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The Poem Is a
Substitute for Love

Points of transition. The passage from South Vermont to Loyola began with me feeling angry and isolated—not knowing quite where to turn—and led toward a secure engagement with language and ideas, an engagement I wanted to shape into a career. The passage from Loyola to graduate school was one of great excitement, the major move that, I thought, would begin with deep study and lead progressively outward to work in the world. I had watched from the sidelines people whose lives seemed laden with meaningful pursuits, and I longed for such involvement. If you live long enough on South Vermont, you begin to feel not just excluded but out of the picture entirely. Ralph Ellison captured it perfectly for the black man with the metaphor of invisibility. Jack MacFarland, Frank Carothers, and the others created the conditions for me to use my mind to engage the world. What I wanted so strongly how was a program that would further develop my intellectual tools and equip me to . . . to teach? . . . to use books to change the lives of others? I was unsure about the specifics and naive about the realities of graduate study in America. Though twenty-two and sporting a baccalaureate, I sometimes felt like I was eighteen, fresh off the farm, a Dreiser character, entering an institution so large that Clark Kerr called it a multiversity. This was a vibrant life, filled with challenge. Years later I would work with freshmen who were just like this: wide-eyed, full of desire, simultaneously fretful and joyous. My attitudes about university life were destined to change dramatically.

but I could still understand—remember vividly—this transition to UCLA from places where the clock seemed to tick more slowly.

Like those dazzled freshmen, I was taken, as well, by the surroundings of the campus, all the incidental enjoyments of living in a place away from home. John Connor, my compatriot from South L.A., and I and two of his friends rented a two-bedroom apartment at the Sherry Terrace on Glenrock Avenue. The Sherry Terrace has since been leveled; it was a nondescript old place with eight units, a laundry room, and a pale blue front wall pitted at bumper level with irregular holes. John and I would wend our way into Westwood Village to window-shop or see a movie or buy groceries. At the center of Westwood was Mom's, the summertime college bar. Mom's was on the second floor of a defunct bowling alley, and you entered from a dingy stairwell into a click-clack of sawdusted rooms, each dark and malarial in its sanitation. Across from the bar was the jukebox, glowing blue and orange, and you could lay your arm across its warm dome and watch as the cockroaches outbopped the buzzard and the oriole. Back, then, up Glenrock on beery wings to the Sherry Terrace where, as luck would have it, only two apartments were rented by males. We lived in Apartment Number Eight, upstairs in the rear, so we thought of all sorts of reasons to walk by the other units to get to our door: "Hi, got a schedule of classes? A cup of sugar? Change for the dryer? A blue Corvair? A pocketful of miracles?" We got to know everyone within a few weeks and soon we were finding plates of cookies at our doorstep. Do I have to tell you how wonderful that was?

Come morning and John and I would walk back down Glenrock to Strathmore Drive, slipping into a tan and brightly accoutred flow of young humanity making its way up Circle Drive and onto the campus. UCLA was massive. At Loyola I could throw a baseball from English to Math-Sciences. Now it took ten minutes—at a fast clip—to walk from the Research Library to John's cubicle in Geology. Loyola had one library; UCLA had nineteen: one for physics, one for architecture, one for medicine, one for art. . . . There were vending machines and bike racks and giant drooping eucalyptuses and fern pines everywhere, and traffic crisscrossed the campus. When the hour hit and classes were dismissed, you would have thought you were jostling through the L.A. Airport on a Friday afternoon. We would take Janss Steps

two at a time and ascend to the main quadrangle in front of Josiah Royce Hall, then John would go south and I would go north to English, where a mind-boggling world was opening up to me.

Professor Ralph Cohen spoke with a Brooklyn accent, and when he spoke he did so with the severity of an Old Testament prophet, pounding the podium with his fist, cocking his head and leaning forward to glare at us and level his charge against rival literary theorists. "Aristotle," he said during the first week of class, "is in serious difficulty." Aristotle—in difficulty? That knocked me out. Don Johnson and Father Albertson certainly took issue with the philosophers and critics we were studying, but Professor Cohen seemed to be taking it all personally—he looked like my uncles when someone crossed them. Aristotle and Kant and Eliot pissed Cohen off. How could they think so sloppily? How could they not see the issue as he was now setting it before us? He jerked them back from the grave, woke them up just to slap them around. "Aristotle," he repeated, "is really in trouble."

