

WILKES
July 4, 1993

Mr. Norman Mailer
627 Commercial St.
Provincetown, MA 02657

Dear Norman,

The enclosed advertisement for Vidal's essay collection set me thinking again. The rave blurbs and the notion that the collection will be the big beach book for the summer touched--vicariously-- a competitive nerve. You are a better essayist than Vidal. Your range is greater and there is none of his special pleading (for the establishment of the homosexual kingdom). Sports, violence, theological thought are beyond him. True, he is good on Hollywood, the pretensions of the West Point-Wasp world and certain writers. Well, there is no use pressing the point. You know your own strengths. I see four kinds of collections that could ace his:

- 1) a career omnibus volume containing the best of your five miscellanies plus some of your best pieces since Pieces and Pontifications in 1982;
- 2) a new miscellany collecting the best of your work from 1982-93;
- 3) your literary essays, including "Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room," "The Mind of an Outlaw," "Punching Papa," "Some Children of the Goddess," "Quick Comments of the Modern American Novel" (the MLA talk, perhaps your finest literary essay), the "Wild 90" essay, your review of Norman Podhoretz's book, "A Course in Film-Making," the intro to A Transit to Narcissus, preface to A Fiction Writer's Handbook, preface to Papa by Gregory Hemingway, "Our Man at Harvard," the D. H. Lawrence section from the Miller book, another from the same book on Miller and Hemingway, "Before the Literary Bar," "The Hazards and Sources and Writing," "Huckleberry Finn, Alive at 100," perhaps your intro to Aldridge's book Dwight Macdonald's, "The Writer's Imagination and the Imagination of the State," your review of American Psycho and of "JFK"--there are a lot more, I'm being cursory, leaving out the literary parts of The Prisoner of Sex, many of the prefaces and all of the interviews. Goddamned important book.

4) a collection of your biographical portraits.

From our conversation of a week or so back, I think perhaps you have forgotten how often you have written in this mode. Consider this list of names: Jack Kennedy, Jackie Kennedy (1962 and 1983), Gene McCarthy, LBJ, Hemingway, Bobby Kennedy, ~~LBJ~~, John Lindsay, Henry Miller, D.H. Lawrence, Goldwater, El Loco, Muhammad Ali, Gary Gilmore, Marilyn, Robert Lowell, Dwight Macdonald, Norman Podhoretz, Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey, Rockefeller, the astronauts, Abbie Hoffman, Cy Rembar, Malaquais, ^{Hal}"Red" in Of A Fire on the Moon, Joe Frazier, George McGovern, Conrad, Clint Eastwood, Warren Beatty, Mike Tyson, George and Barbara Bush, the Quayles and Picasso. Okay, a half dozen of these might not be sterling enough, but if you took half of the above you'd have a 250-page book of great range and insight. I've forgotten Floyd Patterson and Liston and others, I'm sure.

Before you dismiss any or all of this quartet, consider letting me send you the selections for one or more of them, which I will be happy to cull and calibrate. I predict that the biographical portraits will turn your head. (You had a chapter once called "Portraits and Powers.") Admit it, you don't always remember your past work with clarity. You may remember the emotions surrounding the effort of writing a piece, or its reception, but you may not recall its specific texture or valence. Also, seeing them arranged in a new constellation could give you a new sense of their merits. It would not be a big task for me to pull #4 together, for example. No one could do faster.

I know that there are probably overriding negatives--money, timing, etc. -- but if there is even a slight chance of Mailer's gallery of princes, princesses, prizefighters, and politicians finding their way back into print, I'm happy to do the assembling. One last note: I see no parallel with Some Honorable Men, which was, in my judgment, not put together the right way. It was either too long or too short.

Things are going well for me at Wilkes. The Board just approved a \$25 million bond issue which will enable us to start our first doctorate and build three new buildings. Most of my weeks are 70 hours long, but I feel as if I am gaining, not losing energy. Donna is both eager and anxious about starting her doctorate. The boys are coping and growing. Being back East agrees with us.

