene because it's an important scene." Louise picks up the manuscript again. She stands up and starts to pace back and forth behind her chair reading to herself. She is walking through the part, completely absorbed in the textual world. I see her lips form the words as she executes the gestures that accompany the words. Suddenly she stands still and takes a drag off the cigarette. As she blows out the smoke, she turns her hand to a pose of elegant sophistication.

"O.K., this is it," she says. "He has been invited over for dinner with the family. Once a week he goes over for dinner, and this is one of those evenings. He's really drunk and no longer cares if they know it because they know he's a drunk anyway. So he doesn't really care anymore about making pretense. He walks into the room." Louise takes a few steps forward. Because she is looking

A: What are you trying to say? She talked into the manuscript. You felt as if you were unimportant; an excuse for her to show her manuscript. Is that it? Or what is it? Did she look a little out of control, even then? Because that was what was on your mind that evening. You were watching for signs of madness and waiting for the opportunity to confront her with the big lie. That's why the description in this passage is a little dry.

It fits in terms of the premise of the story, but it's much less interesting than heroin and madness.

H: I know, but I can't write that. I have to consider my own mental health—especially because of what happened with the novel.

at the text, her steps are slow and cautious, feeling the floor with ballet-like softness. "They are all sitting at the table waiting for him because he is late."

"The wife looks at him and says, 'Your drunk!' as if he has offended her in some deep way. She is so petty-bourgeois this woman. She makes me sick. All that's important to her is that life be cozy. She never thinks beyond that. She also feels that just because she has gone beneath her stature—inviting him to dinner—the pianist should act like he were her slave. But he doesn't care. He says, 'Yes I am drunk. How very observant of you, quite remarkable, actually.'"

Louise begins pacing in a small semi-circle, holding the manuscript with her left hand and the cigarette with her right. She puts it in her mouth and notices that it has gone out. Mechanically, as if she does not want to lose any of her focus on the narrative, she holds it away from her mouth with only the briefest glance to see why it is not lit. She quickly puts out the cigarette out on the ash-tray on the table. Then her entire being re-focused itself on the story.

Looking at the manuscript, she pulls the chair away from the table and sits down.

"The pianist walks up to the table and stands beside the chair." Her hand reaches out to feel its presence.

"The whole room is silent, and you can hear the chair slowly scrape against the wooden floor. He sits down."

She sits down.

Suddenly her mood changes. She's frustrated. "I'm sorry about the translation. I know it's so hard for it to come out right, and the way it is it's impossible to really get a feel for the way it's written. I feel as if I'm chopping my own work to shreds."

"I wish I could read it, but I get the story idea, and your translation is not as bad as you think," I reply.

Louise continues to read bits and pieces of her story. The scene is like a time

But what else was happening? What is she displaying? Certainly her novel was reflecting her consciousness, but what else? Wasn't she, during the course of her narration, becoming more and more manic? She was intense. Her every expression a stroke of power. She was beginning to show the signs: she narrated from the novel as if she were in the text, a character reviewing events that actually happened, she lost track of who you were, she showed that nervous edge, the need for an ever growing velocity, and on occasion a slight tremor passed through her body.

shell, everything that happens takes place in the midst of plumes rising from the cigarettes. Louise is like a ghost lit lightly from the front by the candles and set in silhouette by the light coming from her bedroom. As I listen, I watch the smoke play on the contours of her face.

"Here, oh, yes," says Louise abruptly. "This is it, essentially this is how I feel. This sentence contains the whole idea of the story. After arguing with the woman at the table for a while, the man says, 'I'd rather live inside the womb of an old used up alcoholic woman than be a man in a suit walking down the street with a brief case.' That's my favorite line. I took the idea from Kierkegaard. You see, Kierkegaard wrote of the man who walks down a street with a briefcase; he was very important and proud to be a man with a brief case. As he walked along the street, a brick fell off the top of the building, hit him in the head, and killed him. Do you see? It's either/or. Why is it important to become something, spend your time in an office acquiring wealth and status, when one day a brick can fall and hit you in the head and kill you? What does that make of your life? What does the money mean then?"

We looked into each other's eyes: she expecting an answer or a sign, and I, unwilling to answer, registering through her eyes, like some mechanical instrument, the searing haze of despair. The intensity of the moment was becoming unendurable. So, I changed the subject.

"How much have you written of the story so far?"

"I've only written the first twenty pages. I keep writing the first part over and over. It has to be perfect. The beginning has to be perfect. I've almost got it to the point where I'm satisfied with it, but it's not there yet. There's something missing."

"How many times have you rewritten the opening?"

"About ten times."

"Why don't you go on with the story and leave the revisions for when you

have more of it under your belt?”

“Because the beginning has to be perfect,” she said with vehemence. I should have known better than to offer Louise advice on writing. Louise was very sensitive about that. And it showed. She was glaring at me as if I had insulted her.

“I mean, of course, do it your way. I was just making a suggestion. Some people get stuck writing like that. No harm. Aside from that, I like the idea of your story very much. I think it is a great idea, and that one sentence of yours is truly brilliant.”

Louise, in a huff, puts the manuscript back into its folder and takes it back into her bedroom. As I watch her walk away, I am struck by the disturbing thought that she is dying, that the character she is describing is herself.

The point I am trying to make, sitting here in my apartment, talking to you—I need to clarify this in my own mind—is that I began to do the same thing with the story *I* was writing about *her*. I began to rewrite the beginning over and over just the way she did, until I was so confused that I lost myself in narrative strategy. The manuscript became nothing but a series of fragments. And the circle of pages in front of me are all about the same person, but one page to the next—the so-called narrative strategy, the way to proceed that seemed to fit perfectly never appeared. In fact it disappeared; it simply went away. It was like a ship being cut into sections and expected to float. It didn’t.

Sitting in the apartment I began to fantasize about the story. The fantasy took a hold of my mind as if I had become possessed. The whole thought of it excited me and I let it run like a wild horse through my imagination. But it was a weird fantasy. It was me and it was not me. I was there, yet I was watching he who should be me go through the motions.

We are in Hollywood. A screenwriter, Henry, is making a pitch before a movie producer. The screenwriter is tall, lanky, and his hair is long—the vogue style among writers. In Hollywood it is very important to look like a

writer. That is how they distinguish among each other in show biz. An indeed, it was only by Henry's writerly appearance that he was granted the interview. The producer is fat and balding, but he wears the finest Italian tie—a big fat Italian tie. Wide to show his control over the studio and the scene about to take place. He gets writers in to him every day. He looks down on them. He thinks of these meetings as a function like that of looking through garbage to find a piece of gold. It's an ugly job, but there is money to be made. He knows that it is in there somewhere, and he has to search until he finds it. It's his job. He's a sadist; he likes it.

The Producer: What's the story?

Henry: (He stands up and becomes animated.) The story is going to be a classical tragedy. The woman who is the main character is a prodigy of the times in the truest sense. It's apocalyptic, it's end of the century; yet it's also timeless in the sense that it's a tragedy and embodies all the elements of classical Greek tragedy while remaining modern.

It's about a young woman. We see her first playing a game of chess. She is playing an older woman, and many people are watching. The game is for the top female chess player in Denmark. She loses. The loss brings about a depression. She looks up her old boyfriend, who is a heroin addict, and asks for him back. She says she loves him and needs him, but she wants to have him back without the heroin. He refuses to quit, but she takes him back anyway. Depressed and curious she begins to shoot up.

Oddly enough she does not shoot up for the first time with him. It's after one of their fights about his habit. After the fight he says he is leaving for good and walks out of the apartment. She, after he leaves, goes by herself down to the railroad station and buys some heroin. Anyway, it is not long before she is hooked—lying and stealing for heroin. She goes insane and in the end kills her-

What do fantasy characters do? They appear in our minds modeled by stock images of people we have known and given birth by our imagination. They animate momentarily then fade back into some inert matter leaving only traces of their presence. How much of them can we call real, even those we have known in the flesh?

You need to slow down this part of the narrative. Even though it is a fantasy, you need to go through it like it was straight narrative. I understand the acceleration of such fantasies, the way your mind wants to speed through to the climax, trying to cling to it, hold on to it as long as possible, not wanting to bother with details except in the exquisite moment. You are on paper: We are not in your head.

self.

(The producer shifts anxiously in his chair and looks around the room while Henry goes on with his pitch.)

But wait! I know the descriptions of such story lines are never more than trivia. That's the way they all are. But here is the juice of it. It is a human story about real people, ordinary misfit types. Aside from the tragic setting and deplorable events, the characters are full of life. In a perverse way, they drive themselves along this path with reckless premeditation and love. That is the twist that will make the story sell. It is not a moral statement about the evil of existence, but an immoral statement about two people who find meaning in life through their own deaths. The story negates life absolutely. There is its power. It's a pure anti-hero story as well as a tragedy. In death there is victory and defeat: a beautiful paradox.

The Producer: (tense) Sounds like you are glorifying them.

Henry: I am. (pause) But didn't Sophocles glorify Oedipus?

I'm not sure which is making me feel sick, the continuous cigarettes or this litter on the floor. Not literature, but litter.

The second phenomenon that led to the disintegration of the narrative was much more disturbing than the first. As Spring came along and the story began to fragment, I began to obsess on two key events that took place while I was in Copenhagen.

Before this last spring I discarded my original narrative strategy and began to write an autobiographical account of the story. At the time I felt it was the only way to get at the truth of the story—writing about her instead of forcing an imaginary woman into some arbitrary situations. The real Louise needed to be written about. I needed to tell the truth. Yes, as ridiculous as it sounds, that was my very thought. It meant rewriting everything and confronting the issue

of my relationship with Louise. There was not much difference between this story than the one I had been working on. Instead of a classical tragedy/anti-hero adventure, it became a love triangle.