Charles Gullans always wore some sort of tweed jacket and a huge pair of saddle oxfords. The course was Bibliography, ten weeks devoted to library research methods: the reference books and periodicals, the tricks and techniques of doing literary scholarship. Professor Gullans had a nice if distant way about him, sitting on the edge of the desk, one foot dangling, his forearm resting on his thigh. His voice was sonorous, and long, flourished sentences came from his mouth perfectly formed. He introduced us to *The Keats-Shelley Journal*, the *Nineteenth Century Reader's Guide*, *The International Index*, *Victorian Studies*, *Literature of the Renaissance*, *The Index of Middle English Verse*, and books whose titles I couldn't pronounce, much less read: the *Bibliographie de la littérature française du moyen-âge à nos jours*, and the *Bibliographie der Deutschen Zeitschriften-Literatur*. He discussed at length the procedures of advanced research: tales of meticulous quests for elusive sources. He described the precursors of the modern book—folios, quartos, and octavos—and summarized for us several famous manuscript studies. He taught us the reference librarian's terms of art. All this involved a number of small assignments and led to our major project: the compiling of an original bibliography on some literary figure. An original bibliography. That would mean finding, verifying, and recording hundreds and hundreds of

books and articles and books and articles about the books and articles. I would be concentrating, as I never had before, on the very tools and texts of the scholarly enterprise.

During that first year, I took courses in bibliographic methods, the Romantic poets, American literature to the twentieth century, modern American literature, literary criticism, the Renaissance, and a seminar on Herman Melville. I also took a course to prepare me for one of the language requirements; we would have to know two, and I chose French as my first. The reading list for Modern American Literature had 164 items on it, and 33 were required for the ten-week course: three novels or plays or collections of poems or critical studies per week. The Renaissance list had 177 items on it, and 53 were required. This was deep reading at full tilt, a sprint with lead survival gear strapped to your back. It made sense to me when I later found out that, in the academy, a résumé was called a curriculum vita, or a biobibliography. Nobody made any bones about the fact that your biography, your vita, your life became the record of all you had to say about the particular booklists you had made your own.

My pre-twentieth-century American literature course covered the major works by the major figures, but it also surveyed a long list of writers wrapped in the shroud of history: Michael Wigglesworth, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Royall Tyler, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet, Lafcadio Hearn. We looked at the minor works of the major authors as well: I discovered Melville's novel of the South Pacific, *Omoo*; his long, strange, rambling poem, *Clarel*; and his neglected stories, "Cock-a-Doodle-Do," "The Tartarus of Maids," and "Jimmy Rose" ("God guard us all—poor Jimmy Rose!"). But it wasn't just a time to accumulate facts, though we certainly did that. It was also a time for widening the frame of reference within which to consider a work of art. My notebook for Modern American Literature, for example, had twenty dense pages on Theodore Dreiser that included information about his life and the historical context in which he wrote, dates of publication and discussions of the successive drafts of several of his novels, and surveys of the major critical works on him. We were being shown how to consider a novel or poem—how it's written, what it says, how it was received—in terms of the social and historical context out of which it came.

We also learned to refocus the lens to the micro level, looking

very closely at a single work, poetry especially. I had learned to read poems carefully from Frank Carothers and Father Albertson. But this was different—I almost said more exacting, though that's not quite it. It was different because the unstated agenda was that we should come up with an original interpretation, argue that what seems fairly simple is really complex, that traditional readings miss the point, that yet another reading is possible. We would examine a poem, then, with great care and cleverness—scrutinizing sentence patterns, meter, images, and alternate meanings of words to support our argument. One of my papers from this time was a ten-pager on the way the subordination of clauses in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" supports and illustrates the epistemology he proposes in *A Defense of Poetry*. This was hardball.

