

64 Verses

a short **memoir**

or a **very long song**
of **growing up**

in **Berkeley**

in the **70's**

by
Laramie Crocker
who is from Berkeley

For my father

Richard Lincoln Crocker

who decided to bring his family west
to Berkeley.

For my mother

Joy Laksmi Crocker

who took me around the world,
and then,
brought me back to Berkeley
to grow up in this amazing place.

They raised us
in Berkeley
with a love of words,
music,
and critical thinking.

Black Appositive

Growing up Black in Berkeley in the 70's

by Laramie Crocker, who is from Berkeley

Appositive:

a noun phrase set beside another noun phrase
to explain or identify it.

You can't say "the black President."

You're supposed to say "the President, who is black, ..."

You can't say

"My black friends."

You must say

"My friend Sambo, who is black, ..."

My friend Vincent, who was 17 when I met him, liked to wear cowboy boots to school. So did I. Naturally, we were instant friends. Him and another boy, Tony, who was white. Tony also wore cowboy boots, and also befriended me standing in the reflective linoleum-floored Washington School building halls, with its lockers, plastic chairs, and aluminum windows that let in the hills and the fog-grey sky. Standing in that hallway, with his curly black hair, hooked nose and teenage, white skin, and looking down at my feet, and saying, in his best Steve Martin impersonation: "Hey, Nice Boots!" [Heh, Naaassss Booooots!!!!]

But Tony and Vincent don't hang out. Maybe Vincent is too faggy for Tony. All three of us were arty, faggy boys, but only Vincent was gay, then. Later, I'd be scared of Vincent because I thought I might be gay or bi or some other -sexual. But back then I loved hanging out, and being funny and flamboyant, and I could be straight and laugh with Vincent, who seemed so funny, so different, so rejected by both cultures (Black and White) for being neither, because neither culture wanted to own up to fags. Vincent taught me words like "fish" (effeminate) or "chicken" (boys below the age of consent who went with older men). He would sit with me in his cute little yellow Honda Civic, the tiniest car to ever have a tape deck, which played a mix of dance bands and angsty rock. He would sit in his tiny seat, in his tiny car, with grease in his hair, permanently sopping the collars of all his coats, smelling like AfroSheen and GQ magazines, and he would look down with his chin, and up at me with his eyes, cockeyed, and say "Ooooo, you so BUTCH" whenever I talked about hot rods or carpentry or other such "butch" topics. I dug being called Butch. Usually bullies called me fag, but I was pretty sure I wasn't one, since I liked girls so much, and the couple of times I was with boys, sneaking into bed in San Francisco Boys Chorus concert tours in hotels, having circle jerk sleepovers, getting felt up in a tent in Lassen Park by Kurt, the male camping instructor from Black Pine Circle School, all these times we talked about girls, so *we wasn't gay*. Well, Peter was gay. But I never touched his cock, so *I* wasn't gay. But it sure felt good when he touched mine.

All this fag talk. Wasn't I going to tell you about growing up Black in Berkeley? Well, I am. You can think about whether Tony, or Peter, or Vincent are black or white, but what matters is that this is what growing

up in Berkeley felt like. Like we knew who had black skin and white skin, but somehow we weren't supposed to talk about it.

Gay? Talk about it.
Boots? Talk about them.
Black/White? Shhhh.

Heros? Huey Newton. Angela Davis.
Black Power? Right on!

When we were going to form a gang in 3rd grade, and over sauntered Duane, who was black, I fell over myself trying to welcome him to our new club by going through each of the things Duane was wearing, making each piece a required accessory in our new gang uniform.

Denim coat. Yeah.
White shirt. Yeah.
Blue jeans. Yeah.
Big, Black, rounded, leather boots. Ooooooh yeeeeaaaah.

After school, I'd hop the fence, and cut through the neighbor's yard, up the steps, across the leaning, rotting back porch, and in the back door, to smell if today was a custard day. Mrs. Butler made egg custard a couple of days a week. Might a been Tuesdays and Thursdays, but I've never been someone for whom time had any concrete, cyclic meaning. I just know that every couple of times she came, she made egg custard. A whole pan, and sometimes a second pan, so we'd have enough to last 'til the next time. First pan would be gone before dinner. Smooth, yellow, silky, sweet. I loved egg custard. Home-made, no packages. Everything Mrs. Butler did was funky and old school. That's why I loved her. That and her big, soft, smooth, silky arms. And her sweet voice. Still loving and exotic when she was scolding me, which seemed to be a lot, but always felt good.

"David, you need to GIT in here!"
"Yes, Mrs. Butler."

Mmmmm. I loved the sound of her voice, and the custodial, maternal, loving command. It was never mean, never accusatory, always forgiving, maybe even teasing.

Mr. Butler would drive up the hill to pick up Mrs. Butler in his big, metallic gold Cadillac. It had maroon velour seats, but they had the plastic car seat covers on, so you couldn't feel the velour, you just stuck to the shiny plastic, and it would leave funny impressions in your legs if you wore shorts. I'd go to Mrs. Butler's house in that car, and then go sit in her living room, which had gold velour couches, also with clear plastic protective slip covers. And you walked on the plastic runners and not on the green, fuzzy carpets. But back in the tiny sleeping porch, which was the real heart of the kitchen, was where I sat and watched her cook some more, at her house. She seemed to always be cooking or cleaning. The kitchen had sparse wood cabinets with layers and layers of paint, which joined shabbily to the floor, the floor covered in linoleum that was like swirled cranberry and that was threadbare in spots.

When I was a teenager, my mom and I went down to visit Mrs. Butler, to see how she was doing. Hadn't seen her since I was in fourth grade. There she was, same house down in the flats, same glassed-in entry porch, same bungalow, same built-ins, same carpet with plastic runners. But this time Mr. Butler came home, and walked in, sat on the edge of the bed in the bedroom, and just hung his shoulders. I watched through the open door. He might a cried a little. He was sweaty, and his shirt said he had been sweating all day. Mrs. Butler held him and talked to him in that comforting voice. She was what I remembered. But

he, he had been this cool daddy with a cool Cadillac, in clean, pressed shirts, and he picked her up each day from cooking and cleaning and caring for me and my sister. He was a giant. Now he was a small, skinny man, beat by another day of looking for work, or maybe working as a laborer, I didn't know.

But the fear hit me. How could one work so hard for so long, and be on top of things, and still have to do hard work at his age, well past retirement. What kind of place is this?

This place was Berkeley. 1970's. The whole country was talking about race. But it seemed Berkeley was above talking about race, since white folks were sure there was no difference between white folks and black folks. So we pretended we were colorblind. Except that white folks didn't want to live in "black" neighborhoods. But they sure wanted to canvas there, since everyone felt so politically tied in. Everyone was against Vietnam, and the Cambodian bombings, and everyone thought Huey Newton was cool. Blacks were the majority in town, about 51 per cent. But black folks lived in the flats, below Grove Street (later renamed Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd. in 1984).