The two key events that I began to obsess over related to my discovery of Louise's growing mental instability and suicide plans. After my first two days in Copenhagen I realized that there was something terribly wrong. The Louise I encountered had radically changed from the woman I had known.

A few days after we had spoken together about the novel, I received a phone call from Louise. She wanted me to go out on the town with her and Yuh, her best friend. I met them at the bus station by Louise's parents house on Osterbro Gade. From there we began our evening of bar hopping. We made plans to do "the round." In Copenhagen there was a bar open somewhere twenty-four hours a day. So, when the evening wore on, one bar would close and another open.

Close to dawn we went to a small bar that opened at four. We were practically the only people who were there. Yuh, Louise, and I sat at a small table near the back. A juke box played Patsy Cline and Edith Piaf. By that time we had switched from alcohol to coffee.

A Piaf tune had just finished playing and Louise began a conversation.

"You see," said Louise, "Piaf sings the song because it is one of the foundations of our existence. There's no way to avoid it. For people there is no other thing than the love triangle. We all experience it and live it out in our lives. That's the way it is for us now. You love me, I love Auders, and he loves hero-in."

There was a depressed silence. I sat across the table from Louise and Yuh. Louise sat directly in front of me, and Yuh sat quietly to my left. I wondered what Yuh was thinking. She seemed relatively sane and intelligent, so I couldn't fathom why she was mixed up in the insanity.

*Think about including the scene at the disco earlier in the evening. I'm not quite sure how it is going to fit in to the basic premise of the story, but it does serve to...something...Come on Henry, you're sitting at a booth in a disco with Louise and Yuh. It's the type of place you hate, elevated dance floor (keep recounting the story told by Louise about Thailand and Auders.) Make into conversation-----compartmentalizing relationships, discovering the truth. Before we arrived at the disco, I had spent most of the evening speaking with Yuh.
A: Who is Yuh? etc.*

There was something rising up in Louise. Although she was staring vacantly over my right shoulder, I could detect a flow of powerful emotions making their way to the surface. The skin around her nose would tense and thaw, and an idea would intermittently flash across her eyebrows. She was agonizing over something.

I looked back across my shoulder wondering what it could be that she was staring at. No light came through the windows. It was still dark outside. There was no object there that I imagined distinct enough to bring back a sudden involuntary remembrance of some unwanted event, some past time and place that she seemed to be reliving in that very moment, looking abstractly over my shoulder. I turned around, sipped my coffee, and lit another cigarette.

Suddenly Louise looked at me and said, "You never understood me. When we were together you treated me like a thing. I was *your* Louise. Someone you could show off to your friends. That's all I was to you."

"That's not true," I replied after hesitating, surprised at the sudden attack. "You were never a *thing* to me. And I never paraded you around before my friends. Of course I introduced you to my friends, but that's natural. Nothing wrong with that."

She was complaining about the poker club where she worked. They treated her like shit now that she was serving toast and coffee instead of sitting at the poker table as she once had.

"I can see how they look at me now. I know what they are saying. I'm not stupid. I know they are laughing behind my back. They say, 'look at Louise, look how pathetic she is. She gets back together with that junky, then she comes crawling back to beg for a job. All these years, all they've wanted is to see me fail. That's how they get their kicks, seeing someone down and spitting on them. All my life people have been spitting on me, loving it every time Louise screws up.'"

Those words came out in a flurry of bitterness. Louise looked like a frightened animal. Her eyes were ferocious and fevered; it was as if she were trapped in a history with no way to escape, lashing out at whoever was there, whoever was in the way.

It was the eyes that stayed with me, those piercing eyes full of hate, and the words “all my life people have been putting me down.” Each day when I was working on the novel the words and eyes walked me through the day like some ghostly shadow or malevolent sprite unwilling to leave my mind at peace.

The second daily image repeating itself endlessly in my imagination was an event from the last evening in Copenhagen. We—Louise, Johanna, and I—had been invited to dinner at Louise’s parents apartment and given tickets to see *Oedipus Rex*, which was playing at the King’s Theater. For her parents the dinner was an opportunity to show their gratitude for our family’s support of Louise when she had been in San Jose.

The stage was sparse. In the background a few skewed houses angled into the air, and in the foreground sat a wooden bench. These few objects on the stage were colored in various shades of gray. Because I could not understand Danish, I could not follow the dialog. But I had seen, or read, rather, *Oedipus Rex* so many times, I had no problem following the action.

As I watched, I realized how boring it was to have all the juicy parts played off screen. All the violence, all the blood, was off stage. I needed to see all the gore, so I could take it in and absorb it. I wanted to see *Oedipus* poke his eyes out on stage, right before my eyes. When the messenger came out and told the audience of the terrible tragedy, I was sorely disappointed. The play had been produced with one foot in the present and one foot in the past. The set design was modern; the production was ancient, prepared for an audience that no longer existed.

The play had become a sacred object. They were still playing it today as it

was played two thousand years ago. Why had not someone simply rewritten the play so that all the violence could be seen on stage? That would have made it more interesting and maybe even kept it alive somehow. But no, we were supposed to sit there with our educations and cultural savvy and understand the monumental significance of the event.

As I looked around I knew that the others were doing their best to understand and appreciate the play. It was imperative that we understand and appreciate. That was what we were there for: to show that we could understand and appreciate.

As the play neared its end, I wanted to lean over to Louise and say to her, "Let him act it out on the stage for you. Don't let this be your life." But I didn't. I remained silent. After all, art didn't have anything to do with real life. It was all a figment of the imagination, a subtle trick of the mind. That was all art was: a subtle trick of the mind. And if it was true, if it was happening, then it was already too late. For us the fatal moment had already arrived, and we were arriving at the realizations of its consequences.

After the show her parents came to pick us up. They walked across the street from the theater at the Royal Danish Symphony. As we crossed the street Louise's mother pointed out a woman entering a green Rolls Royce. "Look, it's the Queen." We stopped for a moment and watched her drive away. It was supposed to have been exciting, being out on the town, seeing the Queen enter a car, but it wasn't. The Queen was only a prop that didn't belong on our stage.

They took us back stage and showed us around the building. In her father's office I was given a few gifts and told how much they appreciated me taking care of Louise. They said that over and over during the course of the evening. Each time it was like a knife going through my back. "You were so kind to Louise. We want to thank you."

At the very end of the evening we parked by the square on Osterbro Gade. It had rained earlier that evening. The lights from nearby lamps glistened on cobble stones casting long blurry trails of yellow, red, and green. The colors blended into each other as if on some oil washed canvas. It was autumn cool, the last memory of summer. The entire square smelled of musk—a still-life approaching autumn.

The four of us stood outside the car. For some reason Louise's mother was not there. Louise, Johanna, and I were huddled close together while her father stood on the other side of the car. Louise and Johanna were talking about Robert and the affair he was having with some woman. Both Johanna and Louise were putting on airs. They were disgusted with both Robert and his wife: him for having the affair and her for allowing it. Then it happened.

Johanna said, "How could a woman be with a man like that."

Louise gracefully looked up at the building across the way to search out some forgotten meaning. It seemed that time slowed as I watched her stretch her eyes across the square. We were suspended as if a photograph was being taken and we were waiting for the shutter to snap.

"I don't know," she said, and the moment was over. But I thought, as I watched her face angle up toward the distant buildings, she was responding to a question unknown to either Joanna or I, a question she was asking herself. All I could see of that question was the look in her eye, and what I thought was a slight quaver in her voice.

The question, as I posed it in my mind, was "Who are you, Louise?" Her answer: "I don't know." I knew in that moment that I had been right: she was going insane. There was nothing left to do or to say.

"No regrets."

I turned and walked down the square toward my cousin's apartment.

Instead of coming to understand these events and the others I was relying on

If this sentence were only readable! But in a way it follows the discordance of the times, the lack of coherence and purpose, the dysfunctional rhetoric of a society gone awry.

A: Your not being honest.

H: Why do you say that?

to make up her character, they simply replayed in my mind each day to the point that they lost all their values and significance. It was as if I were still experiencing the event with the same naivete.

As I sat in my apartment, with the scattered boxes and shards of manuscript spread out before me, chain smoking. Ready to put away the text for good, I indulged in one last fantasy moment. I tried to visualize them, let them envelop me as if I were living in a dream. Sitting there with the room fading out I could see her as clearly as an image on a screen, her breath vaporizing in the cold air, her head tilting slowly toward the sky.

“Sorry I let you down, Louise.” I put the scattered pages of the manuscript back into the box. “It’s time to put you to rest.”

8-12-92

I was sitting in my apartment today reading ‘Lady Lazarus’ and something strange happened. I’m not quite sure what to make of it. I just finished the poem when I looked up and had a vision. I had a vision. I can’t believe that I am actually writing the sentence down. It’s absurd, but I have no other way of describing what happened. I looked up from the book and I was in another apartment. I wasn’t there physically. It was as if my eyes had become a window into another time and place.

In front of me is Louise and her mother. Louise doesn’t appear to be more than five years old. They are in the living room of their apartment. I am disembodied and invisible, hovering over the back of Louise’s shoulder watching her tentative steps, feeling her fear and apprehension. Her mother sits in a chair knitting and doesn’t notice her approach. Louise comes to a stop directly in front of her mother, and when her mother finally looks up Louise says, “Daddy doesn’t love me anymore? Is it because I’m ugly now?”

The scene fades.