Please give our love to everyone, especially to Kate, the new bride. I'll call soon to see about an August visit. I hope your writing is going well. Flow words, flow.

All Best,

Mike
Mike

Enclosure



WILKES-BARRE • PENNSYLVANIA 18766 • 717/831-5000

15 April 1994

Mr. Norman Mailer
142 Columbia Heights
Brooklyn, N.Y. 11201

Dear Norman:

What follows is the result of a scan of all your books except the novels. My reading of these over the past month has confirmed my initial view that there was a fine collection to be mined and smelted from your previous books. The more recent, uncollected, essays are fat, rich nuggets--the Huck Finn essay for example--that will give the collection a greater luster and burnish your reputation as a literary critic. Even after discounting my large enthusiasm for writing by Norman Mailer, I find a wonderful book, bristling with marvels. It will be better than the Vidal omnibus, and far better than Updike's 1991 collection, Odd Jobs.

Here is an overview of the following pages:

Key: L = Literature, P = Portraiture
Number of selections: 122 (L = 53, P = 69)
Number of book pages: 1255 (L = 610, P = 645)
Number of uncollected pages: 186 (L = 95, P = 91)

Possible additions:

Interviews with Laura Adams, Robert Begiebing, Paul Attanasio; more selections from newspaper and magazine columns; an excerpt from Pablo and Fernand; an excerpt from your unpublished piece on the 1992 Democratic convention.

Possible deletions:

200-300 pages could be cut without serious difficulty. However, I could have easily inflated the total number of pages by the same amount. I was modestly discriminating in compiling my list.

Other issues:

I think topical grouping of the selections is required. A chronological approach is too relentless and gives away the possibility for some happy juxtapositions and surprising pairings.

The book could be divided into two books and issued a year apart, or kept together in the hardback edition and separated in the paperback editions, as with Pieces and Pontifications. Whatever is done, I think there should be two enclaves--literature and portraiture.

I'm very excited about the collection and am prepared to get to work as soon as you give the word. Donna is ready to pitch in. She was of enormous help on both Pieces and Pontifications (1982) and Conversations with Norman Mailer (1988). The task of duplicating the 122 selections will be time-consuming, not to mention the other editorial work. But we relish the opportunity and are grateful for it.

Norm, I know that you are in the home stretch on "Oswald's Ghost," and won't have much time for this project right now. But I also know that you might be interested in considering at some odd hour the attached list of essays, reviews, interviews, excerpts, prefaces, forwards and several other sub-genres. I also know that you may wish to promote the collection at Random House for tactical reasons. So I'm sending this package on to you now, although I understand you'll be humping it on the Oswald book until the end of April. Our love to Norris.

Best regards,



J. Michael Lennon

VPAA

717/831-4200 (O)

717/696-2374 (H)

8/2/96



WILKES
UNIVERSITY
170 South Franklin Street
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766

To: Norman MAILER

From: MIKE CENNON

Phone:

Phone: 717-831- 4208

Fax: 508-877-2136

Fax: 717-824-2934 or 831-7820

Number of Pages (Including Cover
Sheet): 6

Comments: Dear Norm,

Here is the preface.
I'm pondering the order of
the book with Bob Peater
today

Best,
Mike

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Introduction

Deaths for the Ladies was written through a period of fifteen months, a time when my life was going through many changes including a short stretch in jail, the abrupt dissolution of one marriage, and the beginning of another. It was also a period in which I wrote very little, and so these poems and short turns of prose were my lonely connection to the one act which gave a sense of self-importance. I was drinking heavily in that period, not explosively as I had at times in the past, but steadily—most nights I went to bed with all the vats loaded, and for the first time, my hangovers in the morning were steeped in dread. Before, I had never felt weak without a drink—now I did. I felt heavy, hard on the first steps of middle age, and in need of a drink. So it occurred to me it was finally not altogether impossible that I become an alcoholic. And I hated the thought of that. My pride and my idea of myself were subject to slaughter in such a vice.