Grove was the dividing line. West of Grove, sloping towards the San Francisco Bay, was black, with some poor whites. East of Grove, were some businesses, and students and whites. Berkeley was so infatuated with its integration, but no one mentioned the dividing line. You couldn't really even see it. The houses were still cute on the West side of Grove, and there were still tree-lined streets. The real money -- anyone white, or retired, or attached to the University of California at Berkeley -- lived in the hills, which started a few blocks East of Grove. I lived in the hills, and I felt like we were the poorest folks in our neighborhood, because, while my dad worked at the university, my mom just taught piano lessons at the house, and we drove a funky Volkswagen bus after the funky Peugeot sedan died, and we drove that bus to all the garage sales in town for everything we needed, and volunteered at the food CO-OP to get the membership prices for all our food. There was a CO-OP supermarket down the street, but the food CO-OP was a bunch of hippie students and funky residents like us who bought food together at the S.F. farmer's market Saturday mornings at 5 AM (a real farmer's market, not like the yuppie overpriced veggie and prepared food fests of today) and bought cheese in bulk, and made yoghurt, and then gathered at the Living Love Center to divide up the food based on people's mimeographed checklists of what they ordered, and distributed the food, some in the Center, some by car and foot.

I never knew anything but busing. I was too young to hear any arguments about busing. It was moral responsibility, so white folks just grinned and bore it, it seemed to me. I rode the bus, shuffled over the ribbed black rubber floors, to a green, plastic-smelly vinyl seat, looked out the window, and listened to the pop funk bands the driver liked.

I ran around school one day at lunch with a giant mob, who chanted "a fight, a fight, a nigger and a white" while we looked for a place to fight. Some girls had decided that I had to fight, I didn't know why. I think I was supposed to fight one of the girls. Finally, we couldn't find a place to fight that didn't have yard monitors, so we all just hung out together and enjoyed the rest of lunchtime recess in the black asphalt yard there at Longfellow middle school, in the flats, well below Grove Street, where the block would be lined with yellow buses that would take us back to the hills or elsewhere in the flats after school.

World Traveler

1970. Little David, who is white, travels the world with Mom, brother Nathaniel, and sister Martha. Dad, who is white, is holed up in the basement of Oxford University somewhere, on sabbatical, studying Gregorian chant.

In 1970, I am called David and I feel that I'm the youngest person ever to know and pronounce the word Sabbatical. Later, before entering fourth grade, I will change my name to Laramie, my given middle name, because David is so normal, so overused. I am not normal! I don't identify with the other kids at school, much less the four other Davids in every class I had. I got tired of being "David Number 3." Other kids had names like Sabrina, Lashawn, Leroy, Damien, David Number 1, David Number 2, David Number 4. Well, which would you want to be?

Back to 1970. I'm traveling the world with my mother, brother and sister, and we are going on the cheap. A dollar a day per person. Mom, who is white, has taken the family stipend that sabbatical recipients get, to keep them in the rice (and butter, and socks, and schoolbooks), at a nice suburban existence in suburban Oxford, well outside of London, for the year. She took the money and bought four 'round the world airplane tickets. More money would be given by the university each month for family support. What did they care if your family was in Bombay, in a stranger's house, and your wife was on the phone trying to figure out how you could wire the money to her so that she could pay for a few nights in a hotel and catch a train to the next town, or buy meals on the streets of India, or get to the airport so we could fly West, always West, according to the rules of the airline tickets: good for a full year as long as you fly West on each leg. Next stop? Visit Dong Soo in Korea. He's our foster child. Foster Child International had been forwarding our monthly five-dollar gift to him, and our letters, and we got back beautiful handwritten Korean characters on wispy translucent red-lined paper (was it rice paper?) folded in wispy translucent Air Mail envelopes. So exotic. A Korean student, or volunteer always provided a typed translation letter, written on a typewriter that indented the thin paper, so we'd sit around the dinner table in Berkeley, reading the translation, and try to make sense of the Korean characters. Naturally, when we embarked on our 'round the world trip, we swung through Korea to see if he truly existed.

Dong Soo's house is two rooms. One main room has a raised floor, made out of concrete or baked clay, and has a few woven floor mats. In the room are the family bed, where all his brothers and sisters, mother, father, and grandma sleep. Each person has a chest for keeping personal items, and these chests are lined up around the room, on the walls that don't have the bed. Outside this room, is the kitchen. Very small, it serves as the entry way. The kitchen has a dirt floor, and is at ground level, three feet below the main room. They build fires under the kitchen counter slab, and the counter gets hot for cooking. Then the heat and smoke from the fire go up and out, under the main room floor, and heat the house. We eat strange foods. Some sort of pancake with some sort of white sauce. In the afternoons, my sister and Dong Soo and I go out into the village, on the steep dirt roads, and find a street vendor, with his steaming cart, and buy dumplings and more strange pancake-cones filled with strange balls of food.

Except for the ever-present concrete/clay buildings, and the dusty dirt roads, I like Korea. Everyone wears button-up jackets, often blue, with high, straight collars. By this time, at age 6, I am a seasoned world traveler. I had had my sixth birthday party in a hotel in India somewhere. I had seen Europe, went behind the Iron Curtain into East Berlin, Romania, Yugoslavia, scaled the pyramids in Egypt, ridden camels, elephants, rickshaws.

In Greece, I learned the most important thing. While sitting at a lunch counter -- not that different from lunch counters in Berkeley: Formica countertop, round metal stools -- and eating slices of fatty, broiled lamb from an electric rotating spit, laughing with our hosts, the owners of the tiny, noisy restaurant, and

our hosts for accommodations as well, I became aware that I didn't understand Greek, and that our new friends didn't look like us, but that we were communicating and laughing and eating and having a grand time. There was a kid my age in the host family, and we just smiled and laughed and talked in our own languages and ate lamb. The adults were carrying on, so I guess we just joined in. My mom's theory was that we should learn 200 words for each country, usually on the plane, or in the hotel the night before traveling. Most important, though, was to learn four phrases:

Please.

Thank You.

Where's the Toilet?

I'm Lost, Please Tell Me How to Get to the Hotel _____.

It's amazing, but those four phrases, in the right language, are complete survival skills for a five-year-old in a strange land.

When we land back in Berkeley, I am enrolled in Hillside Elementary School, a block from my house on La Loma at the top of Cedar Street, in the Berkeley Hills. Busing is in effect. My school is racially integrated. People are talking about race, about black and white, about revolution, about Huey Newton, the Black Panthers, about Angela Davis. I don't quite get it. I've just come back from the World, and I've stayed in the homes of people of every race and culture in the Third World, and I know that I can laugh and eat and talk with all these people of the world. And yet, the divide is palpable, here in Berkeley, 1970.

Inquisition

I am standing at the top of the basement staircase.

I don't know how old I am, but there is a yellowed, plastic rotary phone hanging on our kitchen wall with a long spiral cord that is always twisted, and is fun to untwist, like Sisyphus, while talking, and there is real linoleum on the floor, not the crappy, shiny vinyl Armstrong tile that a future roomer will convince my mom to install after my dad moves out and my mom rents out every room but mine and sleeps in her red Volkswaagen camper van in the carport. Which means I'm somewhere between 6 and 9 years old. Coming up the stairs are my older sister, Martha, and my mom. One holds incriminating evidence; both look concerned, with the same look that my dad and my step-mother will use on me years later when it is discovered that my sister has given me LSD twice. In the stairwell, my sister begins the interrogation. My sister, three years older than me, puts on her best adult voice.

"We found this paper, which is in your handwriting, wherein you describe this wonderful project and idea that you want to implement. But since this paper has come to our attention, we noticed that you have done nothing on this project, and, in fact, have hidden this paper, or worse, neglected it, in amongst mom's sheet music and used paper stacks."

My mother: "Yes..." followed by smarmy, overly concerned, falsely sympathetic grimacing.

My sister:

"Ahem. Yes. And we are concerned that this pattern could negatively affect your future. This inability to complete projects after you've started them."