In some ways, I was prepared. I had received good training at Loyola in the areas I cared about: the twentieth-century American novel, modern poetry, and Shakespeare. And I had learned to read closely. But there were whole stretches of English literary history that I knew little about: eighteenth-century poetry, Victorian prose, Chaucer, Milton, the seventeenth century. Most of my fellow graduate students could read another language; I could not. My writing, by now, was pretty good, but it contained the telltale signs of its origins: sociolinguistic gaffes (using *different* rather than *different from*, *it* for *lay*, *drug* for *dragged*) and run-of-the-mill misspellings (*Isreal*, *aquaint*, *prestiege*) as well as confusions that elicited from my professors witty jabs in the margins: writing emerging for immersing or chaplin for chaplain—a blunder that, in this context, was like having your fly open at a cottillion. I started keeping vocabulary lists, for I daily heard and read words that were foreign to me: *beguile*, *nib*, *dapple*, *reify*, *kismet*, *culpable*, *damask*, *crimp*, *evanescent*, *denizen*, *piquant*, *lassitude*, *skein*, *diffident*.

Most of the first-year graduate students were friendly—the pressure of the program brought us together in manic goodwill—but what soon emerged among them, and certainly was present in older students, was a fierce competitiveness. It became clear to me that the production of knowledge in graduate programs like this was more than a calling, it was a contentious enterprise. It was in this arena that I was most ill equipped. My father was a quiet man laid low by illness, and my mother was silenced by

hard work. And for all their classroom challenges, Jack MacFarland and Frank Carothers and the rest didn't really encourage competition. My ill-fated debate with Brian Kelly—in Mr. Johnson's General Ethics course—was my one previous encounter with high-powered disputation, and I got hammered. Around my third month at UCLA, I had to prepare a discussion of a short poem for Twentieth-Century American Literature. I chose one by Robert Frost. My presentation went smoothly, and it was followed by a brief period for questions. A fellow in the back, bespectacled and severe, said it was clear that I was misreading the last four lines and forcefully wondered if I had considered the interpretation he then put forth. I felt that old bite in my chest. Brian Kelly. I repeated a few things I had said earlier but was going blank fast. Fortunately, the professor was annoyed and slipped in and nailed the guy. I wondered for weeks if my explanation was adequate or an embarrassment. Did I need protection, or was the professor miffed for his own reasons? Whatever the case, it didn't take much for the podium to crack and send all my insecurities flooding back over me.

I would get up early and read at the kitchen table in our apartment and then join up with friends and walk to class. After class I would go to the library, supping on Hormel chili and candy bars and Cokes and corn chips from the vending machines in nearby Bunch Hall. The library lights would flick on and off at a quarter to ten, and I would pack up my books and sidle through turnstiles out into the night air stiff and logy—my cortex bloated with print—and walk fast across the campus and back to the comforts of Sherry Terrace. One of my roommates was an Iowa farm boy named Norm who kept things tidy and could cook "American style." I would round the corner of Glenrock and run up the stairs at Sherry Terrace to hear someone warbling that love disappears overnight and inhale the vapors of a ham or a meat loaf or a tray of cookies. I still have a note from Norm that says: "Mike, there's two pork chops in the oven."

And so it went. A great deal of isolated time in the library, some postadolescent joy at Mom's, and some wonderful conversations with my neighbors. I would lean against the banister in the hallway or sit on the front steps talking to them: a wealthy dancer from New York, a graphics designer who taught me something about Judaism, an apartmentful of Chicanos who were the pride

of their bordertown high school and who later became my roommates, a black kid who slighted every course but chemistry, a sweet and caring girl named Maria, a very bright med-student named Hendrickson who would go on to be a professor at Stanford, and a towheaded Motown enthusiast who—even in notes to the mailman—called himself Capt. Soul. It's no surprise that the faces and the hallways and all the emotional bric-a-brac from that apartment building have developed a musical quality in my memory—a joyous synesthesia in which touch and sound play off each other like a light and airy melody:

I was on a fellowship, but I had to do something for spending money. I started working for the guy who managed our building and a number of the other buildings around us. I kept the grounds and did minor repairs: clogged drains, cracked windows, toilets that kept running, that sort of thing. Most of the work was between-quarter preparation of apartments as one stream of students rushed out and another rushed in: scrubbing resolute stains off toilets and sinks and floors, patching holes left by pictures and shelves, slapping the landlord's cheap white paint on the walls.

