

Intro to Pynecker's
collection "Slow Learner"

AS NEARLY as I can remember, these stories were written between 1958 and 1964. Four of them I wrote when I was in college – the fifth, “The Secret Integration” (1964), is more of a journeyman than an apprentice effort. You may already know what a blow to the ego it can be to have to read over anything you wrote 20 years ago, even cancelled checks. My first reaction, rereading these stories, was *oh my God*, accompanied by physical symptoms we shouldn’t dwell upon. My second thought was about some kind of a wall-to-wall rewrite. These two impulses have given way to one of those episodes of middle-aged tranquility, in which I now pretend to have reached a level of clarity about the young writer I was back then. I mean I can’t very well just 86 this guy from my life. On the other hand, if through some as yet undeveloped technology I were to run into him today, how comfortable would I feel about lending him money, or for that matter even stepping down the street to have a beer and talk over old times?

It is only fair to warn even the most kindly disposed of readers that there are some mighty tiresome passages here, juvenile and delinquent too. At the same time, my best hope is that, pretentious, goofy and ill-considered as they get now and then, these stories will still be of use with all their flaws intact, as illustrative of typical problems in entry-level fiction, and cautionary about some practices which younger writers might prefer to avoid.

"The Small Rain" was my first published story. A friend who'd been away in the army the same two years I'd been in the navy supplied the details. The hurricane really happened, and my friend's Signal Corps detachment had the mission described in the story. Most of what I dislike about my writing is present here in embryo, as well as in more advanced forms. I failed to recognize, just for openers, that the main character's problem was real and interesting enough to generate a story on its own. Apparently I felt I had to put on a whole extra overlay of rain images and references to "The Waste Land" and *A Farewell to Arms*. I was operating on the motto "Make it literary," a piece of bad advice I made up all by myself and then took.

Equally embarrassing is the case of Bad Ear to be found marring much of the dialogue, especially toward the end. My sense of regional accents in those days was primitive at best. I had noticed how in the military voices got homogenized into one basic American country voice. Italian street kids from New York started to sound like down-home folks after a while, sailors from Georgia came back off leave complaining that nobody could understand them because they talked like Yankees. Being from the North, what I was hearing as a "southern accent" was really this uniform service accent, and not much else.

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I imagined I had heard *oo for oop* in civilian voices around Tidewater Virginia, but didn't know that in different areas of this real or civilian South, even in different parts of Virginia, people spoke in a wide number of quite different accents. It is an error also noticeable in movies of the time. My specific problem in the barroom scene is not only that I have a Louisiana girl talking in Tidewater diphthongs imperfectly heard to begin with, but worse, that I insist on making it an element of plot — it makes a difference to Levine, and therefore to what happens in the story. My mistake being to try to show off my ear before I had one.

At the heart of the story, most crucial and worrisome, is the defective way in which my narrator, almost but not quite me, deals with the subject of death. When we speak of "seriousness" in fiction ultimately we are talking about an attitude toward death — how characters may act in its presence, for example, or how they handle it when it isn't so immediate. Everybody knows this, but the subject is hardly ever brought up with younger writers, possibly because given to anyone at the apprentice age, such advice is widely felt to be effort wasted. (I suspect one of the reasons that fantasy and science fiction appeal so much to younger readers is that, when the space and time have been altered to allow characters to travel easily anywhere through the continuum and thus escape physical dangers and timepiece inevitabilities, mortality is so seldom an issue.)

In "The Small Rain" characters are found dealing with death in pre-adult ways. They evade: they sleep late, they seek euphemisms. When they do mention death they try to make with the jokes. Worst of all, they hook it up with sex. You'll notice that toward the end of the story, some kind of sexual encounter appears to take place, though

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you'd never know it from the text. The language suddenly gets too fancy to read. Maybe this wasn't only my own adolescent nervousness about sex. I think, looking back, that there might have been a general nervousness in the whole college-age subculture. A tendency to self-censorship. It was also the era of *Howl*, *Lolita*, *Tropic of Cancer*, and all the excesses of law enforcement that such works provoked. Even the American soft-core pornography available in those days went to absurdly symbolic lengths to avoid describing sex. Today this all seems a dead issue, but back then it was a felt constraint on folks's writing.