I had walked the streets of Calcutta, India, and seen poverty. I had peed in closets in seedy hotels in the

Tenderloin in San Francisco. And here, in Berkeley, I had met crazy people, hippies, and dropouts. But this new information puts the fear of future failure in me where before I had only envisioned a life of singing, gardening, riding bicycles, building things, and possibly flying to the moon. My mother, always energetic, always laughing at the gods, and always dragging me with her into the AV room at the elementary school around the corner so that I could crank the handle on the mimeograph machine to spit out sweet, acrid, chemical smelly, blue printed pages of "handouts", programs, song sheets, flash cards and other devices of a music teacher, and always at the last minute, chimes in:

"We're concerned about your future. Why? Why did you write this? Don't you want to work on it any more?"

They read the paper to me. It is foggily familiar. I wrote it. Having dreamt up an idea, and written about it, I have lost interest in it. The paper still wags its incrimination at me from my sister's hand. I want to disappear down the stairs, the rough, furry timbered stairs, with painted treads, and a large, plank desk built in at the landing and knotty pine shelves that my dad built for my mother so she could have an "office" where she kept her extra sheet music (piles of Für Elise and Bach minuets for her piano students) mixed in with her "handouts," some active, and some relics from student sing-alongs and tie-dye parties. I love this stairwell. It is fun to climb, to lounge, to converse on. It is possibility. It is descent into the true heart of the house. Past my mom's music-and-activism mimeograph marketing collection, is the basement with exposed timbers, secret passages, a laundry chute, my brother's photography darkroom with its mysterious folded entrance that excludes all light even though there is no door to close, and my dad's woodshop where I make musical instruments of my own invention, and help build parts from exotic woods for my dad's boat. But I can't descend into the chthonic, safe, earthy, woody and warm world, because the Hydra, one claw on my paper dream, and one snakey eye on my dreamy, powerless mother, is blocking the path of Hephaestus.

Place An Odyssey

Spring, 2000
Brooklyn, New York

He wore shiny brown polyester pants that were a little too high over his generic American running shoes, shoes with three blue stripes down the sides; not a stripe of any well known shoe that signified sporty-yet-stylish-because-of-the-cost. These shoes signified American-yet-affordable. He sat quietly in a thin wooden chair, observing the others. I asked him some polite, leading questions, and within a few exchanges, we were discussing his youth in India, and his escape in his parents' arms from Tibet and cultural persecution. I noticed, as he spoke, his fine, graying hair, soft, wrinkled skin, and gentle eyes. Here, in this Place, away from the place of his birth, and away from the place he grew up and learned to speak five languages, and to be a gentle man, he is a baker's assistant on Sundays, and five or six other days a week he makes Japanese noodles at a warehouse downtown. And here, in this place, thousands of miles from where I was born and built forts and bicycled in the Berkeley hills, I sit and talk with this shy man with the composure of a Harvard poetry professor. He is one of the bakers from downstairs that have come up to Her Little Apartment, invited, to celebrate Her Birthday. Most are strangers, but She buys bread in the mornings from them, and so they have come up, these bakers, after a long day sweeping flour, and rolling dough and pulling sheet pans from yawning oven doors. They brought lots of bread. The spanish-speaking ones stay standing in the little kitchen, too shy or too polite to come all the way into the little living room, and Her mom speaks in Spanish to them and putters. Her uncle, a man with flowing greybrown hair, feathered, ala 1970's disco, a white, educated Manhattanite, wearing a colorful, third world shirt and comfortable jeans,

joins me in talking to the man in the running shoes. Her uncle talks of Tibet with the man. I have to go to my place on the fire escape to tend the steaks on the hibachi, but I hear drifts of conversation: it seems Her uncle spent time in a monastery in Tibet. I wonder at the American who made a pilgrimage to Tibet, and the Tibetan who fled Tibet for India, and the Yankee son whose parents left the East Coast for a position at Berkeley after getting fired from Yale, who now squats on a fire escape in Brooklyn; in Brooklyn in Her Little Apartment, She who grew up in Humboldt County, California, land of the ranchers, redwood loggers, and dope-growing hippies, and child of back-to-the-land Manhattanites; in Her Little Apartment where She happily floats among the pack of friends and relatives and bakers.

I am here to be near Her, to catch what I can of Her Delightful Mind, her humor, her smiles when they are directed at me. She doesn't seem to notice me when other people are around, but I have come to accept her that way. I wait for the times when we are alone and she makes me laugh and I lavish love on her and she treats me like I make the Sun go around.

I have also come to be close to my father's place. The place in the green hills of Brownsville, Vermont that he keeps to come to in the Summer, the place that reminds him of Summer vacations when he was a child. In this green place he is natural and relaxed. He walks me through the woods explaining how trees grow, how to watch out for them falling down, and pointing out his friends: the saplings that have turned into tall beeches, maples, pines.

My father, though more relaxed than when he is in California, still has a wonderful paranoia about him at all times, like a canteen you wear on your hip, and can pull out to take a good swig. *The trees can fall at any time, so be careful on walking on windy days, or on any days for that matter, through the woods. And don't mix too much concrete in a hole in the ground, the heat it generates might start a fire.* Here, in this place the nearest neighbor is a friend, but is on the close side of a 23 acre parcel, and the nice lady at the post office knows your name and puts your letters in a wooden cubbyhole that is open from her side and has an aluminum door with a key on your side. You have to go chat with her if she slips a note in your cubby because a large letter or parcel came, and can't fit in the cubby. But it's nice to chat with her anyway when you get the mail, so as not to be impolite. Here, in this place which seems so removed from Her Little Apartment in Brooklyn, my dad finds it necessary to lock all the doors at night, when he goes to bed, and sometimes when he is awake, too. The driveway is steep and gravelly, and you hear someone coming long before you see them. But one can never be too safe.

Dad and I stay up nights discussing the physics of music -- waveforms, Fourier analysis (my training), overtones, chord relationships, and modes (his training). During the day, I sing and play The Blues on my guitar that I lugged all the way from Berkeley, and through the New York Subway, and at night he sings and plays Cole Porter and Gerschwin tunes on the fine, wooden Emerson upright piano, crafted in Boston early in the century. The Emerson suffers the yearly ravage of freezing temperatures, and now sounds like a barroom piano in a wild west movie.

Dad spent so many years at Berkeley doing battle with academics and peers around the world, that he now talks very sagely and abstractly about what is "real". *The only thing real is experience, and that itself is a poor substitute for "What Is Happening". So the best you can do is listen to a bit of music and absorb it. Even talking about it is pointless.* This from a man who spent his whole life talking to people about music, and writing books about music. He tells me he feels uncertain whether it is OK to just come out and say that what he is going to tell the reader is only his experience, as he wants to do in his next book. I reassure him that that is the honesty I look for when I read.

There is a quiet rhythm in this green place. Mornings the house is quiet. We make meals, Dad gardens and shuffles building materials around, cradling a beer. I help him with construction projects. Dad sings Gregorian chant in the afternoons, and takes a nap on the settle by his favorite window with the baronial view over his estate. I click away on my laptop computer, writing Java code for the corporation in San Francisco that sends my payroll checks. Some year I will spend the whole year here, to feel the full rhythm of the seasons. But our neighbor just told us of the 20 degrees Fahrenheit below zero he had to endure last winter, so I don't think I'll be staying in Vermont this year.