Well, this preface is not to recount the story of those years and how I may have come out of them; no, we are here to give a crack of light to the little book which follows. I used to wake up in those days, as I have just remarked, with a drear hangover, and the beasts who were ready to root in my entrails were prowling outside. To a man living on his edge, New York is a jungle, and such mornings were full of taboo. It was often directly important whether the right or left hand was crossed with water first.

One modest reality used to save such hours from dipping too quickly into too early a drink. It was the scraps of paper I would find in my jacket. There were fragments of poems on the scraps, not poems really, little groupings of lines, little crossed communications from some wistful outpost of my mind where, deep in drink the night before, it had seemed condign to record the unrecoverable nuance of a moment, a funny moment, a mean moment, a moment when something

Norman Mailer

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I might always have taken for granted was turned for an instant on its head.

Some of those curious little communications which came riding in on the night through an electrolyte of deep booze were fairly good, many were silly, the best were often indecipherable. Which would feel close to tragic. Almost always the sensation of writing a good poem (in the dark of early morning) was followed in the daylight by the knowledge I had gone so deep I could not find my eyes. My handwriting had temporarily disintegrated in the passion of putting down a few words. Somebody had obviously been down in the rapture of the depths.

It was not so very funny. In the absence of a greater faith, a professional keeps himself in shape by remaining true to his professionalism. Amateurs write when they are drunk. For a serious writer to do that is equivalent to a professional football player throwing imaginary passes in traffic when he is bombed, and smashing his body into parked cars on the mistaken impression that he is taking out the linebacker. Such a professional football player will feel like crying in the morning when he discovers his ribs are broken.

I would feel like crying too. My pride, my substance, my capital, was to be found in my clarity of mind or—since my mind is never so very clear—let us say found in the professional cool with which the brain was able to contend with the temptations and opportunities each leap of intuition offered. It was criminal to take these leaps like an amateur, steeped in drink, wasteful, wanton. To be hearing the inspirations of the angel when one is kissing the flames is a condition so implicit with agony that it took eighteen centuries of Christendom before Kierkegaard could come back alive with the knowledge that such moments not only existed but indeed were the characteristic way modern man found a knowledge of his soul—which is to say he found it by the act of perceiving that he was most certainly losing it.

I would go to work, however, on my scraps of paper. They were all I had for work. I would rewrite them carefully, printing in longhand and ink, and I would spend hours whenever there was time going over these little poems, these sharp dry crisp little instants, some of them no more and hopefully no less possessed of meaning than the little crack or clatter of an autumn leaf underfoot. Something of the wistfulness in the fall of the wind was in those poems for me. And since I wasn't doing anything else very well in those days, I worked the poems over every chance I had. Sometimes a working day would go by, and I might put a space between two lines or remove a word. Maybe I was mending. As the sense of work

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funny. In the absence of a greater faith, myself in shape by remaining true to his poets write when they are drunk. For a poet is equivalent to a professional football player in traffic when he is putting his body into parked cars on the street that he is taking out the linebacker. Such a player will feel like crying in the morning when his ribs are broken.

Writing too. My pride, my substance, my self in my clarity of mind or—since my poetry is clear—let us say found in the profession of the brain was able to contend with the opportunities each leap of intuition offered. These leaps like an amateur, steeped in tradition. To be hearing the inspirations of a poet kissing the flames is a condition so intimate that it took eighteen centuries of Christen- gaard could come back alive with the moments not only existed but indeed in a way modern man found a knowledge as to say he found it by the act of perceiving: certainly losing it.