What I find interesting about the story now is not so much the quaintness and puerility of attitude as the class angle. Whatever else the peacetime service is good for, it can provide an excellent introduction to the structure of society at large. It becomes evident even to a young mind that often unacknowledged divisions in civilian life find clear and immediate expression in the military distinction between "officers" and "men." One makes the amazing discovery that grown adults walking around with college educations, wearing khaki and brass and charged with heavy-duty responsibilities, can in fact be idiots. And that working-class white hats, while in theory capable of idiocy, are much more apt to display competence, courage, humanity, wisdom, and other virtues associated, by the educated classes, with themselves. Although cast in literary terms, Lardass Levine's conflict in this story is about where to put his loyalties. Being an unpolitical '50's student, I was unaware of this at the time—but in hindsight I think I was working out of a dilemma that most of us writing then had, in some way, to deal with.

At the simplest level, it had to do with language. We were encouraged from many directions—Kerouac

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and the Beat writers, the diction of Saul Bellow in *The Adventures of Augie March*, emerging voices like those of Herbert Gold and Philip Roth—to see how at least two very distinct kinds of English could be allowed in fiction to coexist. Allowed! It was actually OK to write like this! Who knew? The effect was exciting, liberating, strongly positive. It was not a case of either/or, but an expansion of possibilities. I don't think we were consciously groping after any synthesis, although perhaps we should have been. The success of the "new left" later in the '60's was to be limited by the failure of college kids and blue-collar workers to get together politically. One reason was the presence of real, invisible class force fields in the way of communication between the two groups.

The conflict in those days was, like most everything else, muted. In its literary version it shaped up as traditional vs. Beat fiction. Although far away, one of the theatres of action we kept hearing about was at the University of Chicago. There was a "Chicago School" of literary criticism, for example, which had a lot of people's attention and respect. At the same time, there had been a shakeup at the *Chicago Review* which resulted in the Beat-oriented *Big Table* magazine. "What happened at Chicago?" became shorthand for some unimaginable subversive threat. There were many other such disputes. Against the undeniable power of tradition, we were attracted by such centrifugal lures as Norman Mailer's essay "The White Negro," the wide availability of recorded jazz, and a book I still believe is one of the great American novels, *On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac.

A collateral effect, for me anyway, was that of Helen Waddell's *The Wandering Scholars*, reprinted in the early '50's, an account of the young poets of the Middle Ages

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who left the monasteries in large numbers and took to the roads of Europe, celebrating in song the wider range of life to be found outside their academic walls. Given the university environment of the time, the parallels weren't hard to see. Not that college life was dull, exactly, but thanks to all these alternative lowlife data that kept filtering insidiously through the ivy, we had begun to get a sense of that other world humming along out there. Some of us couldn't resist the temptation to go out and see what was happening. Enough of us then came back inside with firsthand news to encourage others to try it too — a preview of the mass college dropouts of the '60's.

I enjoyed only a glancing acquaintance with the Beat movement. Like others, I spent a lot of time in jazz clubs, nursing the two-beer minimum. I put on hornrimmed sunglasses at night. I went to parties in lofts where girls wore strange attire. I was hugely tickled by all forms of marijuana humor, though the talk back then was in inverse relation to the availability of that useful substance. In 1956, in Norfolk, Virginia, I had wandered into a bookstore and discovered issue one of the *Evergreen Review*, then an early forum for Beat sensibility. It was an eye-opener. I was in the navy at the time, but I already knew people who would sit in circles on the deck and sing perfectly, in parts, all those early rock'n'roll songs, who played bongos and saxophones, who had felt honest grief when Bird and later Clifford Brown died. By the time I got back to college, I found academic people deeply alarmed over the cover of the *Evergreen Review* then current, not to mention what was inside. It looked as if the attitude of some literary folks toward the Beat generation was the same as that of certain officers on my ship toward Elvis Presley. They used to approach

those among ship's company who seemed likely sources — combed their hair like Elvis, for example. "What's his message?" they'd interrogate anxiously. "What does he want?"

