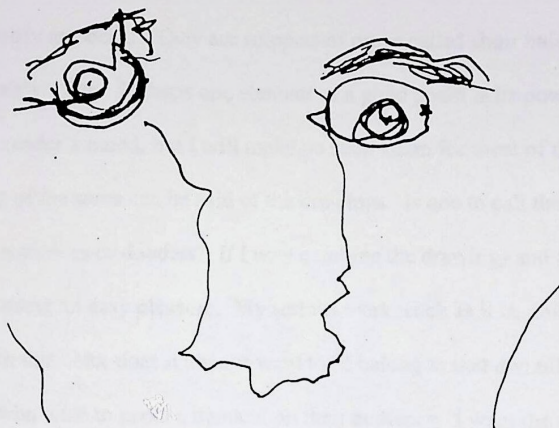


Modest
Gifts



Poems and Drawings
by
Norman Mailer



I don't know
where to
start

Well, in fact I do know. It is to warn the buyer. Let the buyer beware for the title is accurate; the gifts you will purchase are modest. William Merrill once wrote that a poem which was too easy to read was without value. "Difficult surfaces [can work] through to the poem's emotional core."

These pieces, for the most part, will be comprehensible on first approach. Some barely qualify as poems. They are snippets of prose called short hairs, there to shift your mood a hair's width. Perhaps one element of a good poem is its power to succeed in altering a reader's mood, but I will make no such claim for most of these inclusions, and something of the same can be said of the drawings. Is one to call them caricatures, cartoons, squibbles or doodles? If I now combine the drawings and the short hairs, it is to offer the reader an easy pleasure. My serious work, such as it is, does not always accomplish this. Nor does it always want to. I belong to that dwindling group of novelists who wish to make a demand on their audience. I want the reader to owe a little more to the work than some passing gratitude for the mild enlivening of his or her leisure time. My mind was shaped at an early age, after all, by the great Russian novelists with their implicit expectation that you, the reader, are there to suffer with the writer. Why? For a huge reason—to partake of the ongoing quest to deepen our comprehension of life and eternity as if—for fact!—life and eternity cannot survive without such a quest.

I still believe this. But at the age of eighty, tolerance insists on seeping into dedication. Casual pleasures become more meaningful even as lively pleasures sleep, and a few pains turn chronic. So, amusement becomes more of a virtue in itself. I now

like to think that a limited ability to draw when coupled with a merry pretension to write poetry can still become more than the sum of its parts, even as a minus times a minus will produce a plus. In mathematics, that always operates. In art, it can happen now and again. Obviously, I hope this is such an occasion.

I am not, however, being altogether candid. There are a few good poems and a few good drawings in this assemblage. Which ones they are, I keep to myself. My real pleasure will come if twenty different candidates are nominated by a score of men and women.

Here, I must offer a further confession. I knew this unashamedly self-serving attitude would have to disclose itself—modesty (at least for me) is too harsh a stricture to maintain all the way through these pages of a preface.

One more note:

About half of these poems were written in the early Sixties and published in a book called Deaths for the Ladies (and other disasters). The rest appeared by 1965 in Cannibals and Christians. Most of the drawings were done, however, in recent years. Nonetheless, the sketches are not all that removed from the tone of the short hairs, even if my ongoing mood in those years when the poems were written was considerably more intense. So I think it's appropriate to include an appendix at the back of this book. It is the introduction I wrote for a mass market paperback edition of Deaths for the Ladies that came out almost ten years after the first publication in 1962, and it will offer a subtext to those readers who find themselves somewhat intrigued by what follows.