Work, however, on my scraps of paper. They work. I would rewrite them carefully, print them, and I would spend hours whenever I got over these little poems, these sharp dry bones of them no more and hopefully no more than the little crack or clatter of an old shoe. Something of the wistfulness in the as in those poems for me. And since I was going else very well in those days, I worked by chance I had. Sometimes a working day I might put a space between two lines or maybe I was mending. As the sense of work

grew a little clearer and the hangover receded, there was a happiness working mornings on *Deaths for the Ladies* which I had not felt for years. I loved *Deaths for the Ladies*, not because it was a big book—I knew my gifts as a poet were determined to be small—but because I was in love with its modesty. The modesty of *Deaths for the Ladies* was saving me. Out of the bonfire I seemed to have made of my life, these few embers were to be saved and set—not every last part of one's memories would have to be consumed. Besides, I wanted to give pleasure. It seemed to me that *Deaths for the Ladies* would give more simple pleasure than any book I had ever written, it was pure, it was modest, it was sad, and it was funny—it was so very modest—how could one not like it? And it had even one innovation to offer poets—so I thought. There was no music or prosody or command or rush of language in the book, no power, not much meter, not at all, much of it was poetry only by the arbitrary insistence of the short line, but *Deaths for the Ladies* was something else, I thought—it was a movie in words. I set it with the greatest care. Every line was placed on the page by me. The spaces were chosen with much deliberation, the repetitions of phrases were like images in a film. The music of the poem as a whole—if it had any—was like the montage of a film. I felt that all of *Deaths for the Ladies* made up one poem, not at all a great poem, never in any way, but still a most modern poem about a man loose in our city, for one cannot talk of New York without saying our city, there, majestic, choking in its own passions, New York, the true capital of the Twentieth Century. And *Deaths for the Ladies* was like a small sea breeze running through some of those electronic canyons where a myriad of fine moments were forever dying in the iridescence of foam.

Of course, if you fall in love with a book, you may be certain it will drown, suffocate, or expire all alone on an untended bed. *Deaths for the Ladies* came out in modest edition and sank without a sound. It was only reviewed three or four places, and the one good review it received (the *Sunday New York Times*) was six months late. Poets, for the most part, resented it. Why should they not? I had dabbled in that life for which they were willing, if they were good enough, to starve and to lose love. They had studied their craft, I had just skipped about in it. They were dedicated to poetry, I was dedicated to climbing out of the hole I had dug for myself, and poetry was offering the first rung. Therefore, poets ignored the book, which was a pity, for a good poet might have done something with my little innovation, my movie in words.

But to end on a note less altruistic to the interests of art let us look at one review. I had had secret hopes, I now confess, that *Deaths for the Ladies* would be a vast success at the bar of poetry. The hopes got bounced. Here is the review in *Time*, March 30, 1962:

Ever
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I mean
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Mr M
comes on
with fourbucks
of poems
about sex
not love
that run
down
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lined up
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Having less
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fun
a reader
counted
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and concluded
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which had
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I had had secret hopes, I now confess,
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You
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But hell you know that.

In a fury of incalculable pains, a poem was written in reply, sent to *Time* Magazine's column of letters, and printed there.

Poem to the Book Review at *Time*

You will keep hiring
picadors from the back row
and pic the bull back
far back along his spine
You will pass a wine
poisoned on the vine
You will saw the horns off
and murmur
The bulls are
ah, the bulls are not
what once they were
Before the corrida is over
there will be Russians in the plaza
Swine some of you will say
what did we wrong?
and go forth to kiss the conquerer.

Now, on the comfortable flank of this reminiscence, I think I may have been fortunate to get so paltry a reception on *Deaths for the Ladies*. For if I had been treated well, I might have kept floating in a still little pond, and drowned my sorrow for myself in endless wine and scraps of paper and folios of further poems. Instead, the review in *Time* put iron into my heart again, and rage, and the feeling that the enemy was more alive than ever, and dirtier in the alley, and so one had to mend, and put on the armor, and go to war, go out to war again, and try to hew huge strokes with the only broadsword God ever gave you, a glimpse of something like Almighty prose.



WILKES-BARRE • PENNSYLVANIA 18766 • 717/831-5000

January 6, 1997

X = NO

Mr. Norman Mailer
142 Columbia Heights
Brooklyn, NY 11201

Dear Norman,

Let me get right to the matter at hand. My comments will follow.