“Forget about her. She’s lost.”

Living in Phil's World

"I want to destroy the society that created the father that beat me."

(Phil)

I'm not sure quite how to treat Phil. In a sense he is an amorphous timeless blob. To call him an amorphous timeless blob is misleading, yet that is what comes to mind when I try to encapsulate him in a single predicate. Phil is certainly not without shape, but if we take the second part of the second definition of amorphous we can say that he is without a doubt ill-organized. To make timeless ring with truth, we need to stretch. Is Phil unaffected by time; is he eternal? Yes and no. Yes, if we can perceive his soul to be eternal and himself as still the child he has always been. No, if we are not sensible enough to take these vague abstractions and twist them into some concrete shape: Phil. A blob he certainly is as you will see as his image appears in your mind.

Knowing Phil, he would find it offensive to be defined in any way, since he has worked so hard to remain undefineable. If you were to ask him about his sign, he would say, "Zodiac." If you were to ask him where he was from, he would say, "the Cosmos." If you were to ask him how old he was, he would say, "why do you want to know?"

So, I think I will take out passages of the journal that relate to Phil and create a scrapbook. I think Phil would like that, not for its aesthetic beauty, but

for the traces of Dada and Surrealism that might be found therein. At any rate, Phil does not a story make; he makes a scrapbook. So this is my Phil scrapbook.

D a y

Phil says that a good dreamer can wake himself up after the first image of unconsciousness, three or four times in a row. He speaks of a state between true sleep where one is somehow aware of both the waking and the dream world. When he writes, he roves in that twilight in search of images. In the evenings some times I see him lying on the couch in the living room. He lies flat on his back with his note-book bobbing up and down like a log on the ocean of his belly. A pen usually sticks out of his hand like a cigarette. He should have been born with a sixth finger, one that sticks out of his knuckle so he can suck on it. Then he would not need to smoke three packs a day.

I am sitting at the kitchen table now, writing in my journal. Phil is there on the couch as he has been the last few nights. He tells me he is getting a lot of writing done. Something about him reminds me of an overgrown pygmy. I'm not sure if it's his round pregnant belly or the dark pock marked face and fat lips that give him the pygmy appearance, or that he simply has that type of buoyancy that one would associate with a pygmy. There is something primitive about Phil lying on the couch gathering notes from his unconscious. The Australian aborigines have their dream lines, the unbroken continuity of the outback, and Phil has his own connection with the timeless world of what? I'm not sure what it is that he sees. He says it is the other side of this world, his connection with an alternative reality: Phil's world. Maybe now that I'm living here I have somehow entered that world.

Like a somnambulist, Phil opens his eyes and jots down some words—at least I imagine they are words—on the notebook. One never knows with Phil.

Then, as if he has achieved whatever purpose he had in mind, he closes his eyes. He probably jotted down a dream image then went back to search for another. From what he tells me, his dream world is a bizarre place: alligators play banjo, clocks tell no time except the present, snake tattooed women walk the desert floor. Images from my dreams usually relate in some way to my personal life; but his relate to nothing I have experienced, nor he, for that matter, except in his dreams.

A
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For a while I have been feeling as if things here at the apartment were a bit strange. I can understand if Phil is a little eccentric, but I thought it was simply that he was a poet, and poets are weird. Today I discovered the reason for some of his eccentricities.

This afternoon I went into the bathroom and saw two open bottles of medication on the cabinet above the sink. They had never been there before. I looked at the labels. One was a bottle of Lithium and the other Prolixin. Since my aunt is manic depressive and takes Lithium, I knew immediately what they were for.

G o d

This evening Phil came up to me while I was relaxing on the couch.

"I have something *important* to tell you."

He looked a little worried. He spoke with a quiet self-consciousness. The type of voice you would expect to hear if someone were telling you about a death in the family. I had a feeling he was going to tell me about his illness. After all, he had been leaving the medication bottles in the bathroom since the first day that I saw them. I'm sure that he realized that I would see them and be curious enough to find out what they were. It was a strange scene, as if it were

staged somehow.

We went into the kitchen and lit cigarettes. After a few puffs off the cigarette he began to tell me the “important” news.

“There is something that I have been meaning to tell you. I don’t want you to freak out, but I’m a schizophrenic. The last episode I had was over seven years ago, and I haven’t had one since. I’ve never had any history of violence, and I didn’t tell you when you moved in because it’s very difficult for me to tell people. It kind of colors the way people look at you.”

For Phil, I’m sure that it was a tense moment, or at least that’s the way it seemed. For me it was boring, except for the minor surprise of him being a schizophrenic instead of a manic.

“Well, it doesn’t come as a great surprise. I saw your medication in the bathroom a while ago, so I figured you were mentally ill in some way.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t freak out. People have a way of freaking out when they find out. That’s why I try to keep it a secret. I’m on disability, but I tell people that I play the stock market.”

A Phil is in the habit of saying, “I feel perfectly normal, I can’t understand
S why people think I’m crazy. I look at the world and see how people
C behave in it, and I realize that it’s they who are crazy. The people out
E there are the one’s who are schizo. The general mode of behavior in the
N world today is that way. I’m glad that I have been cast out into the mar-
T gins and don’t have to deal with them. This whole world is a nut-house.”

I often hear variations on this theme: the madness of the world at large and the sanity of the insane. It’s one of his preoccupations. In one sense he’s right. “What’s the difference,” says Phil, “between the man holding his finger to a button that can explode an atom bomb and a man who says he has a bomb in his head?” He is reading R. D. Laing’s book on schizophrenia.

When Phil says, "I don't understand why people think I am insane," I can't help but feel sorry for him. On the one hand I think he must be joking; on the other hand he is dead serious. There is no irony in his voice, only a disbelief and slight trace of sadness. But he must be aware. If Phil is anything, he is aware.

The other day I went to buy a book, and Phil came with me. As I stood at the counter to buy the book, Phil stood behind me with a book on philosophy in his hand. In a loud voice he said, "Look, this book must be really good. It is published by Viking Press! They're big, aren't they, Viking Press? And look at how thick it is! Five hundred pages with little letters." Then he started to laugh. I glanced at Phil with a look that signified my displeasure. He quit laughing as if he were disconnecting an electric current. I turned back to conclude my business with the clerk and noticed that she was tense; the smile on her face had been replaced by an anxious fear.

Once out the door, Phil says to me, "That was weird. Did you notice how strange the clerk was?"

H o p e

Phil is of the opinion that there are two reasons for the European disillusionment: W.W.II is one, and the other is what he calls the shallowness of the Protestant ideas of faith after the Reformation. He sees a new spiritualism coming into the European consciousness at the beginning of the next century. We can already see it in the interest growing now in the "New Age" spiritualism here in California. Phil sees himself as beyond the cusp of the movement. In one hundred years the cusp will have moved and the world will be ready for Phil. Phil must certainly be referring to a time after the second coming: a time of chaos and madness—a world made for Phil.

B
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d Phil turned out to be the perfect choice for a room-mate. He is a poet with a great knowledge of philosophy and literature. I can bounce ideas off him and ask him questions about art and philosophy. Below are two typical Phil maxims. He is always coming out with statements that carry the weight of finality. In my opinion there is no truth, only a series of truths, each dependent upon the angle and distance of perception. But for Phil truth is absolute; he is privy to it by means of his unique experience, having known both sanity and madness.

Phil says: "We live in a Zen prison, a prison without walls, and we are sent here from the fourth dimension as punishment for crimes committed there, for this is truly a place of the criminally insane."

Phil says: "Love is present in nature because of the desire for union and a striving upward is the same goal. Spiritual and carnal ecstasy are the same."

Phil says: "Each of us suffers in equal measure in our own unique way. There is equality in suffering, a democratic world consciousness. Then there is the question of perception, a double-edged sword that gives no respite."

Phil says: "We're caught up in illusion. It's the eye that tricks us. This afternoon at the cafe I saw a woman who was disfigured. She came by herself, and I felt sorry for her because of the way she looked. Then a man came up to her, and I realized she was with him. I realized that she was better off than I was because she had somebody."

"When I first saw her I knew that I could not love her because of her looks. Then I got mad at myself because I could not look beyond the form to the essence. It was my failure as a human being."

Phil says: "Essence is the soul. If you love someone you need to give your inner self to the other—a straw offering."

Phil says: "Einstein smoked a pipe, Duchamp smoked a pipe, Heindhal smoked a pipe, Joyce smoked a pipe, and I smoke a pipe."

Phil says: "There are probably only two writers in the twentieth century able to exercise complete artistic freedom: Joyce and myself."

L i f e "They used Plato against me. That's why I have never liked Plato. The authority at the university used him to justify throwing me out. One of my professors quoted the Republic where Plato says that artist should be excluded from society for being subversives."

"Why were they so against you?"

"My whole thesis tried to prove that prophetic knowledge was a legitimate form of knowledge. I used Wittgenstein as an example. You see, if Wittgenstein could predict that philosophy was going to change radically in the 20th century, he was transforming it by his very statement. It was too much for the professors. They were all straight-laced Catholics. They thought I was a heretic and dangerous."

"That sounds about right to me, but it is no reason to kick you out of the university."

Graphic image here!

One of Phil's philosophical questions was what is mind. Often I would come home and ask Phil, lying on the couch smoking a cigarette, "What did you do today?"

"Meditate."

Meditate on what?"

"Mind."

"Mind?"

"I was thinking about the nature of the mind. It is one of life's great mysteries."