We were at a transition point, a strange post-Beat passage of cultural time, with our loyalties divided. As bop and rock'n'roll were to swing music and postwar pop, so was this new writing to the more established modernist tradition we were being exposed to then in college. Unfortunately there were no more primary choices for us to make. We were onlookers: the parade had gone by and we were already getting everything secondhand, consumers of what the media of the time were supplying us. This didn't prevent us from adopting Beat postures and props, and eventually as post-Beats coming to see deeper into what, after all, was a sane and decent affirmation of what we all want to believe about American values. When the hippie resurgence came along ten years later, there was, for a while anyway, a sense of nostalgia and vindication. Beat prophets were resurrected, people started playing alto sax riffs on electric guitars, the wisdom of the East came back in fashion. It was the same, only different.

On the negative side, however, both forms of the movement placed too much emphasis on youth, including the eternal variety. Youth of course was wasted on me at the time, but I bring up the puerility angle again because, along with imperfectly developed attitudes about sex and death, we may also note how easily some of my adolescent values were able to creep in and wreck an otherwise sympathetic character. Such is the unhappy case with Dennis Flange, in "Low-lands." In a way this is more of a character sketch than a story. Old Dennis doesn't "grow" much in the course of it. He remains

static, his fantasies become embarrassingly vivid, that's about all that happens. A brightening of focus maybe, but no problem resolution and so not much movement or life.

It is no secret nowadays, particularly to women, that many American males, even those of middle-aged appearance, wearing suits and holding down jobs, are in fact, incredible as it sounds, still small boys inside. Flange is this type of a character, although when I wrote this story I thought he was pretty cool. He wants children — why isn't made clear — but not at the price of developing any real life shared with an adult woman. His solution to this is Nerissa, a woman with the size and demeanor of a child. I can't remember for sure, but it looks like I wanted some ambiguity here about whether or not she was only a creature of his fantasies. It would be easy to say that Dennis's problem was my problem, and that I was putting it off on him. Whatever's fair — but the problem *could* have been more general. At that time I had no direct experience with either marriage or parenting, and maybe I was picking up on male attitudes that were then in the air — more documentably, inside the pages of men's magazines, *Playboy* in particular. I don't think this magazine was the projection, exclusively, of its publisher's private values: if American men had not widely shared such values, *Playboy* would have quickly failed and faded from the scene.

Oddly enough, I had not intended this to be Dennis's story at all — he was supposed to have been a straight man for Pig Bodine. The counterpart in real life to this unwholesome bluejacket was actually my starting point. I had heard the honeymoon story when I was in the navy, from a gunner's mate on my ship. We were out on shore patrol duty in Portsmouth, Virginia. Our beat was a

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desolate piece of shipyard perimeter — chain link fences, railroad spurs — and the night was inhospitably cold, with no ill-behaved sailors abroad for us to regulate. So to my shipmate, as senior member of the patrol, fell the obligation to pass the time telling sea stories, and this was one of them. What had actually happened to him on his own honeymoon is what I had happened to Dennis Flange. I was heavily amused not so much at the content of the story as at the more abstract notion that anybody would behave that way. As it turned out, my partner's drinking companion figured in a wide body of shipboard anecdote. Transferred before my time to shore duty someplace, he had become a legend. I finally did get to see him the day before I was discharged, mustering in the early morning outside a barracks at the Norfolk naval base. The minute I caught sight of him, before I heard him answer to his name, I swear I had the strange ESP knowledge that that's who he was. Not to overdramatize the moment — but because I still like Pig Bodine so much, having brought the character in a time or two since in novels, it's pleasant to recall that our paths really did cross in this apparitional way.

Modern readers will be, at least, put off by an unacceptable level of racist, sexist and proto-Fascist talk throughout this story. I wish I could say that this is only Pig Bodine's voice, but, sad to say, it was also my own at the time. The best I can say for it now is that, for its time, it is probably authentic enough. John Kennedy's role model James Bond was about to make his name by kicking third-world people around, another extension of the boy's adventure tales a lot of us grew up reading. There had prevailed for a while a set of assumptions and distinctions, unvoiced and unquestioned, best captured years later in the '70's television character Archie Bunker.