As I was stacking mattresses or cleaning out closets or yanking a couch out to the middle of the floor, I would find a sock or an earring or a page from a diary or a scarf with flowers and crescent moons. Some of this was junk—left for someone else to throw away—but some had been lost, hidden in the crevices that trap the bits and pieces of our affairs. I'd lean the broom against the wall and hold them—like a nightclub seer divining a life from car keys—and wonder about the owner. Who passed through here? What fragment of life did a diary page reveal? ". . . we drove straight through to S.F. and Jim kept wanting to stop and I kept saying no, no, no Sweetie, I wanna get to the Fillmore. And we did." It is impossible to determine exactly how our abilities develop, but I suspect that my desire to write poetry shaped itself in these apartments. The quiet, empty rooms and the castaway pieces of other people's lives were soon evoking other rooms in earlier houses, feelings and events that somehow blended with the music that had caught my ear since childhood.

When I was introduced to poetry by Jack MacFarland and Dr. Carothers, I was drawn to T. S. Eliot's sharp images, the lyrical

play in e. e. cummings ("who knows if the moon's / a balloon coming out of a keen city / in the sky . . ."), and the tight shapes of William Carlos Williams:

the back wings
of the
hospital where
nothing
will grow lie
cinders
in which shine
the broken
pieces of a green
bottle

But way before the printed poem was the radio dial, the only lyrical index I had on South Vermont. The lamentations of Hank Williams and Kitty Wells, the phrasing of the blues, the rhymes and rhythms and sent-from-God saxophone breaks of rock 'n' roll—this was the score on which T. S. Eliot and Dr. Williams played: honky-tonk angels and hot-rod Fords and trucks on a lost highway; rivers-of whiskey and ducks that would dive to the bottom and never, never, ever come up; lips as sweet as "petals falling apart"; a hotel on Lonely Street where "the desk clerk's dressed in black"; a beleaguered soul who feels like "a one-eyed cat peeping in the seafood store." This, I think, is where it started. And a room, quiet but for the running water, and a lost object wedged between the cushions of a couch would shuttle me back inside some ruminative core. I would hold the earring or the scarf or the page of someone's diary, and familiar longings and distant lyrics and musical cadences would reify into an image at the center of a poem.

I did very well that first year. I got one B; the rest were A's, and I got to know several professors. Leon Howard was an old-style Southern academician—simultaneously homey and sophisticated—who had written a number of books and articles, a graceful biography of Herman Melville among them. Frank Lentriccia was brand-new, a very young Ph.D. who would go on to become a major literary theorist, and he taught me some valuable things about close, close reading. Professor Gullans thought that the

bibliography I did for his class could be made publishable, and that I should continue working on it. And Howard and Lentriccia told me that a paper I had written on Melville's story "Bartleby the Scrivener" was just about ready for print. The fact that I didn't follow up on their suggestions, I realize now, was a sign that something was wrong. At first, the disillusionment was probably at trace level: a daydream during a lecture, a fleeting sadness in the library. But as the year slipped along toward summer, other things happened that were harder to ignore.

One of the books I had to read for Twentieth-Century American Literature was Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, a series of sketches about dreamy and dislocated people in a small Midwestern town. I thought the stories were wonderful; they reminded me of some of the men I had known on South Vermont. I went to see the professor to talk about the stories. He was nice but reserved and told me a little bit about a critical study of Anderson I should read. He also recommended one of Anderson's novels, *Poor White*. He told me that he thought Anderson's sentimentality limited him, and he wondered aloud if there might be a dissertation topic for me in some of the novels that the critics had neglected.