M Phil's place has become unique. For the last few months we have been in the habit of inviting people over to draw for entertainment. We came to the conclusion that it was the only respectable Bohemian thing to do. Each of the drawings made were placed on the wall behind the kitchen table. When the wall was filled up there were around fifty drawings on the wall. Yesterday, the last space on the wall was taken up. It was both a moment of triumph and a moment of sadness.

Phil was fond of drawing mandalas and line drawings that he referred to as "Maps of Consciousness." His mandalas were invariably done with circles and triangles of different bright colors. He used oil based pastel crayons and smeared them with a thinner to get a multi-layered effect. He always strived for symmetry between color and geometry, but fell hopelessly short.

I asked Phil once what was the meaning behind his Maps. He replied, "They contain everything that is important in life. I mean, look! The Holy Eye is in the center. There's God, Truth, Time, Spirit, Bird."

"What does the bird represent?" We were standing in front of the wall looking at the Map. Phil was smoking out of his pipe looking very professorial. He seemed to take on the airs of authority you would associate with some aging Harvard professor looking at a Picasso, smoking delicately while looking deeply at every line and nuance of the painting, taking it all in, not missing a thing.

"Freedom."

He says the word as if it were obvious. The bird of paradise, how could it have meant anything else. How could I have been so stupid as not to have known. Bird=Freedom. Phil is always writing about the Bird of Paradise.

Maybe only birds are free, and then, only when they get to paradise.

As I look at the bird at the bottom of the Map, I can see Phil in it. The bird of Paradise with his aloof, questioning, vulnerable eye, slightly out of place on the head looking down: a little bird who has climbed heaven to gaze upon the likes of us, then had its wings clipped. You can see that in its eye.

There is one other picture on the wall that is of special interest. It was done by Judy to reflect a poem Phil had written. The drawing is composed of a variety of images: a man throwing a pair of dice that read six and seven; a bell that seems to be ringing; a crimson crescent moon; a fire; dolphins coming out of the fire; and the man is wearing a felt hat with a card in it, his hand extended as if the dice have just left them. A cloud of smoke comes out of the man's mouth, pushing the dice toward the fire. The bell hangs in the center, the man is to the left; and the fire, dolphins, and moon are to the right.

<i>L o v e</i>

 I decided to build a bunk bed in order to make more room in my bedroom. I guess what I really need is some space from Phil. He seems to be there constantly. I go to the cafés with him. He is there in the morning; and he is there in the evening. When I work in the kitchen, he is always interrupting with questions or asking me if he can read me his poetry. It's beginning to get on my nerves. I can't afford to move out, and I feel that if I can get some space I will feel better.

I went to my father to ask what type beams to get. He told me to get 2X6 beams along with 4X4 post for the corners. So I did. When it came time to construct the bed, I realized that the beam sizes were much too large. My father had effectively told me to get beams that could hold up a house. But since the beams were already cut to size, I went ahead and used them.

I feel like I have a new bedroom, but I must admit it is rather comical and much larger than I expected. The bed is a monolith! It takes up over a third of

the room; and while it has allowed me to place my desk underneath it, the room now looks like a dungeon.

The Institute of Institutes

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The Institute was a place of learning. I was the pupil and Phil was the teacher. He went by the alias of X-7, and I went by my own name, Henry. The educational aspect of the institute consisted of a reading list and lectures by X-7.

All the sessions took place at the apartment, often with Phil lying on the couch, his ashtray propped up on his undulating belly and cigarette dangling from his hand. Only when he was in one of his extremely serious moods would he smoke a pipe, although the ashtray for some reason would still be placed on his chest. Possibly, the ashtray, delicately placed on his belly was like the honorary sash of a doctor in philosophy or a portal by which the wisdom of the ages entered into Phil's being.

Although X-7 was erudite and had an extensive knowledge of Western philosophy his lectures were marred by one minor detail. Each discourse led inevitably to a discussion of his own poetry and how it exemplified the most brilliant ideas disseminated through the course of Western Civilization. If it ended there, he would have reminded me simply of an egotistical professor, but X-7 always took the last step. He did not end by discussing the brilliance of his own work, but used it as an intermediate step in proving that he was certainly among the great geniuses that have blessed us through the course of these last two thousand years. In fact, I learned quickly that it was the main point in all his arguments. It did not matter if we were speaking of Kant, Hegel, Plato, Aristotle, or Nietzsche; their works served to prove beyond a shadow of doubt that X-7 was a genius. Phil was a genius. No doubt about it!

The Mirror Meditation:

A part of The Institute's curriculum were lessons in Tantric Buddhism. I was meditating and reading various Buddhist text, but I wasn't satisfied with the progress I was making on the road to enlightenment. I didn't want it to take a few lifetimes; I wanted it now. I went to X-7 and told him of my complaint. At the rate I was going, I'd have to be reborn at least several times before I became a Bodisvahta.

Phil told me he knew of a meditation that would satisfy my need. He called it the mirror meditation.

"Some monks," he said, "do it for up to six hours, but it's very dangerous because it can lead to insanity. The whole idea of the meditation is to get you to realize that your body is an illusion. The longer you stare into the mirror the more you see the hidden aspect of the body-mind. Be careful. You never know what you might see, and I don't want you to freak out. If you start slowly and stick with it, you'll get there fast enough."

I sat down before the mirror in Phil's room and began to stare at my face in the mirror, focusing on the point between my eyes. After a minute I began to see my image in the mirror distort. My head turned a dark hue of pink with a dull yellow circle in the middle of my forehead. I moved my head a little to each side to make sure the yellow circle was not a smudge in the mirror or a trick of the light. The yellow circle remained there (my third eye?).

Then, there was a sudden burst of violet light in the room. As I continued to stare, my face began to distort. The contours of my face became pronounced and took on geometric patterns. My head began to swell into odd mutations of its original form, bubbling like a lava pit. Phil came into the room at that point, and my meditation ended. It lasted only three minutes in all!

M i n d

"My poetry can be summed up in one sentence," says Phil. "It is an attempt to destroy the society that created the father that beat me. I have planted the seed in the language that is going to work like a disease and destroy it. I want to be immortal in my work. All great artist strive to become immortal. I write my poetry so it is impossible to figure out what it means."

These comments disturb me somewhat. I have been reading Phil's manuscript and beginning to feel like I am being used as a guinea pig. Is he testing it out on me? If I went insane by reading it, would it then be ready for publication?

After a while of study at the institute I am ready to ask the important question: "Phil, if your poetry is meant not to be understood, why are you always asking me what I think it means?"

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"What is the present?" asks Phil. "As soon as I think a thought it is in the past; and when we're not in the past we're projecting into the future, so how can one live in the present?"

"Don't ask me, Phil. That question is too technical. Why should I try to define present with words anyway? Wait. How about this? God is the moment as it transpires." I look at Phil with a sarcastic grin. He frowns and looks back at the wall.

M o o n

The last time Phil flipped out was over eight years ago. He was working on Pie Pie, a section of his first book. He stayed up all night cutting and pasting. While he was cutting away in the late hours of the night, he began to listen to a Christian radio show. On the radio they were talking about demons and the second coming. By morning, Phil was beginning to have schizophrenic delusions. He thought the devil was coming, and it was the end of mankind. This delusion transformed itself into a

paranoid fear of Amazon Lesbian coming to kill him. At seven in the morning, when his mother was in the kitchen, Phil ran downstairs in a state of desperation and begged his mother to protect him from the Amazon lesbians. His mother promptly called Jim. Jim came and took Phil to Valley Medical, where he stayed until he felt better.

P About his poetry, Phil says, "It's a view of the world from the other side." He thinks of himself as a heretic monk and a mad genius. When I ask him why he has to smoke pot before he writes, Phil responds, "pot is to me what whisky was to Joyce." Depending on when this question is asked, because it is asked many times, a different answer is given. The idea that drugs are a catalyst to creativity never changes. Phil simply changed the artist he compared himself to, such as Faulkner, Baudelaire, Rambeaud, etc. Any artist that took drugs and became famous is good enough to be compared to Phil. That is the light in which Phil sees himself.

Present I am staying up late to listen to music on my headphones in the living room. At about midnight Phil comes out of his room and walks up to me. He says "Henry, listen to this." There is a manic gleam in his eyes as he speaks. Then, before he can read from the piece of paper he holds in his hand, he begins to cough. They are deep coughs, as if he can't catch his breath. His eyes begin to water, and he goes into a coughing fit. I hear his lungs wheezing as he tries to get air into his lungs. When he stops, he begins to recite a poem about love and illusion. He starts to cough again. His eyes water, and saliva runs down his chin. For a moment I think he might have a heart attack. Then, as abruptly as he came out, he says, "good night" and walks back into his bedroom.

This happened at a time when Phil was smoking a lot of dope and was very

withdrawn.

Phil on smoking dope:

"You see, the reason I smoke dope is because it brings me back to normal. The medicine I take deadens the chemical receptors in the brain. Dope counteracts the medicine and brings me back to a state of being almost normal. It is only then that I can write. Otherwise I feel dead and uninspired. Dope is in a sense my ally."

P Phil and I are sitting around the kitchen table. We are both writing in our notebooks and little is being said. As I write, I notice that Phil has stopped and is staring at me. I stop my writing and stare back, a tactic I have been using lately to get him quit his annoying habit of staring.

r Phil opens up a conversation by asking, "Do you know what a hobby-horse is?"

a "Yes."

y "A hobby-horse comes from a person riding a wooden horse." Phil never listens. "So chess, basketball, tennis, and weaving and so on are all hobby-horses."

e "So what are you driving at?"

r "I was just thinking about the guys at the club who are experts and have this exclusive attitude. Chess is, after all, just a hobby and doesn't have any value beyond that."