Monday, Memorial Day, 2001
Brownsville, Vermont

Well, the good ol' boys rumbled down the driveway today. A redfaced drunken handyman, D.C., his painting contractor buddy, and their lackey, a good natured braggart who stayed in the back of the six pack truck and regaled us with stories of building in Montana. The painter talked paint with my dad, while I chatted with D.C., who was intent on rustling up a little work for himself and his buddy in the truck. Seeing how I was tearing apart a worn out deck to recycle the lumber, he offered numerous helpful suggestions as to the best way to move the wood to its new location, and how for ten dollars an hour, which wasn't much, but he would be happy to take it anyway, he would see clear to helping me out.

6:50 PM, Thursday
"Price Chopper" Supermarket
Windsor, Vermont

This is a place where you can't buy peanut butter that doesn't have sugar added, where the only chile peppers available are in a cute little plastic box: one Haba ero, one Serrano, one Jalapeño, for \$2.95. (I can see the pasty white Vermonter saying -- "hey, here's a plastic souvenir case of the Habañero I *almost* ate"). A place where the managers wear kelly-green smocks, and the clerks all wear matching red aprons and white collared shirts. Every ten minutes or so, the overhead sprayers come on in the vegetable bins in the produce section, and speakers play the sounds of thunder and rain. Up the alley towards the meat department, a large LCD screen constantly plays videos of fake talk show hosts, telling you how to prepare various meals -- "make sure to add the mustard *to* the mayonnaise" -- or how to arrange your drinking glasses in the correct order for a formal setting. Up front, a portly lady with a pissed off look disputes the price she paid on "Mountain Dew" soda -- apparently the sale items were in a big display that included cans only, and she had bought bottles. I don't think she'll be worrying tonight about whether the "Mountain Dew" glass is to the left or the right of the white wine and champagne glasses. Filling a wall to the right of the cash registers is the bread section, where you can get 49 different kinds of white bread. Even the four selections of "multi-grain" or whole wheat bread are so squishy and soft you wonder if they will survive the trip home in the bag underneath the Serrano pepper. They don't ask "Paper or Plastic?" -- you just get plastic bags at the checkout stand.

August, 2001
Brownsville, Vermont

Dad doesn't like to have a sign out on the road so that people can see it as they drive up. He has a fancy oval sign with "Crocker Hill" carved in ornate letters. It is down the driveway a ways. So when we had to accept delivery on some furniture, Gloria persuaded him to put a temporary sign up at the road. It is a giant piece of sheetrock, with a penned arrow and "Crocker" in letters, leaning up against a sawhorse, with orange safety streamers. Shortly after he put it up, a van full of tourists with thick Caribbean accents came rolling down the driveway. "Do you have any Crocker's, Mon?" My dad answers "Yes". After a few confusing exchanges, it is revealed that they are looking for Croker fish. Turns out this is a Caribbean delight. I don't think they'll find any in New England.

Skye

October, 2001
Berkeley, California

I've been to Heaven, and to Hell. Heaven wakes you up with warm, yellow sunshine and smells like fresh

cut grass, like hay, daylilies, wet forest, like lavender. Hell is the inside of a hospital, with endless corridors, where there is no day, no night, and no exit.

Underwater

Tuesday, August 13, 2002
Brownsville, Vermont

I once fell in love with a delightful young woman, Katie, whom I met standing in line for the transbay bus during the BART train strike in San Francisco. It was a wonderful time, like the days after snowstorms in Brooklyn, when people talk to each other in public for no reason. Like the bonding effect of a war, or an earthquake, the BART train operator's strike brought people together against a common adversary, but without the pangs of fear and dread, or the pain of loss. Mornings at the bus stops were jovial and communal, sharing of information between allies. Evening commutes were souplines of the weary. Waiting in the transbay terminal in long lines, with no anger or blame (not early in the strike, at any rate), was still the pack of allies, but now some of us were war-weary veterans. Katie tapped me in line to ask if the "C" bus was the same as the "F" -- an important distinction if we were not to be lost in the miles of East Oakland with no BART train to save us. I assured her that the "F" had always been the best bet to Berkeley, and was immediately lost in her sparkling, blue eyes. Eyes that were conduits of pure electricity. My brain raced to come up with additional dialog, but none came -- I was dumbstruck. Katie was so calm and easy to be with. Moments after meeting me in line, she followed me onto the bus and just plopped down in the seat next to me, a compatriot in the communal strife. I relaxed, and we chatted on the way home, amazed at the very long route of the bus in comparison to the train, made longer by a bizarre string of events. Various denizens demanded special services, either demanding to be allowed off the bus at improper stops, or demanding to remain on though intoxicated. At one point the bus driver hit a bicyclist while rounding a corner. The cyclist walked away, sans bicycle. We filled out witness cards the driver handed out to everyone. No problem: one more task in the communal duty!

I'll spare you the details, but Katie continued to amaze me with her ease and her eyes. Some times we would have long conversations, sometimes we would just look at each other, and communicate silently. Finally, half a year later when we were both free of our mates for different reasons, I made a pass at Katie, and was rebuffed completely. We often hugged, and this time, as she stood just inside my front door, I went in for a kiss. Katie squirmed and beat a hasty retreat. The door swung into my face as she scrambled through the not-quite-wide-enough opening. She seemed shocked that I took our ease and excitement with each other as grounds for a relationship, even though it was she who had declared us soulmates. We talked about it a bunch, but no amount of processing brought us any closer. I waited for her to change her mind for several months, agonizing every time I hung out with her, feeling lost in her eyes and bright smiling face. Finally I accepted the truth, but couldn't handle continuing to be her friend. She left for a trip to Germany and I ignored her after that.

I dredge up Katie because I was struck by a moment that brought it all back, years later, while swimming in a swimming hole I built in the mill brook that runs at the foot of my folk's property in Brownsville.

For three years of summers I worked on that swimming hole, carrying rocks to the dam site, dredging the creek bottom with bare hands, grunting underwater, holding my breath while trying to move two hundred pound rocks. My brothers and friends laid raw their fingertips to help. My largest brother, Danny, and I once moved a boulder onto the dam that would have immobilized an economy car down on its axle were it loaded into the back seat. A three foot diameter sphere of solid granite, it could not be lifted, but could be rolled, underwater, sumo-wrestler-style. This year I figured out the final solution to the engineering limits that had kept previous years' efforts to mere splashing holes. I redesigned the dam to be wider at the base. I laid up the walls carefully like the dry stone walls that wander through Vermont's woods, stacked

by poor farmers around what were sheep pastures at the time. The sheep farmers herded Morino sheep, made available by a deal between New England traders and Napoleon's conquests in Spain. The Morino sheep are gone now from Vermont, but the walls still stand. So, taking my cue, I stacked the rock carefully, to a splendid six feet in height. Then I used 3 mil plastic sheeting from the hardware store to line the dam and the sandy bottom at the inside foot of the dam. Putting on the sheets was an exercise in timing. The water rushing through the rocks would suck the plastic in, wrapping the rocks tightly like vacuum-packed bags of dried fruit. Before that moment, the twenty foot long sheets would undulate underwater like giant sea jellyfish, threatening to entwine me in their slimy grasp. Finally the plastic was in place, lapped about a foot over the top of the wall for future expansion. Then the water level rose, and, excited by the progress, a friend and I stacked more rocks in delicate balance on top of the sturdy wall, propping up the plastic until the water spilled over the top. We had managed to raise the level of the water some three feet above its natural level -- eleven thousand cubic feet of water.