After my first quarter, I was invited to see the chairman of the department. He explained that he liked to keep tabs on the department's fellowship students, and he wanted to see how I was doing. I had started making my first real passes at writing poetry and had simultaneously been studying modern American poetry. I told him that I thought my own writing was making me understand something that I hadn't quite understood before about the poems I was studying in class. He smiled and continued, explaining about the departmental exams and what courses I should be taking to prepare myself for them. He was cordial and helpful, but by not addressing it, he made clear to me the department's attitude toward my own direct involvement with the writing of poetry versus the analysis of it.

Two of the graduate students I made friends with were Rich McBriar and Steve Drinkard. McBriar was corduroy and shuffly and balding; Drinkard was curly and given to sprees of wiry enthusiasm. Language washed over them. McBriar never met a poem he didn't like; he always found something—an image, a turn of phrase—to excite him. We'd be reading, say, the colonial

American religious poet Edward Taylor, and I'd be grumbling about the arcania and the piety. McBriar would lightly touch my shoulder and say: "Yeah, I know. But look at these two lines here: '... dye the same in heavenly colors choice, / All pink with vanisht flowers of paradise.' Now, that's nice, isn't it?" By the third quarter, both McBriar and Drinkard were making plans to leave the program. "It's deadly, man," McBriar said, hunched over a beer at Mom's. "They could give a shit if you like this stuff. They could GIVE A SHIT."

When you walked out of the Research Library at closing time, you were hit with the fragrance of jasmine and the light greens and dark yellows of shrubs and ferns, wet from the sprinklers, bright from ground-level spotlights. Angle right and across the broad patio that led from the library and you would see jacarandas heavy with purple flowers rising above the benches where students ate their lunches. You would also pass the English Building. I passed it a hundred times and started to notice that some of the lights were on. The illuminated panes were sharp among the jacarandas. One of the poems I read that year was Wallace Stevens's "Arrival at the Waldorf." Stevens was consumed by the tension between the vital but uncontrollable natural world versus the crafted and orderly but artificial world of art. And this poem was quintessentially Stevens; he represented the wildness of nature with lush Guatemalan jungles and opposed them dynamically to the architecture of New York's Waldorf Hotel. My professors spent endless hours with their books. Some were in their offices as I was going home, reading *Macbeth* or *Moby Dick* again, but more often a book you would find only in the card catalog of a research library. They pursued the little-known fact, the lost letter, the lucky fissure in language that invites one more special reading. It was not uncommon for me to spend eight hours a day in the library—and for a while that was fine, for I was learning so much—but when I began to think of a career of those eight-hour days, to think of the unending drive to find one more piece of intellectual property, something went cold within me.

"The wild poem is a substitute / for the woman one loves or ought to love," says Stevens. And the poem's suitors—or, more exactly, the suitors to the anthology in which the poem rests amid its critical gloss—will spend decades at her hem, and she will take from them and take from them, and though she promises much,

she is, contra Stevens, not particularly wild. The scholar will write and write and only a few will know, for the world of this romance is very narrow, solipsistic. It is focused back forever on itself, an endless regress, like an Escher print, of readings and readings about readings read by a few suitors in a few other private rooms behind purple jacarandas. I began to feel more and more a desire to open the door, to go out and read the world: "alien, point-blank, green and actual."

I didn't know what to do. I talked with Leon Howard about the possibility of stopping at the master's-degree level and teaching in a junior college. He was understanding in his gentlemanly way, and he said he'd be glad to write me a letter of recommendation. But, all in all, he thought I was making a mistake. I drove out to see Dr. Carothers. He recognized the disillusionment but assured me it would pass. "It's just that you've got such a good fellowship, Mike. Please think it over." "I have been, really, and I'm stuck," I said. "I don't know what the hell to do." There was more I should have told him, but I didn't know how to go about it. It seemed so strange and personal. The tight partitioning of the library carrels, the vacant hallways of the English Department, the solitary meals—leaning against a vending machine rehearsing to myself the names of the Italian Neoplatonists or Van Wyck Brooks's line of argument in *The Ordeal of Mark Twain*: All this was becoming a variant of hiding away in a house-trailer on South Vermont, reaching into a dusty breach of "The Drunken Boat" to underline the isolated cries of Arthur Rimbaud.