"It's a good meditation as well."

"You think of it as a meditation?"

"Yes."

"I think of it as more of an exercise."

"It can be both."

"Well, what I'm driving at, beyond the aesthetic value of chess, is that there

are only two pursuits in life that have any true meaning.”

Phil is now looking at me, waiting for me to ask the question so he can proceed to tell me the two true values in life. I stare at him and he stares back, waiting patiently for the question to come. He is having a conversation with himself but he needs a prop; so I finally give in and ask, “Would you like to expand on that?”

“The first is the question of the ‘I’. What is that thing, the ‘I’? What am I?”

“And?”

“Do you know who you are? Do you know what the ‘I’ is that is you?”

“I am me. I am.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure I’m sure.”

“How do you know that?”

(asshole)

“What is the second thing?”

“The second most important thing is to return to the old soul.”

“To return to the old soul?”

“Yes. The rest of what we do are just hobby-horses. For instance, my writing is just a hobby-horse. Essentially, it only serves my own ego; in fact, it’s only a small hobby-horse. Only about five or six people are interested in it. Do you see what I am saying?”

“I see what you are saying. The only valid pursuit in life is to try to attain Enlightenment.”

“That’s right.”

“Is your writing to you only a hobby-horse?”

“Essentially, that’s what it is, but I don’t think of it that way. I’m saying what Sandy told me; and I have to remain skeptical about it, but it’s essentially true.”

Sandy is a practicing Hindu. He has a beautiful wife, two lovely daughters,

and a hundred million in the bank. If you looked at him you would think he was just another WASP. But to be Hindu is a mark of intellectual savvy and sophistication among the wealthy. The only thing I don't understand about Sandy is why he keeps a cyanide pill hidden away in his medicine cabinet. I guess he can always take it if things get too rough. After all, Kali is the ruler of this plane on illusion.

"I don't think art is just a hobby-horse. If that were true, then it would have no meaning. If it were only for the gratification of the ego then it would be meaningless. Art is more than that. It's an expression of ourselves as human beings. It's a way for us to transcend ourselves and pass along ideas."

"You know Sartre and Beckett were interested in this idea that there is nothing except the self and that life is just an illusion generated by the self. So this world is just an illusion generated by yourself."

"Then why would I create an illusion where I am poor and spending my time talking about philosophy with you, instead of being on a tropical island playing around with some island nymph?"

"Why anything? How do you know this isn't just a dream?"

"You cannot deny this existence as just a dream. This is our reality, the world in which we live, and it's valid and has purpose."

"What is the purpose?"

"I don't know."

"Then how do you know that it is not just a dream?"

"Because I'm here."

"How do you know?"

(asshole)

"Well Phil, if this is just a dream, we might as well live in the dream as if it had purpose and meaning, live it out until its end."

"What do you think about my shirt?"

"Your shirt?"

"Yes. I had it cleaned and now it is all white and shiny."

"It looks fine."

"I had it done by a Chinese laundry."

S k y

Choke master.

You know it's good when you cough. One game Phil. Always the same conversation. "Do you think that women feel ambivalent about men?"

I can do no long stream golden fruit. Icarus, iron-horse, stamped creaking groaning bending powerful metal bars slowly at the axis bending under weight.

I see it like I have never seen it before. Look at the mandala. The union of egg and sperm is sensual like only a woman would make it...illuminated. She likes to get stoned. It's not going to happen...disappointment ...silence...cars drive by on the freeway. A foolish dream, a fantasy of mine, a fantasy of mind.

Two objects reflecting each other through the sun's rays.

Phil's favorite expression: "In the final analysis..."

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Each day Phil wakes up and chain smokes around ten cigarettes. He comes into the living room, lies down on the couch with the ashtray on his chest, and begins lighting up. I usually make the coffee in the morning; although to be fair, I must say he makes it on occasion. The only breaks he takes from the long chain of cigarettes is to get up and chug a cup of coffee. He pours a cup that is half milk and half coffee. Then he stands by the coffee machine and drinks it down in two or three gulps; burping,

coughing, and farting in-between gulps. This is Phil's morning ritual: lying prone on the couch and getting up for an occasional cup of coffee, burping coughing, and farting.

Phil's favorite conversation themes:

The Unhappy Conscious

The High Order of the Observer

How others perceive Phil

"I don't like the way so-and-so mirrors me."

S p i r i t Ruler of the Universe

I don't remember when, but at some point we began playing for the Ruler of the Universe. When Phil first mentioned playing chess for the imaginary title, I was adamantly opposed. It seemed to violate the spirit of an informal game between two friends. But he kept insisting, and soon I was playing for the Ruler of the Universe and other silly titles. After a while, these silly titles began to have meaning, and I actually kept track of who was the reigning Ruler.

Things took an odd turn this evening. After dinner we sat down to play some speed chess at the dining table. The first game was for the Ruler of the Universe. I won the game and became the Ruler. We played a second game and Phil won. Right after he won, he raised his hands in victory and said, "Now I'm the Ruler of the Universe." He stood up and started to dance around the room. Suddenly, I was upset because we did not call the game. He had no right to call himself the Ruler of the Universe.

"Hey, wait a minute. I'm the ruler of the Universe. We didn't call the game, so I'm still the Ruler."

"No your not. I am. I won, so I am. Ha, ha. The Universe is mine!"

"Hey, you got to call it to get it, pal."

I stood up and walked toward Phil intending to continue the argument—I was furious—when I saw the look on his face. He was laughing at me, not because he won the game, but because he had been able to make it real, make it important. I stopped in my tracks. My face flushed with embarrassment. After some hesitation, thinking of how to respond, I said, “Yeah, your right. You won the game so the title is yours.”

That was the last game we ever played for the Ruler of the Universe.

T i m e	“Here’s a line you will really like,” says Phil sitting across from me at the City Espresso cafe. He coughs a couple of times without covering his mouth or turning his head. “Turn your head when you cough,” I tell him. “Did I spray you?”
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“No, but you might.”

Phil looks down at his note book getting ready to recite.

“It seems I have a choice that I have yet elected.”

It is a part of his latest trip: idiomatic deconstruction. He is trying to walk the fine line between idiom and cliché. He probably spent the good part of the morning coming up with that singular sentence: a sentence that is grammatically correct, seems to have meaning, yet is a metaphysical paradox.

“So what?”

S u n	Phil: “I was speaking to a woman the other day at the cafe. In the conversation she said ‘I have all these emotions all the time. I seem to be bouncing back from one feeling to another.’ I told her ‘you should suppress your emotions, become neurotic, and write poetry. Right after I said that she got up and left.”
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The two underlined words were scribbled in my notebook. Phil looked at these markings and said: "Two coffins linked by a moat. Kim locked in a prison. See? You think Kim is getting into a bad marriage, that she is a prison-

er—and the two linked coffins. It's a transdimensional analysis. They will be divorced in two years."

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Living with Phil was beginning to take its toll. There were days when the first thought that came into my mind was the dread of having to speak to Phil in the morning. I would lie in bed before getting up and cringe at the thought of having to endure the loud "Good morning" I knew would greet me as soon as I stepped out of my room.

Phil was there every morning of every day; not only in the morning, but every day and every night as well. He rarely went out, and when he did, he always wanted me to go with him. Every day he asked me to go to the café with him. The only exception was when he was meeting a woman. Then, and only then, he preferred to go alone.

You would think that his meetings with women would have given me respite, but they didn't. After each of his meetings he would come home and give me every detail of the encounter, analyzing every aspect of the woman in the minutest detail according to Freudian theory. Sometimes he would bring up the woman in three or four sequential conversations over a period of a few days. So, Phil was never alone at those meetings. I had to experience them as well, over and over again.

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I am beginning to catch on. Phil, the more he talks about people, the more I realize the manipulation that is going

on, the more and more I sense that he his using the same tactics on me that he is using on the women he is trying to seduce. Not that he is trying to seduce me, rather that he needs to have me there with him, a type of side-kick. He probably spends hours each day analyzing me.

Last spring I built a bunk-bed with extremely large beams. It took away most of the space in the room and gave it a cavernous look. Not that there wasn't room. I had my desk under the bed—but it was cluttered and small. It only had two narrow passages on the sides of the colossal bed. It was a cave that I sunk into; a shell. As I recall, I wanted to make more space in my room so I could work in there. But I now realize that it was a desire to escape from Phil, a desire to create my own sanctuary where I could find refuge from having to constantly speak to him that lead me to make the bunkbed.

Last Sunday I tore down the colossal bed. I hammered away each beam one by one, and put them out on the patio. Once again the room had an open feel, the type I have always liked.

While I was discussing writing with Phil. We were sitting at one of the outside tables at the City Espresso café. It seemed that we had the same problem. Phil says, "I think that I've had writers block for the last two months, but it's more serious than that. Since I finished the manuscript, it seems that I keep coming up with the same idea."

"Yes, you don't want to write the same book over and over again."

"I feel that there is a huge void inside. Maybe it's withdrawal—no smoke. But, on the other hand, I think what's happening is that I'm going through a psychic regenerative process. I'll just have to wait it out."

"Why don't you try to write in an entirely different style. For instance, normal every day prose. That's it! Write a prose sentence."

"No. I can't do that."

"I feel that I'm in the same boat. Not quite that same, but close enough. I've been trying to construct a fictional narrative, but all I have are a variety of fragments that don't want to come together. I've thought a lot about it lately. I've come to the conclusion that my problem is I don't have an ideology, no mirror in which to shape meaning. Things are so bad that I no longer even believe in meaning, or the possibility of meaning. I've been swimming through a swamp of philosophy and I'm utterly confused. But I can't stop writing. I can't even go a day without scribbling down some meaningless events or fragment of an event. I've even taken to reorganizing my diary, calling it fiction, when it is little more than shuffled pages, filler, and momentary thoughts. It is how I spend my days now, filling up pages as if I were filling up my life."