For two weeks we enjoyed a wonderful swimming hole. Six feet deep in spots, longer than an olympic swimming pool, it was calm and cool, with diving and sunning rocks around its edges. We wore goggles and swam underwater with the fish in the green, clear depths around the submerged rock islands we used to walk on. We rafted. We floated. We dove. We swam the backstroke, unafraid.

I was told by a neighbor that hindering the stream flow was illegal, with fines being immediately applicable if we were caught. The fines could be five or ten thousand dollars. I dejectedly gathered up my brother Dan and his son William, and asked them to come down for a final swim in our personal lake before I had to remove the plastic sheets.

I swam under the clear water, floating, gliding, taking in the light for the last time, like staring into Katie's brilliant, endless blue eyes, knowing I'd never be her boyfriend.

Then I surfaced, and with a final survey of the lake we created, Danny and I pulled back the slimy plastic sheets and unleashed the torrents of whitewater.

For two days I was too depressed to go look at what once was a happy swimming hole. But life went on, with its balmy flow of country retreat living. The small boys were still happy to play there. For tiny William, there were still overhead deep spots. Danny and I felled a "widowmaker" (a standing, dead birch tree) with a handsaw. On its way down, the trunk of the deadwood hung up in another tree, perfectly balanced straight up, then, with more persuasion, came down with a satisfying crash. The boys spent all day down at the tiny puddle behind the useless rock wall of the dam. I built a fire and we roasted bockwurst sausages over our firepit outside. Then after the relaxing, sumptuous meal, Gloria announces that she and Dad have decided to sell the Brownsville place. I try to keep my voice calm and ask them about what their pleasures and fears are, and nervously tap a marshmallow-sticky willow branch against the table. I'm outraged at the inexorability of time and events. I hate to agree with that asshole George Bush, but since September 11, the world *has* changed. For me, everything seems simultaneously inevitable and unpredictable. For me, this is one small loss in a year of huge personal loss. My folks' announcement is a pull on the plastic that held this place, this summer retreat, together. The years flow out. The future drops away.

Home

Thursday, August 28, 2002

Brownsville, Vermont

Well, after some negotiations, the Folks and I have agreed that I'll buy the Brownsville house from them. This is exciting -- Dad and Gloria and my brothers and sisters and their appurtenances can come visit in the summers, and I finally get to realize my dream of living in the country. And I, and perhaps my folks,

don't have to face losing this place.

The sticky point is whether I can build a rental/winter house up near the road in the 3 acre meadow that is flat and cleared and has more sunlight and views. It is THE commercial place to put a year-round house. It is everyone's understanding that this was stipulated at the time of the deed restriction with the Human Society. They monitor the property now for compliance as an animal sanctuary. Except the allowance does not appear in the deed restriction document. It's not clear if the deal will live if the meadow is closed to building.

Dealing with the folks is a giant river of shit. I go between wanting to just walk away, to just saying "oh, they're old and curmudgeonly, ain't that cute". Well, not cute, but you get the point.

I swing between the manic and the depressed:

The Manic:

I'll finish out this house, add a rental house, build out some sleeping cabins for Summer, and have jazz camp for a few one-week sessions in the Summer, when it's hot in NY. Get some jazz musicians to come up here for pay and retreat, get sponsored or paid kids to come up here, have the musicians teach music during the day, have performances at night. This place is a natural retreat and performance space. The aroma of barbecue fills the house and the locals, students and staff sit back, fat and happy with pesto pasta and BBQ, and enjoy live music in the greatroom. On hot nights, we have brass quartets (trombone/trombone/french horn/tuba) play out on the porch, and we listen as we wander around the lawn under the trees.

The Depressed:

I'll freeze here in Winter, it'll be dark, I'll never work on the house, I'll get fired, I'll go poor and default on the mortgage, no one will visit me, and I'll be too depressed and poor to go back to New York City, I'll shoot myself one cold and dark January morn out of fear and depression. My coyote-eaten remains won't be found until the snow melts in May.

Memories wash in every day, of the house where I grew up, on La Loma street in the Berkeley hills. I still feel the loss of that place, that house that even at age twelve I wanted to inherit and live in forever. I learned that I would not live in that house forever when my sister Martha came down to my basement room one morning. With a casual tone and a smirk on her face, she told me that mom and dad were going to split up, and that she would go with dad, and I would go with mom to live in an apartment. An *apartment*?! I had lived in that huge, solid, three story house with my own bedroom, with freedom to crawl through the basement, the attic, and build forts in the yards. The place had a laundry chute you could drop bundles of sheets down and listen as they wooshed to the basement. The basement had space for my dad's woodshop, my brother's darkroom, the laundry room, and a room with a 14 foot ceiling that became my bachelor pad when I was in junior high. The laundry chute emptied out into a giant wooden bin you could stand in, and there was a huge concrete sink. The water heater was an on-demand, cast iron monster which had rings of gas jets inside surrounding a spiral of water pipes. My sister and I would open its door and gaze into the belly inferno at the rings of fire that came to life when someone ran the hot water. From the third story West bedroom and sunroom we had a view across the shimmering San Francisco Bay. I remember that room:

I am standing in the room, on a bright, warm day, watching Martha and her friend Minnie, and their "guys", Shay and Huey, playing foosball. Minnie is beautiful, and is always sweet to me. She has golden hair, big eyes, and fine, small white wrists with golden arm hair, and wears thin silver bracelets. And she has something none of the girls my age have: breasts. I'm in love with Minnie. She's three years older and I'm sure she just thinks of me as Martha's cute little brother. I want her to think of me the way she thinks of Huey. I want to kiss her the way I see Martha's friends making out when she has parties. Martha tells me to split. But Huey and Shay

allow me to stay and play foosball, saying "he's a guy, and he can pee standing up, so he's cool." I'm grateful and impressed with these guys and their giant belt buckles, their roach clips hanging off the pockets of their frayed bell-bottom jeans, their long, greasy hair.

There were stairways, landings, large rooms, seven bedrooms, two top-floor sun porches, and walk-in closets for chasing each other and playing hide-and-seek. I remember going to spray cars with water as they drove around our bend in the road:

From my hiding place behind the juniper bush, I let loose a torrent of water when I hear the car, before I can see it. With a stream of water in mid-air, I see that the car is a black and gold T-top firebird with the tops off and the windows down, and the largest, Mac-Daddy-est black guys I've ever seen. My aim couldn't have been better if I had planned it: the passenger takes the hit right in the bridge of his enormous gold sunglasses -- the water soaks his afro and he yells, then spots me. They will come back to kill me. I run upstairs. Where to hide? I peer out of my dad's bedroom window: nothing yet! I hide in his deep walk-in closet, under his stuffy, tweed, university coats. I am petrified, but the safety of the house and the depth of the closet prevails and I am safe.

In the enormous living room there was room for a Steinway, and a king-size fold out couch where five kids could sleep for slumber parties. The large dining room housed our oval, walnut table, shiny and smelling of the lemon Pledge it was my job to apply, where the five of us sat and had long, chatty dinners.

I remember La Loma being sold when my parents split up. I remember helping my mom prepare it for sale. We painted, we scraped, we went through gallons and gallons of drywall joint compound making sickly cake-frosting designs on the ceilings with the joint compound, attempting to hide the huge plaster cracks.