I began wondering about psychology. Three years before, Mr. Johnson had introduced me to Maslow's *Toward a Psychology of Being*, and since that time psychology had tugged on my thoughts. One of the things that drew me to Maslow was his ability to marshal evidence from fields as diverse as anthropology, cybernetics, theology, and biology to support his optimistic vision. Would coursework in psychology enable me also to turn scholarship out onto human affairs? I thought about this through spring and finally decided that I had to take a chance, that I had to find out. I could take a leave of absence from graduate study for one year and still have my fellowship held for me. I could pick up where I had left off. How else would I know? So I signed up for courses in the Psychology Department. My only previous

coursework was a flimsy introduction during my first year at Loyola, so I had to take a series of upper-division surveys before I could apply for graduate study. Over the course of a year, I took Abnormal Psychology, Learning, Developmental Psychology, Perception, and Social Psychology. I also took a seminar on theories of alienation in the Sociology Department. It felt a little strange to be an undergraduate again, sitting in large lecture halls, sunk down deep in the seat. But it wasn't the end of the world. And it certainly was less pressured than graduate study in English.

My hope was that these courses would give me access to the work that Maslow had opened up to me: the study of human growth; the fusion of religion, psychology, and philosophy into a science of values; the contemplation "of the basic human predicament, that we are simultaneously worms and gods." What I got instead was a bit more of the worm's-eye view. Learning took me on a strange tour through behaviorism: cats in puzzle boxes, rats in complex mazes, John Watson scaring the bejesus out of Baby Albert with white rats and loud noises, Clark Hull creating theories of human behavior with the language of classical mechanics. Social Psychology was built on studies of voter behavior, social power, and attitude change. Abnormal Psychology looked systematically at mental illness and offered a set of classification schemes and a variety of psychotherapies for deviant behavior. Perception was pretty much neurophysiology: sensory inhibition, Mach band phenomena, iconic storage, and the like. I was being introduced to the world of academic social science, and it was not what I had expected.

I would read my textbooks and then, on my own, hunt down books that were more directly concerned with the study of health and human possibility. I read all of Maslow. I found other theoretical psychologists and psychotherapists who were also trying to advance an affirmative study of mind: Carl Rogers's *On Becoming a Person*, Rollo May's *Existential Psychology*, Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. And they, in turn, led me to thinkers in other fields. A Maslow footnote sent me to the library to browse through books on the creative processes of mathematicians and scientists. Another reference had me reading Kurt Goldstein's studies of the cognitive consequences of brain injury. One of my

great finds was the Jewish theologian Martin Buber, who seemed to be speaking right to me in his epigrammatic prose:

... if there were a devil it would not be one who decided against God, but one who, in eternity, came to no decision.

He who truly goes out to meet the world goes out also to God.

All this was going on in the late sixties, so, of course, I dabbled as well in the Westernized Zen of Alan Watts, heard Timothy Leary's psychedelic prayers, read, openmouthed, Carlos Castaneda's apprenticeship to a Yaqui medicine man, put my fingers in the crack between worlds. There were fatuous moments. I borrowed some money, went to Esalen, a "growth center," and heard people seduce each other with breathy catchphrases; in a mineral pool under a Big Sur sky, I waded gingerly out of the clutches of a hairy psychiatrist from Oregon. I learned something about the difference between a serious and quiet pursuit and a popular movement. Humanistic psychology—and particularly the so-called human potential movement that mutated from it—has come under a good deal of legitimate criticism, and I have to agree, but with a reservation. For though I too would eventually tire of the superficial offshoots, my reading of Maslow and Rogers and the others enabled me to counter the profound environmental messages I had received on South Vermont. I was surrounding myself with a discourse of possibility rather than succumbing to images of defeat.