"Your problem, Henry, is that you have just finished school, and you need to adjust to a new existence."

"Yes, but being without work is driving me crazy."

"Just wait two or three years, you'll get used to it." Phil laughs.

"I'm serious, Phil. I can't afford not to work."

"You'll get work. It just takes time."

We sit and smoke for a while without speaking. It is Sunday morning and the cafe is relatively empty. Of the regulars, we are the only ones there.

"Listen Phil, I want to bounce an idea off you. I might have a solution to the problem of meaning, at least for the short term, something that might help keep me focused. At the moment I am feeling as if I almost don't even exist. For one, I will be focusing on a single subject—my self—and I can keep a grip on my day by writing about it."

"If you do that, you need to write everything that pops into your mind. Like today I thought about slapping Randy across the face to say hello. Things like that you need to put in. You have to write the truth. If it's the truth then it will be a success."

“You thought about slapping Randy to say hello?”

“It was just an idle thought.”

“Well, you know, I can’t simply write everything. a page only has so much space on it. Just think if they put a camera on our conversation, it would be like a Warhol film of an empty cafe, all the pauses included. Who would want to watch that? I’m thinking more in terms of a document that verifies my existence, something I can look at and realize that events took place in the objective world—a safety net while I’m swimming through this abyss.”

Phil's kitchen:

On the counter next to the refrigerator is a toaster, coffee maker, four dirty glasses, an open box of Crispy Rice Vitamin Fortified Cereal. Behind the cereal box is another empty box of the same cereal and a partial loaf of bread covered in places with some indeterminate growth. The counter is covered with a mixture of sugar, dried coffee, milk, and crispy rice. In the sink is a dish growing some strange fungus, an empty milk carton, a tall glass with white mucus floating in it, and a spatula. The far counter contains a dirty knife, two empty containers of Lady Lee Peanut Butter Sandwich Cookies, a bag of black bananas, and a rubber band—last but not least, a rotting orange.

The Apartment:

Most of the events and conversations between Phil and I took place at his apartment. I moved in with Phil in April, 1990. It was shortly after I had the dream. The dream had nothing to do with Phil, but it was an important dream. But let me tell you about the dream because the dream was a beauty. Since that time I have not had a more powerful dream. After coming home from Copenhagen I had a lot of dreams about Louise, but none of those dreams were as intense as the dream I had that spring. It was at the time I was living in the tent in my parents back yard. Yes, the eternal return! I think I'll make a habit of periodically living in tents for the remainder of my life if there is going to be such a thing.

City Espresso:

A part of the routine was a daily trip to City Espresso. It was a homey café located in the El Paseo shopping center in Saratoga. For some reason, the valley does not create many places of great distinction. Cafés, although they have the possibility of being personalized to a great degree, often turn out to resemble clones of existing cafés. There is a special generic type that most cafés resemble. It is as if the owners, realizing that there was money to be made in

the café business, did their accounting well, but looked through the same magazine looking for a safe design. City Espresso is such a café.

It has an anesthetic feel to it. The inside is clean and neat. White is the predominant color. When I walked inside to buy coffee, I always had the feeling that there had been people in there making their marks, but someone had erased them before I arrived. Not that the place was always empty. There were usually people inside, yet it had the feel of being empty. That's why I always sat outside.

The true mark of the café was that there was no place to be truly comfortable. Small round tables dotted the interior surrounded by chairs with metal backs and small seats.

Phil today: "It's great that you have started cooking. What lead you to begin?" I ask.

"Freedom."

I look at Phil for a moment without saying anything. Phil stares back waiting for a reaction. I do not give him any. A sly smile appears on his face.

"Well, o.k. I learned from Jim—you know that Jim has slept with over six hundred women—that if you make them dinner with a little wine you have a better chance of getting laid."

I start laughing. It's pure Phil!

In Search of the Art Object

On October 10, 1992, I was sitting at the Espresso Café when I noticed Vince walking towards the café from the parking lot. As Vince walked towards the café, he gave me the impression of a crumpled piece of paper blown along by the wind. He tucked his hands tightly into his pockets, and his curved shoulders down and inward. His head leaned forward, and his eyes followed the ground before him. There was always something uncertain and hesitant about Vince.

As he crossed the road between the parking lot and the café, Vince looked up and recognized me. I noticed a peculiar look on his face, as if he were contemplating a delicious secret. The look aroused my curiosity. It was not the usual sullen and contemplative Vince crossing the street, something had changed him.

As Vince passed by he said, "Let me get my coffee, and I'll be right out. I've got something to tell you."

A few moments later Vince came out and sat down at my table. He emptied a packet of sugar into his espresso. Vince stirred like a effete painter delicately holding the spoon as if he were swirling a paint brush in a bottle of thinner. There was an irrepressible softness to Vince. His hands had the pudgy softness of an aged woman; he shook hands with his thumb and fingers taking care not to grip too hard, he spoke with a tentative meek voice never raising it too high. Maybe he was more like a rolled up ball of velvet than a crumpled piece of paper.

"Something happened to me the other day," he began, "something really special." He spoke with an airy secretive voice. He looked around suspiciously, but with a grin on his face. "This might sound weird, but I think you'll understand what I mean."

Make sure you write about Vince as a man who is on the mythical artist as hero journey except one absurd detail: he is not an artist. Vince created his own narrative according to the artistic ideal. He looked to the archetypes to fashion an image of self and cast himself in that mold. He lived as an outcast—which in America can be as simple as being poor—followed a spiritual path to a deeper understanding of human nature (not), but that is as far as he goes in the narrative. Unfortunately, he did not practice his art; and even more unfortunate for Vince, he did not at all understand the teachings of his guru—rather, that his guru was not a teacher. Being the disciple of a guru was his fatal error. In my opin-

"Every so often I go down to San Francisco to the galleries to see what they have up. I went last weekend, and something really bizarre happened. I'm not really sure if I understand exactly what happened, but I know that my perception of art radically changed."

"After going to all those galleries like I usually do, I was walking down the street when I saw a bundle of folded cardboard boxes. Someone had taken them out to be picked up by the trash collector. That's all it was. But I looked at the bundle, and I was immediately struck by how beautiful it was. It had stamps from all these different ports: Hong Kong, San Diego, San Francisco. And it was held together by a plastic ivory colored chord. It was really weird, but I looked around, then I picked up the bundle and took it home with me. I have it hanging from the wall in the kitchen now."

"That's interesting."

"I had a strange feeling when I picked the bundle off the street. " Vince laughs. His shyness comes out in his laugh, his head sinks slightly into his torso and the sound itself is mousy and irritating.

"But that's not the point," he continued. "The point is that for me, art had always been something in museums and galleries. I always went *into* these place to look at art. But for the first time I saw something ordinary, and I could see the beauty in it. I saw the bundle of cardboard boxes as an art object, something created by people, something that in and of itself had beauty. ..And it was truly beautiful."

I could sense that something important had happened to Vince, but I was not sure what had happened. Why had he gone and picked up a bundle of cardboard boxes and put it on his fireplace mantle? Then an idea struck me. I had been trying to hunt up a story idea for one of my writing classes without much success. The story Vince told me seemed a nice little self-contained short story—it even had an epiphany at the end and seemed to suggest a resolution

ion—not that I am a believer in the narrative—all paths are individual.

A: Do you think that Vince is just a looser?

H: Pretty much.

A: Isn't there more to Vince than that?

H: You mean, does he have a soul, or something like that?

A: (Pause) Why are you writing about him?

H: (Pause) Good question.

A: There is obviously something about him that interests you.

H: Well, for a while I thought he was an artist, but I realized that his art was a prop he used to seduce naive and idealistic teenage women. Somehow, as I began to see this part of Vince, he began to turn me off.

A: Your not answering my question.

H: It's a tough question to answer. Does there have to be some deeper meaning? What if I

into a new perception of art. Great, I thought, this will be an easy assignment. All I had to do was record.

“You know something Vince, I’d like to write a story about your discovery. I think it would be really cool if we went down to San Francisco and retraced the steps of your discovery. At the same time we could have lunch and kick around. I know that you know a lot about art, so I’m interested in what you have to say about the development of art in the recent fifty years. We’ll call it, ‘In Search of the Art Object.’ How does that sound?”

“I’d love to do that. It sounds like a great idea.”

The following Saturday Vince came by at nine in the morning and we drove to San Francisco. Both Vince and I were excited by the prospect of the day. I brought my notebook and a pen in order to best capture the events of the day and Vince’s comments on art. From what Vince had told me, I felt the trip represented an opportunity for a good story. The mission, as I saw it, was to try to capture in my mind the events up to and including the epiphany that Vince experienced the moment he saw the bundle of cardboard boxes: a nice closure.

The notes I took did not turn out to be of much value. Since I did not bring a tape recorder and we were constantly on the move, my notes turned out to be inadequate for using as the basis of a coherent structured narrative where we could see Vince as a developing character slouching towards his destiny. Instead, they resembled the images we looked at that day, vague impressions on an unfinished canvas.

Jack Hanley Gallery on Grant Ave.

Michael Jenkins is the artist on display. One picture on the wall is an ink window behind a section of yellow picket fence on a smooth off-white canvas.

write about Vince because he was an event—time and space sanctified his status as an art object?

A: I don't buy that.

H: I didn't think you would.