And now I would be relegated to an *apartment* while my sister went with my dad to live in a new *house*?! Ever since we left that place, La Loma, I dream about it. In my dreams, I am constantly trying to "repair" La Loma -- and I am the only one capable of holding it all together, able to rebuild it. In the dreams, the house stands, but has rotten studs; it has a leaking roof, or a collapsing foundation, or snakes of wires and plumbing hopelessly tangled in the walls. Now, with Brownsville, some part of me feels that it is my duty to hold this place together again. This place where we have outdoor barbecues under the Milky Way and shooting stars, and we brothers and sons go swimming together.

And now I wonder why I have to have more than one house to feel secure. I still won't be secure until I also have a building in NY and a farm in Virginia in addition to my house in Berkeley and this house and land in Vermont. My folks having to sell this place is a huge blow to my world view, that as retirement progresses, one still must worry about money and a secure place to be.

It is very hard to be around dad full time this year. Today we were sharing a nice moment admiring the view from the deck, the deck that I finally convinced him would be a grand idea and finally got approval this year to buy decking for, and his view, the one he worked for 15 years with a chainsaw and a weedwacker to create. We both agreed that the view from the deck would be worth him coming to visit in future summers. The he said: "I have another fantasy -- that if I come down the driveway to visit, and I see a chimney coming out of the roof anywhere between the middle of the house and this end, I'm turning around and going back home." He means that if a woodstove is placed anywhere in the living room, he won't visit this house. He's also admonished me to never place a woodstove in the fireplace, either. He admits that the fireplace will never heat the house, and that as designed, it would suck more warm air out of the house and up the flue than it provided in heat. And he has said that I should never put glass doors on the fireplace. So today's statement is backed by a whole canon of statements about the proper design of this house. What is different about today's dictum is that it carries the weight of an ultimatum -- *change the design of the house in any way that I don't approve of and I won't visit you.*

Sometimes I watch him when he falls asleep sitting in a chair or on the couch. Propped up perfectly,

except for his head, lolled forward, chin and mouth wrinkled closed, or backwards, mouth agape. He looks dead. A wave of fear starts in my stomach and climbs up to my jaw, and I realize that any day, he could, in fact, be dead. His physical condition is very different this year, and his mental state is very different. He's so infuriating at times, yet in these moments I find myself praying that the time we have left won't be over just yet. I'm relieved to see his chest rise as he breathes. It's scary to sit and talk with him about the future. He says stuff like "well, I'll never build another one of those," or "I can go home and throw away my 75 boxes of research material -- I won't need them anymore." He's looking at the few years left in his life, and some of them may not contain the energy required to do carpentry or write books. I get tired sometimes, but I can not conceive of knowing I'll never write another book, or build another house. He talks about not being able get on a plane in the next five years. In the big picture, that's 80 years old -- not bad. But for now he's still schlepping building materials around, and running power tools.

I'm so excited about getting this place, working on it, planning for it, carrying on the work he's done. But I can't talk to him about it. When I do, he cuts me off saying, "Oh, I can't even *talk* about that!" As though the idea of any of his plans being changed would cause him immediate pain. Some topics of house improvement are OK, most are not. I can't mention putting in a vegetable garden, or breaking up the vast lawn, or putting in a window larger than 2 feet by 2 feet in the bedroom, or new lighting or woodstoves, or fireplace improvements, or relocating the clotheswasher, without offending him. I know it is because the process of leaving the house is so painful for him.

A lot of times we are quiet and don't talk much. There seem to be so many topics I can't broach, and others I'm afraid to. I want to ask him directly about what it's like being old, if he's afraid, etc. In the past, when I've asked him directly about anything, he's always side-stepped the questions. Sometimes he'll loop back days later with a little prepared speech that addresses one of the questions.

Some evenings we sit back and relax into our roles of the previous year, sharing stories, talking late at night, and I cherish these moments.

I find myself wanting to slip into his role, his life, or my view of his life. I walk around the yard the way he does, admiring certain views, special trees. I find myself gazing at the house for long moments, just appreciating it. It's more than admiring a building: I'm trying to absorb his legacy.

The News from Brownsville

Spring, 2003
Brownsville, Vermont

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.

Well, it's been raining a lot this week in Brownsville, my home town.

[applause]

Miss Ruthie O'Malley, who works up at the Poplar Hill Farm, a piece of God's Country that is about the closest to heaven that any of us will ever get, considering the deeds we may or may not have done, or whether God was looking at the time, reports on her answering machine that some sheep went missing. If you call up to the farm, her normally sweet, if crisp, educated, New England Yankee voice can be heard on the message, in a rather concerned, agitated, prim tone -- the tone of a librarian calling to alert you of your late fee for "The Joy of Sex", a fine, informative book, one that I spent many hours as a pubescent lad studying in some detail, but nevertheless a book the librarian would rather not admit exists in the first place -- Miss Ruthie's voice can be heard speaking rapidly, as though not a second is to be lost in the

recovery of these animals:

"Hello, this is Poplar Hill Farm. On May 23, three of our sheep went missing and are wandering around Woodstock. They *are* ours, if you see them, please let us know."

As though the good townfolk over in Woodstock will see the sheep and exclaim, "well now aren't those the Poplar Hill Sheep, I do believe I recognize them." Perhaps they have ear tags. I don't know, I can't say I've ever met the Poplar Hill Sheep.

[laughter]

Up at our place, the lack of hot water continues to hamper efforts at maintaining cleanliness, both of body and of dinnerware. The dishes are now piled in great stacks, every one of the dishes in the house, in fact, is now dirty -- the cupboards are bare, in the true sense of the phrase. Having an empty pantry leads to starvation directly, but having empty cup-boards simply leads to shameful reuse, and ultimately, in dire cases, to starvation by lack of cutlery. I have taken to keeping one plate, one bowl, and one large spoon rinsed off, like a single, shaven Tibetan monk, in his frigid mountain temple, carrying his one wooden bowl and his one cup in his robe, rinsing his rice out with his broth, then his tea, the ultimate in utilitarian efficiency. I don't wash the little teaspoons, there seems to be an infinite supply of them in the drawer, so I have taken to using these to sneak spoonfuls of yogurt, ice cream, and peanut butter from the tubs in the fridge, eating American style -- over the sink -- and sometimes, in sinful excess, I use a teaspoon to eat my pasta, direct from the pot, and then slide the spoon quietly into a pot of water that sits in the sink, the pot that is now brim full of dirty teaspoons. Of course, now the sink itself is full of pots, so I don't heat anything up any more, except for foods that can be cooked in the non-stick frying pan: pancakes and quesadillas. The pancake batter is mixed from a box into my monk's bowl, which is then quickly rinsed after use. The water from the well is just too darn cold for a good washing, so I use a quick rinse before any food particles have a chance to set in.

And believe me I know: I've been reading about food particles a lot lately, obsessively, driven by fear that the food particles massing in the kitchen will achieve not only sentience, but will revolt and demand healthcare and free elections. I pore over websites about dishwashers. In my state of lack of hot water and excess of dishes, which I am now determined not to wash by hand, even when hot water is restored, I have spent more money than a body should have on a fancy dishwasher, about going rate these days, I'm afraid, but still more than my father would like to see me spending on what is, after all, even though I hold the mortgage and live here alone, still his house, and will continue to be so long after his days. The blessed machine won't arrive for ten more days, maybe 13 counting weekends, and I've yet to even install the hot water heater. But still, I've researched and selected and ordered, so, you see, I now know all about wash cycles, sterilization temperatures, rack spacing, sippy-cup lid holders, soft food disposals, and hard food grinder disposals, as they are called in the Large Kitchen Appliance trade, as though when washing dishes you will routinely put whole bowls of cracked walnut shells in to be cleaned. There are lengthy, technical discussions on the deposition of food particles and the devices to combat this modern malady, this scourge upon the happiness and the cleanliness of the God-fearing home. I subscribed to ConsumerReports.org. I looked up ratings on epinions.com by happy housewives from the banal ("*I love my new Maytag!*") to the butch ("*I installed it myself!*") Some of these fine ladies go on at considerable length, with detailed essays on the selection, purchasing, fulfillment, installation, and operation (is obtainment a word?) of the latest in a series of home improvement selections designed to stay the inevitable, but hopefully avoidable, stare into the black hole of existence to contemplate the meaning of being.