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It may yet turn out that racial differences are not as basic as questions of money and power, but have served a useful purpose, often in the interest of those who deplore them most, in keeping us divided and so relatively poor and powerless. This having been said, however, the narrative voice in this story here remains that of a smart-assed jerk who didn't know any better, and I apologize for it.

Disagreeable as I find "Low-lands" now, it's nothing compared to my bleakness of heart when I have to look at "Entropy." The story is a fine example of a procedural error beginning writers are always being cautioned against. It is simply wrong to begin with a theme, symbol or other abstract unifying agent, and then try to force characters and events to conform to it. By contrast, the characters in "Low-lands," though problematic in other ways, were at least where I began from, bringing the theoretical stuff in later, just to give the project a look of educated class. Otherwise it would only have been about a number of unpleasant people failing to resolve difficulties in their lives, and who needs that? Hence, adventitious lectures about tale-telling and geometry.

Because the story has been anthologized a couple-three times, people think I know more about the subject of entropy than I really do. Even the normally unhoodwinkable Donald Barthelme has suggested in a magazine interview that I had some kind of proprietary handle on it. Well, according to the *OED* the word was coined in 1865 by Rudolf Clausius, on the model of the word "energy," which he took to be Greek for "work-contents." Entropy, or "transformation-contents" was introduced as a way of examining the changes a heat engine went through in a typical cycle, the transformation being heat into work. If Clausius had stuck to his native German and called it

Verwandlungsinhalt instead, it could have had an entirely different impact. As it was, after having been worked with in a restrained way for the next 70 or 80 years, entropy got picked up on by some communication theorists and given the cosmic moral twist it continues to enjoy in current usage. I happened to read Norbert Wiener's *The Human Use of Human Beings* (a rewrite for the interested layman of his more technical *Cybernetics*) at about the same time as *The Education of Henry Adams*, and the "theme" of the story is mostly derivative of what these two men had to say. A pose I found congenial in those days — fairly common, I hope, among pre-adults — was that of somber glee at any idea of mass destruction or decline. The modern political thriller genre, in fact, has been known to cash in on such visions of death made large-scale or glamorous. Given my undergraduate mood, Adams's sense of power out of control, coupled with Wiener's spectacle of universal heat-death and mathematical stillness, seemed just the ticket. But the distance and grandiosity of this led me to short-change the humans in the story. I think they come off as synthetic, insufficiently alive. The marital crisis described is once again, like the Flanges', unconvincingly simplified. The lesson is sad, as Dion always sez, but true: get too conceptual, too cute and remote, and your characters die on the page.

For a while all I worried about was that I'd set things up in terms of temperature and not energy. As I read more about the subject later, I came to see that this had not been such a bad tactic. But do not underestimate the shallowness of my understanding. For instance, I chose 37 degrees Fahrenheit for an equilibrium point because 37 degrees Celsius is the temperature of the human body. Cute, huh?

Further, it turns out that not everyone has taken such a dim view of entropy. Again according to the *OED*, Clerk Maxwell and P. G. Tait used it, for a while at least, in a sense opposite to that of Clausius: as a measure of energy available, not unavailable, for work. Willard Gibbs, who in this country a century ago developed the property at theoretical length, thought of it, in diagram form anyway, as an aid to popularizing the science of thermodynamics, in particular its second law.

What strikes me nowadays about the story is not so much its thermodynamical gloom as the way it reflects how the '30's were for some folks. I suppose it is as close to a Beat story as anything I was writing then, although I thought I was sophisticating the Beat spirit with second-hand science. I wrote "Entropy" in '38 or '39 — when I talk about '37 in the story as "back then" I am being almost sarcastic. One year of those times was much like another. One of the most pernicious effects of the '30's was to convince the people growing up during them that it would last forever. Until John Kennedy, then perceived as a congressional upstart with a strange haircut, began to get some attention, there was a lot of aimlessness going around. While Eisenhower was in, there seemed no reason why it should all not just go on as it was.