Limited editions of Mailer essays, profiles, reviews, and conversations

yes

* Two Dramatic Fragments: "Buddies, or the Hole in the Summit" (1959) and "Earl and Lyndon: An Imaginary Conversation" (1992)

yes

* Two Reviews: Bret Easton's American Psycho (1991) ^{NO} and Oliver Stone's "JFK" (1992) [Note: the Stone review could also go with review of "Last Tango," as noted later]

yes

* "The Hazards and Sources of Writing" (1985)

* "All the Pirates and People: Norman Mailer Discovers the Man Who is Clint Eastwood" (1983) and "The Warren Report" (1991) [Note: Could Madonna interview be added?] ^{NO}

yes

^{NO} * "An Evening with Jackie Kennedy" (1962) and "The Prisoner of Celebrity: Jackie Kennedy" (1983) [Note: Compare with later grouping]

* Three Friends: Jean Malaquais, Dwight Macdonald, Abbie Hoffman

"My Friend, Jean Malaquais" (1974) cut to 5.2x

Introduction to Dwight Macdonald's Discriminations (1983)

Introduction to The Best of Abbie Hoffman (1989)

[Note: Other Friends could be substituted or added: Jose Torres, Cy Rembar, Hal Conrad, John Aldridge. The Gene Kennedy preface and the Mario Vassi and Jean Davidson are too thin, but the first four are solid.]

yes

* Homage to Hemingway: "Gladiators: For Hemingway" (poem, 1974); "A Wandering in Prose: For Hemingway" (1956); Preface to Papa by Gregory Hemingway (1976) [Note: There are several other possibilities.]

yes

NO

Punching Paper

Send to Mailer

yes 2 or 3 separate

- to page 1
- X
- NO
- X
- 4x
4
- yes
- Modern Mailer
- stands alone
- A Political Afternoon
- alone
- in part
- * Four Literary Essays: "Modes and Mutations: Quick Comments on the American Novel" (MLA talk, 1965); D.H. Lawrence critique from The Prisoner of Sex, 1971; Hemingway and Miller from Genius and Lust (1976) and "The Hazards and Sources of Writing" (1985) [Note: the Fourth essay might best stand alone or go with the ten prefaces listed further on.]
 - * Beginnings: Preface to A Fiction Writer's Handbook by Whit and Hallie Burnett (1974); "Our Man at Harvard" (1977); Preface to A Transit to Narcissus (1977); Introduction to After the Last Generation by John Aldridge (1984)
 - * Conversations with the Right: "A Conversation Between Norman Mailer and John Ehrlichman; The CIA and Watergate" (1978) and "Search for Deliverance" (interview with Pat Buchanan, 1996) [Note: 1962 debate with Buckley could be added.]
 - * Two Ladies: "The Prisoner of Celebrity: Jackie Kennedy" (1983) "Like a Lady: Interview with Madonna" (1994) [Note: A selection from Marilyn could transform this into "Three Ladies" which would parallel "Three Friends".]
 - * Comic Ventures: "The Bad News Bearers" (Comic auto-obituary, 1979); Foreword to Dear Muffo by Hal Conrad (1982); "The Best Lies Very Close to the Worst" (portrait of Ryan O'Neal and Sly Stallone, 1993) [Note: the O'Neal piece could go with those about Beatty and Eastwood.]
 - * Two Movie Reviews: "Last Tango in Paris" and "JFK"
 - * Ten Prefaces: Introduction to The Short Fiction of Norman Mailer (1967); Deaths for the Ladies (1971); An American Dream (letter to Whit Burnett, 1970); Introduction to "The Time of her Time" (1973); Preface to Some Honorable Men (1976); Preface to Advertisements for Myself (1976); preface to Why Are We in Vietnam? (1977); preface to Franklin Library edition of The Naked and the Dead (1979); Special Message to Readers: Tough Guys Don't Dance, Franklin Library edition, 1984; Special Message to Readers: Oswald's Tale, Franklin Library edition, 1995 [Note: This one could be expanded by adding The Deer Park (two paragraphs); The Presidential Papers (there are two prefaces: 1963, 1976). A Transit to Narcissus (1977); The Idol and the Octopus, 1968. But the ten I suggest grouping together all have the merit of being both detachable and intrinsically interesting. Several of these prefaces are quite difficult to find, the intro to "The Time of Her Time," for example. (Remember its closing line: "Reader, the story you are about to peruse is the godfather of Lolita"). Finally, I think that the preface to A Transit to Narcissus goes much better with "Beginnings." Alternately, the best five or six prefaces could be chosen.
 - * Three Boxers: Preface to Sting Like a Bee by Jose Torres (1971); King of the Hill (1971); "Fury, Fear, and Philosophy," (portrait of Mike Tyson, 1988)
 - * "Hip, Hell and the Navigator" (interview with Richard Stern and Robert F. Lucid, 1958) and "Cosmic Ventures" (1989)