Describe him in abstractions. He looked like he had seen God, Moses coming down off the mountain, etc. But not with the same authority. Because, unlike Moses, Vince questioned his own sanity, which is typical of those going through a good brain wash. Well, he wasn't going through a brain-wash. He was a brain left mistakenly in the wash.

White frame—nothingness—shadow of being, says Vince.

the painting is neatly ordered—A stick with a symbol, a costume, mask. It's minimalist, danger and isolation. Vince narrates a corporate package of childhood lost. A simplistic, private, perverse reflection of a dark childhood.

IBM stock is blue chip, says Vince, corporate, fascist. Colors, brush strokes, random words. The smaller ones are better. He sticks to one definitive shape, the act of invention, painting.

Architectural lines are left in the pieces, charcoal—conceptual.

Art is always an inward approach, says Vince, a contemporary art approach.

"It seems to point to a focus on process in order to deny completeness," say I.

—Line composition as a starting point creating internal references to create conflict with the piece itself, says Vince. Puzzles—head trips—problematic meaning to decipher—that is what the 20th century has been about—head trips.

—Western art has degenerated because it has fallen away from spiritual principles. Most pictures today are little more than elaborate head games. They are ego journey, not spirit journey.

—We are helped by initiates and masters until we can do it ourselves, says Vince about the process undergone by the developing artist.

—Ideas without purpose, direction, or spirit.

But can't real metaphysics be going on regardless whether the artist in touch with it? I ask.

Pointing out a painting Vince says, "New York school. Like city architecture, many readings can take place depending on the distance and angle of perception."

—Heightened aggressive, when everyone still believed in the immortality of the artist.

—Everyone wants to be Picasso.

“What are the important movements of the 20th century?” I ask.

“Dada—surrealism capitalizes on the high Renaissance. What was brought to the viewer was the icon, the degeneration of that which was the highest ideal of Renaissance offerings to God.”

“In the belly of devils,” Vince continues, “is the bull of Mercury—messenger of art.”

“In general, I would say of 20th century art that the occult is returning through the rational. The danger is that the mind is on the alter. It is a double edged sword that may or may not improve our lives. It’s all a ritualized mental paganism that fits into the corporate mentality because people are manipulated by desire. One markets desire.”

“Warhol exposed the hypnotism. Wake up people!” His nervous laugh punctuates the call to arms. He is on a roll, and I simply listen as he speaks.

“The dadaist affirmed the machine, and glorified it by their negation—they were trying to be protesters but they were mad about being poor.”

“In the 60’s things changed. The art dialog cooled in terms of complexity. Technology will make things better was the slogan of the day. As the sixties progressed it turned out to be the opposite. There was within the new technology a way to oppress. Statistics created dreams of utopia—a counter-conspiracy on the industrial front—no way to turn back once people were caught up in desire.”

“The closing of the 20th century is marked by a post-Hitler dialectic. ‘My Reich will last for a thousand years.’ He wasn’t kidding!”

Enter—the metaphysics of desire and suffering. Let’s say that a morality play is being staged inside Vince’s head. We have not been given tickets, but one of the characters—desire and suffering—has come out to work the audience. He wants us to buy our tickets at an extraordinary price, so he comes out to let us see little bits of the production going on inside Vince’s mind. But the admission price is too high, and besides, we can hear from outside even if we can’t see.

“Marshall McLuhan used the terms warm and cold in terms of applications for manipulation. He thought that oppression would be conducted by a cold technology, a technology just as visceral but not seen by the common man—Desert Storm death like a Bud commercial—a corporate advertisement for the weapons of war.”

“Soft—talk show, but that could be pushing it.”

“Pop art didn’t have any dialog. It was the same as Madison Ave: a protest against the format by doing it. They, the pop artists, seemed to be on both sides. Whatever protest was in the art to begin with was easily assimilated by the corporate for their benefit.”

—Warhol was a designer, not an artist.

Pop gallery show.

Inside a Campbell soup label with Andy Warhol’s signature on it. The piece had become a reference to the signature, which was a reference to his status, which was a reference of his ability to act as a commodity—what else?

We look at some painting, then Vince looks at me and says, “Notice how the brush strokes are elegantly pushed and arranged?”

—To much of anything and it becomes repetitive.

The project I had envisioned faded as I re-read the notes. It’s not so much that there wasn’t a story there, I simply didn’t feel like doing the work. It involved too many lies. But I recall two events from the day that told me more about Vince than all the notes I could have possibly taken.

As I was editing the text I had a bizarre thought. I like a nice clean sentence, and there is nothing wrong with editing for nice clean sentences, but I found myself editing on another plane. Rules popped up in my head: fiction writing rules, rules I had learned in school about "High Art." I even began to develop a guilt complex for not following these rules, like not recreating the day in SF so the reader could "be there." What does "be there" mean anyway? All I want to do is have fun, entertain myself, that's all. Like all those notes tossed down like sales receipts. That's all they were to me, just like his rhetoric. Vince the non-hero, who has the epiphany-not, in my almost story.

After spending the morning and early afternoon at the galleries, we decided to lunch in Chinatown. We picked out some arbitrary Chinese restaurant and sat down to our meal. As I ate there was some thought trying to reach the surface of my consciousness. I felt that I was digesting the events of the morning along with the meal, and there was something pushing its way to the surface. There were the paintings, drawings, designs, ideas about the history of art, philosophy, rhetoric, and a myriad of other things floating around in my mind.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked me as I was staring at a glass of water on the table but not really seeing it.

"I'm not quite sure," I look up at Vince and placed my hands together under my chin. "I'm thinking about what it takes to be an artist, to be in the continuum of art history. If art is in itself a movement, then the artist needs to be somewhere in the current, as well as standing out from those who are in the same river. The question in my mind is how does one do that and still maintain some sort of personal integrity. Well, let's forget about the integrity part and see if we can figure out the first part."

"Wouldn't an artist be someone who excels at his craft, an excellent craftsman?" I ask.

Vince perked up in his chair, drawing in a deep breath as if he were trying to squeeze the idea up to his head. Then he slumped down, his shoulders hunching in the usual Vince fashion. "You know, Henry, I never really thought about that. I always thought that you simply went about doing your own thing, and if you were lucky you would be *discovered*."

"Yes, but you see art is a dialogue. It needs to be out there and speaking to someone. And if it is speaking to someone then we can assume that it is speaking to other artist and people in general. And if it is saying look at me, look at what I have to say, then it is also saying see how I am different than the others. If it were just the same then there would be no reason to give it voice. So, if

we have some homogenous whole, then the artist needs to be a part of it while at the same time being separate.”

“I get what you are saying,” replied Vince, suddenly perking up again. “You need to find your little niche and exploit it.”

“That’s right, you need to focus like a laser beam on an uncharted area not too far from the main stream. There are exceptions, of course, but that is the general idea.”

We had finished our meal. I smoked a cigarette while enjoying a bit of silence and rest before we took up the remainder of the tour. Vince did not break the silence. He looked a bit sullen and preoccupied. He looked searchingly at me for a moment as if I had some type of answer, or wore it in my expression. But nothing was on my mind. I was languishing in the after-meal cigarette.

“I just realized something,” said Vince. “I had the opportunity but I never did any of those things.”

“What things?”

“You know, try to carve my own niche.”

Waking to the car from the last gallery, Vince saw a wooden box lying up against a wall in an alley off Grant Ave. The box was rectangular and orange. It was made out of low grade wood with a square hole in one of its sides. He picked it up and said, “It took me twelve thousand dollars in prints to realize this.” He wiggled the box in front of my eye like a seller of cheap jewelry. “Before, I could only collect in galleries.” We stop on the street so we can examine the box together. Vince held it up to his eyes, looking inside the hole with the curiosity of a child. I could see that he was really happy. Not only were we investigating the previous discovery but Vince had made a new discovery that I had the honor of witnessing. A new orange box for his collection. “I am going to have to find a place for this in my apartment.”

How this bores me now that I have re-read it. I even find it embarrassing to have wasted so much energy trying to define art, something that would never occur to me now. Maybe I should have focused more on the guru and Vince's wife. What the hell, why not stretch a little bit. Drum roll please! The guru held meetings every Monday evening at his home. When the disciples arrived they were given snacks and libations before the meetings officially began. No, I can't do it. I don't want to do it. I already see the nauseating picture of a room full of lost souls with some cheap cracker-box rendition of Rasputin lecturing.

When we returned to San Jose, Vince invited me to have dinner at his apartment. He cooked up some spaghetti, and we ate in relative quiet. After dinner Vince made some coffee and we sat out on the front porch.

Vince began to tell me about his guru. For the past ten years he had been seeing a guru. Vince called him the Master. The focus on the teachings seemed to be on transcending the personal ego in order to experience the transcendental ego.

As Vince went on, he became more and more animated. I began to realize Vince's true pursuit was not art but enlightenment. When he spoke of art the flash in the eyes was missing. For Vince, art was something abstract, something other. Where was he investing his identity? It seemed to have been art at first, but now it seemed to be the spiritual quest. But the two were somehow mixed up, pulling at him in two different directions.

My confusion came from the separation of the two. Vince spoke of one or the other but never of the two of them together. I felt as if I were coming to know three different people who occupied the same body: Vince the quester, Vince the artist, and Vince the slave to ideology. This was the Vince who had almost struck through to the true nature of the art object, without being aware or understanding what he had done.

"This guy is really great," he continued. "He is the most complete person I have ever met, and such composure. He seems to have been everything at one time. He was a dancer, a musician, painter, architect, and mystic. He could project energy at people that you could feel, and he could even heal injuries. I sprained my ankle, and one night he healed it by merely rubbing it for a minute."