Since I wrote this story I have kept trying to understand entropy, but my grasp becomes less sure the more I read. I've been able to follow the *OED* definitions, and the way Isaac Asimov explains it, and even some of the math. But the qualities and quantities will not come together to form a unified notion in my head. It is cold comfort to find out that Gibbs himself anticipated the problem, when he described entropy in its written form as "far-fetched . . . obscure and difficult of comprehension." When I think about the property nowadays, it is more

and more in connection with time, that human one-way time we're all stuck with locally here, and which terminates, it is said, in death. Certain processes, not only thermodynamic ones but also those of a medical nature, can often not be reversed. Sooner or later we all find this out, from the inside.

Such considerations were largely absent when I wrote "Entropy." I was more concerned with committing on paper a variety of abuses, such as overwriting. I will spare everybody a detailed discussion of all the overwriting that occurs in these stories, except to mention how distressed I am at the number of tendrils that keep showing up. I still don't even know for sure what a tendril is. I think I took the word from T. S. Eliot. I have nothing against tendrils personally, but my overuse of the word is a good example of what can happen when you spend too much time and energy on words alone. This advice has been given often and more compellingly elsewhere, but my specific piece of wrong procedure back then was, incredibly, to browse through the thesaurus and note words that sounded cool, hip, or likely to produce an effect, usually that of making me look good, without then taking the trouble to go and find out in the dictionary what they meant. If this sounds stupid, it is. I mention it only on the chance that others may be doing it even as we speak, and be able to profit from my error.

This same free advice can also be applied to items of information. Everybody gets told to write about what they know. The trouble with many of us is that at the earlier stages of life we think we know everything — or to put it more usefully, we are often unaware of the scope and structure of our ignorance. Ignorance is not just a blank space on a person's mental map. It has contours and coherence, and for all I know rules of operation as

well. So as a corollary to writing about what we know, maybe we should add getting familiar with our ignorance, and the possibilities therein for ruining a good story. Opera librettos, movies and television drama are allowed to get away with all kinds of errors in detail. Too much time in front of the Tube and a writer can get to believing the same thing about fiction. Not so. Though it may not be wrong absolutely to make up, as I still do, what I don't know or am too lazy to find out, phony data are more often than not deployed in places sensitive enough to make a difference, thereby losing what marginal charm they may have possessed outside of the story's context. Witness an example from "Entropy." In the character of Callisto I was trying for a sort of world-weary Middle-European effect, and put in the phrase *grippe espagnole*, which I had seen on some liner notes to a recording of Stravinsky's *L'Histoire du Soldat*. I must have thought this was some kind of post-World War I spiritual malaise or something. Come to find out it means what it says, Spanish influenza, and the reference I lifted was really to the worldwide flu epidemic that followed the war.

The lesson here, obvious but now and then overlooked, is: just to corroborate one's data, in particular those acquired casually, such as through hearsay or off the backs of record albums. We have, after all, recently moved into an era when, at least in principle, everybody can share an inconceivably enormous amount of information, just by stroking a few keys on a terminal. There are no longer any excuses for small stupid mistakes, and I hope this also leads to much more inhibition about stealing data on the chance that no one will catch it.

Fascinating topic, literary theft. As in the penal code, there are degrees. These range from plagiarism down to

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only being derivative, but all are forms of wrong procedure. If, on the other hand, you believe that nothing is original and that all writers "borrow" from "sources," there still remains the question of credit lines or acknowledgements. It wasn't till "Under the Rose" (1959) that I could bring myself, even indirectly, to credit guidebook eponym Karl Baedeker, whose guide to Egypt for 1899 was the major "source" for the story.

I spotted this book in the Cornell Co-op. All fall and winter I had been having writer's block. I was taking a writing seminar run by Baxter Hathaway. Having returned that semester after some time off, he was an unknown quantity, and terrified me. The course had been going on for some time, and I hadn't handed in a thing. "Come on," people advised me, "he's a nice guy. Don't worry about it." Were they kidding, or what? It was getting to be a major problem. Finally about halfway through the semester there arrived in the mail one of those cartoon cards, showing a toilet stall covered with graffiti. "You've practiced long enough," it said — open the card — "Now write!" It was signed "Baxter Hathaway." Could I, even as I laid down cash for it at the cash register, have been subconsciously planning to loot this faded red volume for the contents of a story?