It was a year of casting about. And, despite my grumbling, hindsight allows me to add that Learning and Social Psychology and the rest of it turned out to be beneficial in unexpected ways. In the mid-1960s, many academic psychologists were doing their work with the aid of experimental designs: ways to test hypotheses that were adopted from the sciences, agronomy particularly. In the most typical design, the experimenter separates a group of subjects into two or more groups. One group is exposed to some sort of treatment (ranging from electric shock to a teaching method) that is withheld from the other, control, group. A statistical test is then run to determine what the odds are that the results obtained came about because of the treatment. And it is cru-

cial to identify and account for all other possible causes of the results, for if the experimenter doesn't, another researcher will.

My reading in humanistic psychology was sensitizing me to the problems with such a mechanical approach to human thought and feeling, but I developed some valuable habits of mind by reading about these attempts to separate out aspects of human behavior and control them experimentally. Too much of literary study involves the unique reading, the clever association, the felicitous turn of phrase, the witty leap from one premise to another. Certainly experimental psychologists covet ingenuity as well, but training forces them to achieve it within a system that makes them slog along, ticking off each variable, each possible explanation for a result. It was good tonic for me to watch this. I learned to be cautious and methodical. And I began to appreciate the remarkable complexity of human action and the difficulty of attributing causality to any one condition or event. This would prove to be most valuable when I later entered the world of education. As with so many reductive pursuits, the academic psychology I studied taught me a great deal by what it could not do.

There is another element to my education during these years. I received a steady stream of letters from a half dozen or so people I had gotten close to at Loyola and met on arriving in Westwood: Mike Casey, my mentor on Loyola's literary magazine; Art Mitz, whom I'd known since high school; Pete Boland and Jack Hailey and Jeff Thornton, three friends from Loyola's brain trust; and Linda Peinhardt, a long-legged, athletic beauty who lived down the street on Glenrock Avenue. They were curious and disquieted, and they traveled across the country and through Europe and North Africa, alone or with lovers, consumed with a desire to study under a famous teacher, or to live in an exotic place, or simply, in Linda's words, "to be gone." They were young and, despite the postures of cynicism they sometimes adopted, they were painfully idealistic. When I met these people, I was the least adept of the lot. But we were drawn to each other—I had a South L.A. rambunctiousness, I suppose, and, to be sure, a passion for this mental thing—and I am blessed that we connected, for I learned a great deal from them, in person and in letters. They conducted a postgraduate correspondence school in politics, social theory, and the literature that was just then hitting the book-

racks. And they helped me with my writing. The letters, I realize now, were each a looking-glass, and the image they reflected confirmed my membership in an intellectual world.—Here's Casey, writing in a blue aerogram that tells me, in Gaelic, how to peel it apart: "Rose, baby, I gave you your start, so I expect you to float a few bucks my way when you get your first Guggenheim." It would be a long time before I knew what a Guggenheim was, but it didn't matter, for I caught in Casey's minor jocularity a major declaration of faith.

The letters contained book-hints. Linda telling me to go out and buy what I could find of the black experimental novelist, Ishmael Reed. Art Mitz, studying intellectual history at Stanford while driving a cab in Oakland, "revising our literary agenda: scratch *The Magus*, add Borges." (Sending me, as well, a Xerox of the cover of Richard Brautigan's *Trout Fishing in America*.) Pete Boland clipping to his letter a copy of a poem by Don L. Lee: "ultra cool was bop-cool / ice-box cool so cool. . . ." Jeff Thornton writing from a fourteenth-century abbey to tell me about William Burroughs's *The Soft Machine*. And Jack Hailey taking a year abroad at the Centre for Cultural Studies at Birmingham, writing me aerograms crammed with type and crabbed handwriting along all four margins. He told me he was reading Wittgenstein, Dürkheim, and Levi-Strauss, names I hadn't heard of but that I suddenly started to see, picking up *Philosophical Investigations* or *The Savage Mind* in the old College Book Company on Westwood Boulevard, leaning against a rack and losing myself in print, the smell of pine and new books in the air.