One attempt to stave off the starvation that can result from not an empty pantry but an empty cup-board, is to invite my friends over for dinner of pot-luck on paper plates. And one such dinner I have planned is Mr. Cooper's birthday party this coming weekend. You see, he's just turned eight years old.

[applause]

For those of you who haven't met him, Mr. Cooper the Extremely Good Looking Dog is my constant

companion -- faithful, if more good looking than smart. We celebrated his birthday last night, he and I, by sitting in front of the fire, with the worlds best music on the CD player, loved by dog and man alike -- Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young's "So Far" -- and we enjoyed a bowl of ice cream each -- well, not truly a bowl in my case -- I used a teaspoon to eat directly from the tub, and spooned him a generous helping into his empty dog bowl, which he lapped up with frantic abandon. I'm not sure how good ice cream is for his constitution, so normally he's limited to licking out the ice cream tub when I'm done, a duty he takes quite seriously. However on this occasion, as on every birthday, I let him have a whole bowl to himself, softened, so that he won't swallow the ice cream whole. I'm not sure he understands that it is, in fact, his birthday, or why he gets such a one-in-a-year treat, but he was happy to get the ice cream just the same. Earlier in the day, we sat on the porch, between thundershowers, the only kind of showers happening around here these days, and I fed him a few spoonfuls of peanut butter, using, of course, fresh teaspoons for each dip. Even a dirty, dishless bachelor reels at the idea of dogslobber going back into the peanut butter jar. I don't know who benefitted more from the experience. Mr. Cooper loves peanut butter, but watching his tongue frenetically lapping all the way out and back in against his upper palate, attempting to extract all the peanut butter deposited there, watching this was more hilarious than I can explain. If you've seen this, you know. If not, words cannot explain the side-splitting laughter that results watching the poor beast caught between enjoying the pure goodness of peanut butter and wondering if he can ever restore the state of his tongue.

At any rate, the waterheater sits in my living room, out of its box, while I ponder the correct pipe fittings to purchase, and make phone calls to order obscure vent pieces for the machine. This is no ordinary water heater -- this is a marvel of modern technology. It is a European-style on-demand propane fired water heater, complete with computer control for flow and temperature, and a sealed combustion unit with a fan. It is a very expensive piece of equipment. For the price I could afford to fly round trip to Hotsprings in Colorado three or four times to bathe. But once installed, it will allow me to take showers of any length, or hot baths of any depth, though not, in practice, any deeper than the rim of the Jacuzzi tub upstairs. Although, even a military, two minute shower sounds pretty good these days. To install the propane tank, I needed to get a trench dug, running twenty feet from the house. I phoned the nice lady down at the job bank in search of laborers to come dig between rainstorms. The universal response from the underemployed seemed to be "Can't he get a backhoe to do that? It's awfully hard work." Well, Yankee ingenuity, I guess, not necessarily a willingness to work hard. I suppose that's where ingenuity comes from after all -- trying to avoid labor. I can't say I blame these fellows too much, after spending a Winter trying to keep warm against sub-zero temperatures, maybe there's just no energy left. I, of course, wintered in Sunny California, so I had the strength to go out in the rain and dig up the trench in about an hour. It felt good to break a sweat after poking away on the computer for so many days.

Spring is in the mountains. The lilacs are blooming, which, by itself, is newsworthy and worth a trip up here. The leaves on the trees are now fully out, though still that brilliant bright green that lets so much light filter down to the forest floor, and makes me think of the enchanted emerald city of Oz. Mr. Cooper and I take walks in the woods, amazed at the variety and subtle beauty of the small wildflowers that bloom in among the pine needles and maple leaf mulch. It seems only yesterday that I was trudging through the snow in snowboots, only the Pine, Hemlock, Fir and Spruce trees still green, seemingly against all odds, impervious as they are to the ten, twenty, even thirty degrees below zero Fahrenheit. Living in Vermont is like inhabiting a painting. In Spring, Summer and Fall, the painting is impressionist: soft, rich colors cover the canvas, except that you are in the middle of it, amazed at the three-dimensionality. In Winter, the picture is a flat, perfect etching in black and white: Birch trees outlined against snowbanks and gray skies. Now, thousands of tiny maple seedlings are once again making an attempt at treehood, standing a valiant 8 inches tall, hoping to gain height before they are overtaken by the blanketing ferns that seem to grow a foot a day. Walking in the forest, I fear stepping on the maple seedlings, not knowing which select few will become the towering hundred-foot-tall trees some day. I walk with avuncular care, not wanting to step on greatness.

The creek is too mad and too full to swim in, because of all the rain. I did get one dip in it during a week

of sunshine, a quick swim on account of the water temperature. And I did spend a little time on dam building, hefting the slimy, massive rocks back onto the dam. In the thaw, it seems, a giant tree, one that had settle in previous years smack dab in the middle of the dam, was lifted and moved thirty feet downstream by the rushing melt. The power of the water is awesome. Some of my best rocks were knocked downstream by the branches being dragged across the dam, I suppose. The water flows too powerfully in the center to allow me to do any serious construction there. With my bare feet struggling for purchase in the slimy stones on the creekbed, the largest rocks I can lift and place in the middle of the flow are tossed aside by the torrent as though they were the empty plastic milk jugs that come floating down the creek from time to time.

So its been a quiet week, if kind of a stinky one, although not as stinky as the previous week, when Mr. Cooper adorned himself by rolling in decayed carrion, and I had to give him a hose bath with the very cold well water out in the yard, but not before he paraded his funk all through the house. So Mr. Cooper is now clean, smelling sweet, and I am the one with the funk, but he doesn't seem to mind, especially when I bribe him with teaspoonfuls of goodness. If you have any forks or large soup spoons, be sure to send them our way; the Yankee propane tank installers may decide that it is simply too much work, and the dish situation is not getting any better.

That's the news from Brownsville, in the Green Mountains of Beautiful Vermont, where all the sheep are well known, all the women wear plaid and can operate chainsaws and shotguns, all the men are kind, if not clean, and all the dogs are Extremely Good Looking.

[applause]

Thank you, and good night.

Pixelate Me

All recordings pixelate reality.
Sometimes, this is a good thing.

How do movies smudge time?
How do photos, digital CMOS sampled,
or black dams, shutters, holding back floods of light
from drippy oceans of film
smudge time into impressionist pixel/crystals?

How do pictures catch moments in time, and even still,
time is smudged
information lost
reality pixelated

Digital pixelation,
those peptic smudges, those dancing rectangles,
on your priceless wedding/baby movies
are ugly
Digital color saturation,
is beautiful
if only for a few years
before it gets really annoying
like massive reverb tanks
from those 80's bands
lush and beautiful
eventually one just wants to climb out of the tank and just dry off, goddamnit.

A shutter, like eyelids, drags across the window of perception.
Film must smudge time.
A photo, time-smudged rich, is a drunken scene.