Could Willy Sutton rob a safe? Loot the Baedeker I did, all the details of a time and place I had never been to, right down to the names of the diplomatic corps. Who'd make up a name like Khevenhüller-Metsch? Lest others become as enchanted as I was and have continued to be with this technique, let me point out that it is a lousy way to go about writing a story. The problem here is like the problem with "Entropy": beginning with something abstract — a thermodynamic coinage or the data in a guidebook — and only then going on to try to

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develop plot and characters. This is simply, as we say in the profession, ass backwards. Without some grounding in human reality, you are apt to be left only with another apprentice exercise, which is what this uncomfortably resembles.

I was also able to steal, or let us say “derive,” in more subtle ways. I had grown up reading a lot of spy fiction, novels of intrigue, notably those of John Buchan. The only book of his that anyone remembers now is *The Thirty-nine Steps*, but he wrote half a dozen more just as good or better. They were all in my hometown library. So were E. Phillips Oppenheim, Helen MacInnes, Geoffrey Household, and many others as well. The net effect was eventually to build up in my uncritical brain a peculiar shadowy vision of the history preceding the two world wars. Political decision-making and official documents did not figure in this nearly as much as lurking, spying, false identities, psychological games. Much later I got around to two other mighty influences, Edmund Wilson’s *To the Finland Station* and Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, which helped me to develop the interesting question underlying the story — is history personal or statistical? My reading at the time also included many Victorians, allowing World War I in my imagination to assume the shape of that attractive nuisance so dear to adolescent minds, the apocalyptic showdown.

I don’t mean to make light of this. Our common nightmare The Bomb is in there too. It was bad enough in ’39 and is much worse now, as the level of danger has continued to grow. There was never anything subliminal about it, then or now. Except for that succession of the criminally insane who have enjoyed power since 1945, including the power to do something about it, most of

the rest of us poor sheep have always been stuck with simple, standard fear. I think we all have tried to deal with this slow escalation of our helplessness and terror in the few ways open to us, from not thinking about it to going crazy from it. Somewhere on this spectrum of impotence is writing fiction about it — occasionally, as here, offset to a more colorful time and place.

So, if only for its feeble good intentions, I am less annoyed with “Under the Rose” than with the earlier stuff. I think the characters are a little better, no longer just lying there on the slab but beginning at least to twitch some and blink their eyes open, although their dialogue still suffers from my perennial Bad Ear. Thanks to the relentless efforts of the Public Broadcast System, everyone these days is hyperfamiliar with the furthest nuances of English as spoken by the English. In my day I had to depend on movies and radio, which as sources then were not 100% reliable. Hence all the pip-pip and jolly-ho business, which to a modern reader comes across as stereotyped and inauthentic. Readers may also feel shorted because of how, more than anyone, the masterful John le Carré has upped the ante for the whole genre. Today we expect a complexity of plot and depth of character which are missing from my effort here. Most of it, happily, is chase scenes, for which I remain a dedicated sucker — it is one piece of puerility I am unable to let go of. May Road Runner cartoons never vanish from the video waves, is my attitude.

Attentive fans of Shakespeare will notice that the name Porpentine is lifted from *Hamlet*, I, v. It is an early form of “porcupine.” The name Moldweorp is Old Teutonic for “mole” — the animal, not the infiltrator. I thought it would be a cute idea for people named after two amiable fuzzy critters to be duking it out over the fate of Europe.

Less conscientiously, there is also an echo of the name of the reluctant spy character Wormold, in Graham Greene's *Our Man in Havana*, then recently published.

Another influence in "Under the Rose," too recent for me then to abuse to the extent I have done since, is Surrealism. I had been taking one of those elective courses in Modern Art, and it was the Surrealists who'd really caught my attention. Having as yet virtually no access to my dream life, I missed the main point of the movement, and became fascinated instead with the simple idea that one could combine inside the same frame elements not normally found together to produce illogical and startling effects. What I had to learn later on was the necessity of managing this procedure with some degree of care and skill: any old combination of details will not do. Spike Jones, Jr., whose father's orchestral recordings had a deep and indelible effect on me as a child, said once in an interview, "One of the things that people don't realize about Dad's kind of music is, when you replace a C-sharp with a gunshot, it has to be a C-sharp gunshot or it sounds awful."