By now I was typing up the poems I had been writing over the past year or two and slipping a few into my letters. The poems had an interesting moment here and there: Jesus buying a six-pack, and a line like "your hands succumb to velvet," and a few tangible objects: toothbrushes and potatoes, a rearview mirror and a jade earring. But essentially these were verse melodramas about love and loneliness—sappy and imagistic, Tammy Wynette singing haiku. My epistolary friends became my first real audience, and through their encouragement and their criticism, they also became my first editors. "Get a jolt into the rhythm here if you can," writes Jack Hailey alongside a flat line. "Don't preach; you've got the answer before the poem begins," he scribbles on the bottom of another poem. Sometimes what I did worked for

him: "This image is nice here." "I like this pun." "These lines have a real good rhythm to them." "Write more poems like this one." His criticism wasn't easy to swallow, and there were times when I jammed his letter back in its envelope and put it out of sight in a desk drawer. But his comments were precise, and I soon had to admit, they were accurate. He was treating me like a serious writer. I started incorporating his suggestions into my poems. Art Mitz relied on a different tactic. He'd single out the poem that showed the most promise and sidestep the rest:

Michael, I really liked the one about the Mexican girl. It made me jealous with its wit and irony. . . . I think your work will get overripe unless more poems like this one begin to emerge.

I would then look closely at Art's choice and compare it with the others I sent him. And gradually the goo started to drain out of my poetry.

And when the book lists and the literary critiques and the wordplay receded, the heart emerged. Linda writes from North Carolina, describing an old farmhouse she and her boyfriend are refurbishing: a garden, a potbellied stove, a sunporch. She is putting up peaches for the winter and fighting that ache to be gone again. Jack Hailey's letter comes from England. He has refused induction into the army. He is sitting at his desk trying to sound lighthearted, though he is "surrounded by stacks of letters to draft boards, lawyers, and General Hershey." Casey describes peace marches in Paris and Amsterdam. Boland details a Black Panther rally in Ann Arbor. And then a letter comes describing the painful breaks with family that all this yielded: "You don't know how much you've disappointed me," a father yells at his son. "I could never bring you around my friends." Finally, the message was loneliness. "Rose, you old metaphor you," writes Jack Hailey, inquiring about his true love here in the states, "call up Sally and see how she is, would you? . . . Cheer her up. And tell her this—tell her that I'm a good guy, and that I think about her all the time. . . ."

I filled in the remaining blanks on my final examination for Perception, gathered up my books and pencils, and left the lecture hall. I was coming to realize over the last few months that I had

been skirting around a harsh truth: Though my introduction to social science was not without its moments, graduate work in academic psychology wouldn't satisfy whatever vague thing it was that was fluttering within me. It would be a specialized and distant pursuit, no different, really, from studying the collected letters of a not-so-famous American author.

I walked out of Franz Hall and over to the Graduate Division, where I would sign the forms to resign from my fellowship and exit me from UCLA. There was a light drizzle in the works and the clouds were full, light and dark masses shifting in the late morning sky. I had read a newspaper article on the National Teacher Corps and had sent away for information. The Teacher Corps, a Great Society program, placed teacher interns in poverty-area schools. Maybe that would be the way to go. I turned into the administration building and down the main hallway to the Graduate Division. It didn't take long to complete the forms—they were brief, and the questions were simple. Ten minutes, maybe. I thanked the clerk and started home, down Janss Steps and toward the student apartments of Westwood.

The winds were starting up and splattering rain across the sidewalk. I walked along Strathmore and up Glenrock as though I were lost in thought, though nothing particular was at the center of concentration. The trees were shaking in the wind. By the time I reached the steps of Sherry Terrace, I was crying and the rain was falling hard. I couldn't make sense of this. I seemed distant to myself. It was midday and no one was around; I was the only one in the building. I walked up the stairs to my apartment, sobbing now and not believing it. A fellowship. A goddamned fellowship is doing this to me. Big deal. I unlocked the door and went in and lay face down on the bed. The rain was streaming off the roof drain and down along the window. I could see my father. His face was quiet, comatose, his cheeks soft and stubbled. His lips were open slightly. Dad? I slid my arms under his arms—he was hot and damp—and tried to sit him up in bed. Dad, sit up. Please. "Come on, Dad," I heard myself cry. "God damn it, Dad. Dad. Dad. Oh, Dad, Dad, I'm so sorry."