I lit a cigarette and asked, "What are the classes like? Is he Buddhist, or Hindu, or what?"

"Well, he is not exactly any of those things. It is like a mix of different spiri-

tual disciplines. The main focus is to remove the ego that inhibits higher consciousness. Each week there is a lecture on some aspect of mind or reality, and how to continue the process of developing a higher consciousness. Then there is a question and answer period. The whole thing takes about two to three hours."

"Is it free?"

"No, it costs fifty bucks a week."

"Oh. How many people are there?"

"About ten, usually."

"Let me see, that's five hundred a week for three hours of work. Not bad. I ought to go into the guru business myself. I've probably studied enough philosophy to pull it off." I laughed at my own little joke, but Vince was not so amused.

"It's not much if you think about it." Vince spoke with a strained smile that slid into an intent and serious expression. "I mean, the guy really knows what he is doing. I've made a lot of progress since I've been with him. Just the other day I thought that just for a moment I actually experience the transcendental ego. It's so hard to explain. I felt as if I were suddenly looking over the entire world and was at peace with it. I realized in that moment that it was all illusion. This plane we live on is an illusion, nothing means anything here. I wasn't scared; I thought it was beautiful."

I nodded my head slowly. I wasn't quite sure how to react, so I lit up a cigarette and said, "huh," in order to circumvent a response and in order to belie my agitation. All gurus were suspect in my eyes. But there was no way of avoiding a response. Vince was waiting for some type of response: rejection, confirmation, something.

"I do have some reservations about the guru," Vince continued, "and I don't sit there completely passive at the sessions or in my relationship with him.

Sometimes I really wonder about him..." Vince, I have noticed, hesitates to say anything that smacks of being real. "I was commissioned to do a mural in his house. It was a two foot square mural to enhance the background of a Rouchenberg painting he had up on the wall in his living room. I came in, he told me what he wanted, and I began the job. When I was almost finished, he came in and told me that the sky was not the right shade of blue. The sky took up over half of the painting. I had to do it over three times before he was satisfied, and the whole job wound up taking three weeks and thirty hours of work. It took that long because he wanted me to use a special oil paint that was difficult to work with. It was very slow to dry. Our original agreement was that the job would cost \$150. But since he kept having me redo the job I wanted more for the work. When I was getting close to finishing, I confronted him with this. His wife was there, and before I could get untracked, she began to attack me for being ungrateful. It was an honor to be asked to do the job. She said that I was shallow for making greed a part of the issue. Then, he said that he could have easily done it himself, but he had great respect for me as a painter. So I completed the job without pressing the issue. In a sense they were right, and I thought of the job as a favor I was doing for them."

"Sounds to me like you got used to the max."

"Well, not really. He could have done it himself."

"If he could have done it himself, why didn't he?"

"He's a busy guy. He didn't have time to do it. Anyway, I don't feel too bad about doing it. It was a good experience, and come to think about it, he was right about the color. And after all, he *is* my teacher and I shouldn't be so worried about the financial aspect of the job."

"It's your time."

A year went by. I had seen Vince from time to time at the café. Our rela-

H: I should put out a cigarette before I light another. If I don't, the reader is liable to think that my mouth is filling with cigarettes, and I'm sitting there puffing on three or four at the same time, which, of course, I'm not.

A: But look Henry, what's missing in the text? Doesn't the reader want to know that the sky is blue, the café is grey, and you are smelling the rich aroma of the coffee mixed with the exhaust fumes of cars sputtering by?

H: You're talking about realism. Realism is dead. If you want to re-create the smell, take a cup of coffee to the nearest street corner, hold it just far enough from your nose so it doesn't

tionship did not progress or regress. We spoke when we saw each other—art, philosophy, religion, etc.—but never did anything together otherwise.

After the evening we spent together at his house eating dinner, Vince seemed to feel uncomfortable speaking about the guru.

It was not until the following October that another event took place. Vince was suddenly warming up to me because he needed someone to rent a room in the house he lived in. Somehow he thought I was the ideal candidate. It was again at the café where our conversation took place. We were sitting outside as we usually did having a casual conversation on art when Vince abruptly changed the topic.

“Let’s get to the point,” he said. “I have this feeling that I’m always beating myself up. Can you see in any way how I do this?”

“Let me think a minute,” I lit another cigarette trying to buy myself some time. His was a dangerous question, and the last thing anyone wants from such a question is the truth. But for some perverse reason I decided to be sincere. I thought for a moment and realized that Vince tried too hard to be enlightened. No, it was not that he tried too hard, rather that he was continuously upset with himself for not being enlightened enough.

“Your studies with the Master are real important to you, aren’t they?”

“Well sort of...I mean, yes, they are.” By his reaction I knew I had hit the important spot.

Then, I just came right out with it.

“Well, what I see is that you try too hard to be Enlightened.”

“You think so?”

“Yes.

“But a week ago I got a glimpse of the Collective Ego. I felt it for a moment.”

“Yes, but you shouldn’t get down on yourself for all your other thoughts and

*overpower the smell
of the smog.*

*Anyway, soon they
will have scratch
and sniff computers,
virtual reality. The
written word will
become an obsolete
technology*

*A: Then why do you
write?*

*H: Why did the
chicken cross the
road?*

A: I don't know.

Why?

*H: To get to the
other side!*

feelings.”

“You mean I’m an idealist?”

“Yes, but there is nothing wrong with being an idealist. I think the problem comes when your ego assumes the position of the ego ideal and looks upon the rest of your psyche in judgment. Then you just wind up with a lot of guilt. It’s like that Christian trip, you need to have compassion for yourself before you can have compassion for others.”

“It’s funny you say that because I’ve been going around moping about how terrible it is for the people of the world; full of pity for them that brings me to tears.”

“That’s just projecting.”

“Yeah, it’s my self-pity at work.”

Later that month I truly came to see Vince for the first time. Two events, both taking place at the café, occurred one week after another. In the first event, Vince saw me at the café, got his coffee and joined me. He seemed somewhat shaken, but that was nothing new for Vince. He was often preoccupied with some metaphysical dilemma, or the one metaphysical dilemma, how to achieve the transcendental ego, how to live in the world light.

“What’s up,” I said to him as he sat down.

“I’ve got to tell you something. You might be able to help me out. You know me pretty well, so I feel that I can trust you.”

“Sure. What is it.”

“I went to a lesson last night. The Master called me a facile idiot.”

“The guy called you an idiot?”

“Yeah. He really pushed a button. I thought that I was learning not to be affected by words. But that somehow really got to me. I know he did it for a reason. He never does anything in class without a reason. What do you think,

Henry?”

The sincerity of the question took me back. I visibly hesitated. How could he not know that he had been insulted, put down and humiliated in front of everyone in the room. I could not believe my ears. Suddenly I realized that his guru was right. It was simply a moment of anger and frustration that led the guru to come out and call him an idiot. What was I to say to Vince?

“It sounds like a serious insult. What did you say to him when he called you an idiot?”

“Nothing right away, I was so taken aback. But later I went to talk to him about it.”

“And what happened?”

“Well, when he explained it, it all seemed to make sense. He can make anything make sense. But you see, it is up to me to find out why his words pushed the buttons. Its all internal, it all has to do with me.”

His guru really had him by the balls. If his guru had spat in his face, would Vince have said, “Oh thank you Master, for showing me how deluded I am by thinking of your teaching as an insult. But through your teachings I know that it is only my lower personal ego that thinks this way. I am now fighting for the higher consciousness hoping that it will give me the right understanding, and the next time someone spits in my face I will be unaffected by it and treat it with indifference.”

By this point I had not completely given up on Vince because he was in my mind no more spiritually deluded than a host of other desperate people walking around the planet. There was no real difference between him and the devout Christian fully accepted by society. He, after all, had his own business, a business he had successfully been running for the last fifteen years. It takes some acumen to run a business.

The following week I met him again at the café. As was always the case, we

met by chance. For the first time Vince was addressing a practical problem. I had never heard him speak of anything so mundane as his job, the thing he did to pay the bills. Our conversations were always on some ethereal subject. It was refreshing relief to hear him be so practical.

"I need to figure out how to make more money." Coming from Vince, the sentence sounded like some sweet lyric. "My cash flow is dwindling, and I'm having a hard time coming up with the rent."

"Are you doing any jobs right now?"

"I'm working on a house up in the hills. But after that, I'm not sure. I have nothing lined up."

"Do you advertise?"

"No."

"Do you pass along flyers where you work or put up a sign in front of the house you work at?"

"No."

"Well, you should. It's a cheap and effective way to advertise. When you're working on a house, the neighbors can come around and see the product. Besides, they see a freshly painted house and want the same for themselves. Even if you were just to put up a sign, it would certainly get you more work."

"Your right, but..." Vince squints and shrugs. He is once again reminding me of the crumpled piece of paper. He looks around as if he is trying to avoid the issue.

"Why not," I repeat.

"I can't do any of those things."

"You can't do any of those things?"

"I don't have a license."

"Your kidding."

"No, I'm not. I never bothered to get one. I always had work, so I never

bothered to get one.”

Suddenly it all became clear.

It's not the object itself but the position of the object in regards to other objects that defines it as a work of art. Sequestered in museums and galleries, the object becomes art. When Vince put the boxes on the mantle above the fireplace, he was returning in his mind back to the gallery. It is for that reason his epiphany does not take place; instead, his act was just an absurd act of rebellion.

A: A rebellion or an act of jealousy?

H: Good point, Allison. It could be jealousy as well as rebellion. How could that question be answered?