me

* "War of the Oxymorons" (1996) and "How the Pharaoh Beat Bogey" (1997) [Note: the Buchanan conversation could be added, if not used in the next item or earlier with the Ehrlichman conversation.]

X * Three Conversations: "Like a Lady: Interview with Madonna" (1994): "Black and White Justice" (O.J. Simpson discussed by Mailer pere and files, 1995); "Search for Deliverance" (Buchanan interview, 1996). [Note: Sex and politics come together in these three conversations, although I think Madonna may go better with Jackie Kennedy and, possibly, Marilyn.]

There are 18 possible limited editions, with several overlaps. Only one proposed edition contains a single piece, "The Hazards and Sources of Writing." But it could be added to "Four Literary Essays" or to the prefaces: Ten Prefaces and an Essay on Writing, which would comprise an 80-page book, one perhaps too large for a limited edition. The point is obvious: the groupings, while not arbitrary, can be re-shuffled as you see fit. That said, let me tell you my favorites: "Beginnings," which has a fine longitudinal coherence; the two George pieces; "Two Ladies" (or 3, with Marilyn); "Three Friends"; "Comic Ventures" (perhaps augmented with "Our Man at Harvard"); "Ten Prefaces"; the literary essays and the two cosmology pieces. But I like the Hemingway trio also and can suggest additional commentary on him from several of your books: the "dirty ape" discussion in "The Metaphysics of the Belly"; "That Summer in Paris" (also from Cannibals and Christians); the December, 1962 "Big Bite" column on his suicide; the opening meditation on his death in Of a Fire on the Moon and others in Armies, Advertisements, Miami and the Siege of Chicago and St. George. And the brilliant comparison with Miller in Genius and Lust.

Obviously, 18 limited editions are too many and would steal thunder from the omnibus collection, which is the main chance. But I think five or six or seven would be all right, if done judiciously over a three or four-year period. I am ready to undertake the job, either as editor/compiler or as manager of the entire project, from editing to mailing lists to the caging operation. I like your idea of a set of limited editions immensely.

After you have pondered the groupings and talked to Andrew we can talk again. You'll note that two of my earlier letters bearing on the project are in this packet. The 1994 proposal (updated to include all your fugitive prose through the last George piece) is also here. I am also enclosing, as a sample, the four pieces I suggest be called, collectively, "Beginnings." Depending on page size and type, it could be anywhere from 25-40 pages as a limited edition. The pieces are evocative as hell of your formative period. And funny as hell, in places.

Norman Mailer
January 6, 1997
Page 4

Really enjoyed having you and Norris at the Corbett House. Come Again.

All Best,


J. Michael Lennon
Vice President for Academic Affairs

P.S. We await with bated breath the Colonel's intersection with the Berlin gay bar scene in Harlot's Ghost.

P.P.S. I also enclose a copy of your letter to Whit Burnett, which I've always seen as a singular and brilliant orphan.