The flood gates open
light rushes in
photons like teenagers
hairsprayed high
rushing the cowpalace
to see Journey, live.
The teenagers hit the film/stage
and dive into the liquid film
ricocheting off blobulous chemicals
and fracturing/upending crystals
silver or mercury topsy turvy
and still more photon teenagers
undo the mercuries flouncing around
on the Bedouin carpets
until 1/2000th of a second later,
the gates slam closed, and the teenage photons melt into the last lounging mercury, and the party is over.

The Real Brady Bunch

At some point on our second date, my second wife said that what had made me interesting when we met was my admission of incest with two of my sisters. I don't believe I said it as a brilliant new pick-up line, but I do recall being desperate to hold Jenny's attention when I met her. As her dreamy eyes floated away from mine I must have dropped what to some would be the A-bomb of personal revelations, but to me was a fact of long ago family relations, appropriate in context to hold an interesting woman's interest. The context was my brother Anthony's wedding, so family history must have been on my mind. And the context was walking up to this violinist from the jazz band hired for the wedding and trying to speak to her. My family and my brother's friends were all gathered and chatting, before for the typical California Wedding service – a civil wedding but with a non-denominational, religion-lite minister reading some benign texts (Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*,...), under the Live Oaks on the brick patio of the redwood and stained glass Sausalito Womens' Club building (in Marin where my brother grew up, across the Bay from Berkeley), sedately posh and timeless, a beautiful Arts and Crafts masterpiece by Bay Area architect Julia Morgan. A Julia Morgan was a tasteful and fitting location for the wedding of an intellectual, up-coming lawyer and his lovely fiancée, and all their restaurateur/foodie friends. But it also made me feel happy and complete and connected in my personal history to Bay Area history that day. Julia Morgan, who also worked for William Randolph Hearst on his San Simeon Castle, was one of my architecture idols, along with contemporary Bernard Maybeck. Morgan and Maybeck shaped the hill neighborhoods where I grew up, from designing streets, steps and walks, to graceful buildings and gardens set in the oaks and redwoods for their well-heeled clients, and any walk around my neck of town involves gazing upon their sublime, natural buildings, admiring the beauty and sense of belonging and place that defines Berkeley to me as much as any of the past or present residents.

There, on the brick patio, outside the redwood french doors, Jenny played Stéphane Grappelli-ish violin to Adam's Django Reinhardt-ish guitar, Adam in a white shirt and wide silk tie, Jenny in a 1920's dress, her Jew-fro pulled back into a classical do with wisps hanging down past her red painted lips – a period piece playing period pieces. I was entranced by the gypsy jazz tunes, but more entranced by her, and she stared back, dreamy-eyed at me, sleeping through the impossibly fast runs she fingered on the fretboard.

However weird and shocking it may have been, something must have clicked because here she was now on our second date, this weird, beautiful, tall avant guard jazz violinist, sitting on my brick patio in Berkeley, stripped of her theatrical rouge and lip paint, hair wild and hippie-natural, bundled up in my plaid red wool woodsman's jacket against the cold Bay Area fog, lit by a string of white Christmas patio lights, telling me that "interesting and weird" beat normal, that she got cruised several times a day by normal guys who just bored her. Maybe she had a brother fantasy since she hadn't a real brother, just an adopted sister from Central America, and a yuppie-ish blood-sister my age, whom she later kept trying to hook me up with whenever she wanted to accuse me of being too yuppie myself and not weird enough.

But it remains true that I did try to sleep with two of my sisters. For one sister, the younger one, Sabrina, I had an excuse – she wasn't my sister. She was my dad's wife's younger daughter, and in the Summer of '78 we were all living together in my Dad's house on Grizzly Peak Boulevard, atop the Berkeley Hills. I was 13, Anthony also 13, Sabrina 14, and my blood-sister Martha 16. My older blood-brother Nathaniel, 19, would come crash in my bed when he visited us from his romps and squats in the High Sierras. Gloria's two oldest kids lived away from home: Danny, 18, and Cheryl, 20. Cheryl would be around during the holidays, and Danny would later come live with us as well.

The fog came in hard up there almost every day in the Summer, and would wrap you in drippy, cold, magical swirls, strangely quiet and beautiful. At night, we'd walk the wide boulevard, and the windy side streets, out in the middle, on the yellow stripe, wrapped in fog, because we could. Nobody drove around

at night up there, and there was nothing happening. We were bored and teenaged, and drugs and flirting were the only real pastimes other than waiting for up to an hour for the 7 Euclid Ave bus to take you down to Giant Burger or La Val's Pizza or some other bunk college food joint where there was also nothing happening. Sabrina had a short, stacked firecracker of a friend from New Jersey named Natalie whom we all wanted to sleep with (Anthony succeeded) who had no idea what a drought was, and would leave the water blasting (whut? It's jus wutta!) Late one night after lots of pot and cigarettes (I tried cigarettes for a month when Natalie was around, but I always toked them – inhaling deeply – and always got a bit queasy and sick from them) Natalie, who was a snappy, sassy flirt with a quick, almost mean laugh, said that if I fucked Sabrina, I could fuck her, too. After some queasy negotiations about condoms, clothing and kissing required ...

LARAMIE: Umm, I don't have any condoms.

NATALIE: Hey! Why don't you ask your dad?

He'd have some!

LARAMIE: At midnight?

NATALIE: Sure! They're still up.

LARAMIE: So I can do it with Sabrina?!

NATALIE: Don't tell him who, you just need them.

He'll be cool.

LARAMIE: No.

NATALIE: It's OK, Sabrina's not getting her period yet.

SABRRINA: Well, not all the time.

LARAMIE: So you are?

SABRRINA: Well, sometimes, but not regularly.

NATALIE: See? It's fine.

SABRRINA: I can't get pregnant. It's fine.

LARAMIE: Umm, OK.

NATALIE: OK, take off your pants.

LARAMIE: Well, I might need to make out first.

SABRRINA: Oh, I don't know.

NATALIE: Come on you guys!

Eventually, Sabrina got on top of me on the bed and fumbled and tried to get things to fit and work, which of course they didn't, because I wasn't hot for Sabrina, I was hot for Natalie. Some kissing was suggested, but Sabrina's kissing style was manly and tongue-y and tasted like stale cigarettes, and turned me off even worse. The girls proposed blindfolding me with a tee-shirt so I'd stop thinking about Sabrina but that didn't work either.

Sabrina and I had become very close before this, riding the bus everywhere, going to swim on hot days to Lake Anza in Tilden Park, a vast, dry, overgrown outback that covered several valleys and ridges in the hills behind Berkeley. There were riding, jogging and fire trails throughout the park, and miles of eucalyptus stands -- tall, dry, oily, fire-prone trees from Australia (the leaves are apparently a favorite food of koala bears, none of whom live in Berkeley). Tilden was covered with poison oak, a brushy weed which would make you itch for weeks if you didn't learn to recognize it. Down in the bottom of the first valley was Lake Anza, and we'd pack up a picnic and lots of tanning oil and cocoa butter, skimpy bathing suits and oversized towels, and go lie on the man-made beach on the bank of the muddy green lake, walk past the kiddies sectioned off from the deep part of the lake by ropes with algae-coated floaters, and swim to the raft where the cool teenagers hung out, and try to pull each other up to the raft with cocoa-butter-slippery arms. Sometimes it was cool, sometimes we were out-cooled by older kids, so we'd slink back to our towels on the beach and work on our tans.