I was to get even worse at this, as is evident from the junkshop or randomly assembled quality to many of the scenes in "The Secret Integration." But because I like more than dislike this story, I sometimes will blame it more on the cluttered way that items accumulate in the rooms of memory. Like "Low-lands," this is a hometown story, one of the few times I tried to write directly out of the landscape and the experiences I grew up with. I mistakenly thought of Long Island then as a giant and featureless sandbar, without history, someplace to get away from but not to feel very connected to. It is interesting that in both stories I imposed on what I felt to be blank space a set of more complicated topographies.

Perhaps I felt this was a way to make the place a little more exotic.

Not only did I complicate this Long Island space, but I also drew a line around the whole neighborhood, picked it up and shifted it all to the Berkshires, where I still have never been. The old Baedeker trick again. This time I found the details I needed in the regional guide to the Berkshires put out in the 1930's by the Federal Writers Project of the WPA. This is one of an excellent set of state and regional volumes, which may still be available in libraries. They make instructive and pleasurable reading. In fact, there is some stuff in the Berkshire book so good, so rich in detail and deep in feeling, that even I was ashamed to steal from it.

Why I adopted such a strategy of transfer is no longer clear to me. Displacing my personal experience off into other environments went back at least as far as "The Small Rain." Part of this was an unkind impatience with fiction I felt then to be "too autobiographical." Somewhere I had come up with the notion that one's personal life had nothing to do with fiction, when the truth, as everyone knows, is nearly the direct opposite. Moreover, contrary evidence was all around me, though I chose to ignore it, for in fact the fiction both published and unpublished that moved and pleased me then as now was precisely that which had been made luminous, undeniably authentic by having been found and taken up, always at a cost, from deeper, more shared levels of the life we all really live. I hate to think that I didn't, however defectively, understand this. Maybe the rent was just too high. In any case, stupid kid, I preferred fancy footwork instead.

Then again, maybe another factor in it was just claustrophobia. I wasn't the only one writing then who felt

some need to stretch, to step out. It may have gone back to the sense of academic enclosure we felt which had lent such appeal to the American picaresque life the Beat writers seemed to us to be leading. Apprentices in all fields and times are restless to be journeymen.

By the time I wrote "The Secret Integration" I was embarked on this phase of the business. I had published a novel and thought I knew a thing or two, but for the first time I believe I was also beginning to shut up and listen to the American voices around me, even to shift my eyes away from printed sources and take a look at American nonverbal reality. I was out on the road at last, getting to visit the places Kerouac had written about. These towns and Greyhound voices and fleabag hotels have found their way into this story, and I am pretty content with how it holds up.

Not that it's perfect, understand, not by a long shot. The kids, for example, seem in some areas to be not very bright, certainly not a patch on the kids of the '80's. I could also with an easy mind see axed much of the story's less responsible Surrealism. Still, there are parts of it I can't believe I wrote. Sometime in the last couple of decades, some company of elves must have snuck in and had a crack at it. As is clear from the up-and-down shape of my learning curve, however, it was too much to expect that I'd keep on for long in this positive or professional direction. The next story I wrote was "The Crying of Lot 49," which was marketed as a "novel," and in which I seem to have forgotten most of what I thought I'd learned up till then.

Most likely, much of my feeling for this last story can be traced to ordinary nostalgia for this time in my life, for the writer who seemed then to be emerging, with his bad habits, dumb theories and occasional moments of

productive silence in which he may have begun to get a glimpse of how it was done. What is most appealing about young folks, after all, is the changes, not the still photograph of finished character but the movie, the soul in flux. Maybe this small attachment to my past is only another case of what Frank Zappa calls a bunch of old guys sitting around playing rock 'n' roll. But as we all know, rock 'n' roll will never die, and education too, as Henry Adams always sez, keeps going on forever.