I

Cocktail Party

A. Voices

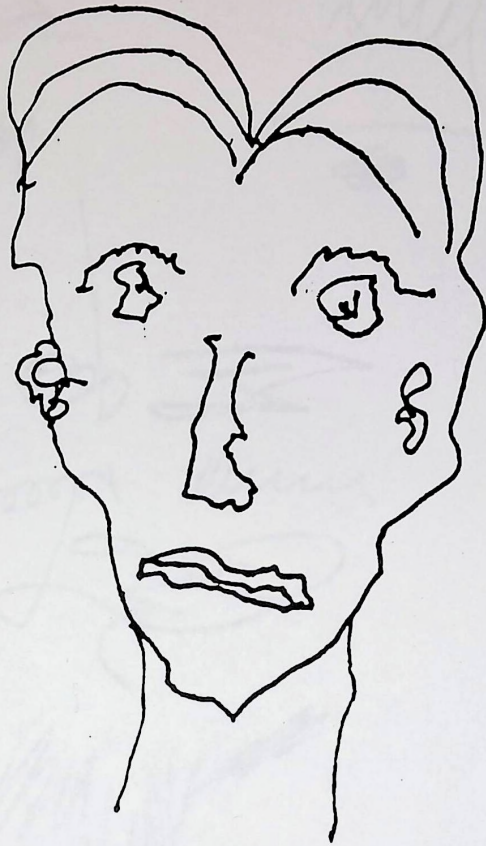
Don't speak to me
until I've had a drink.
I was out of phase
with the world today.



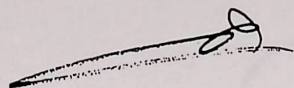
Don't speak to me
until I've had a drink.
I was out of phase
with the market today.



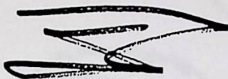
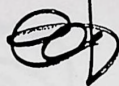
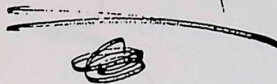
Sometimes I feel
as if I have a
picture of the whole.



Sometimes I feel
as if I have no grasp
of it at all.

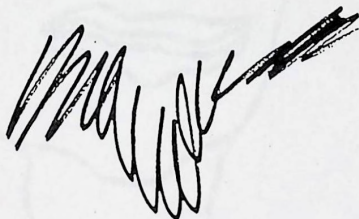


killer



killer

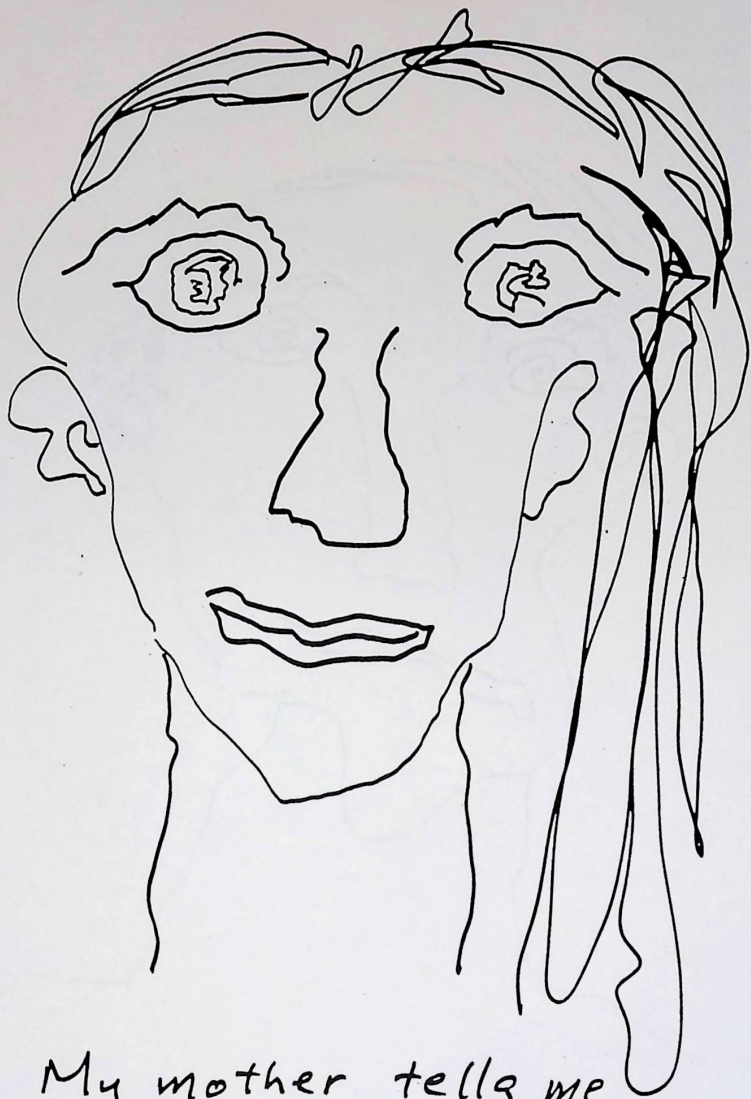
killer



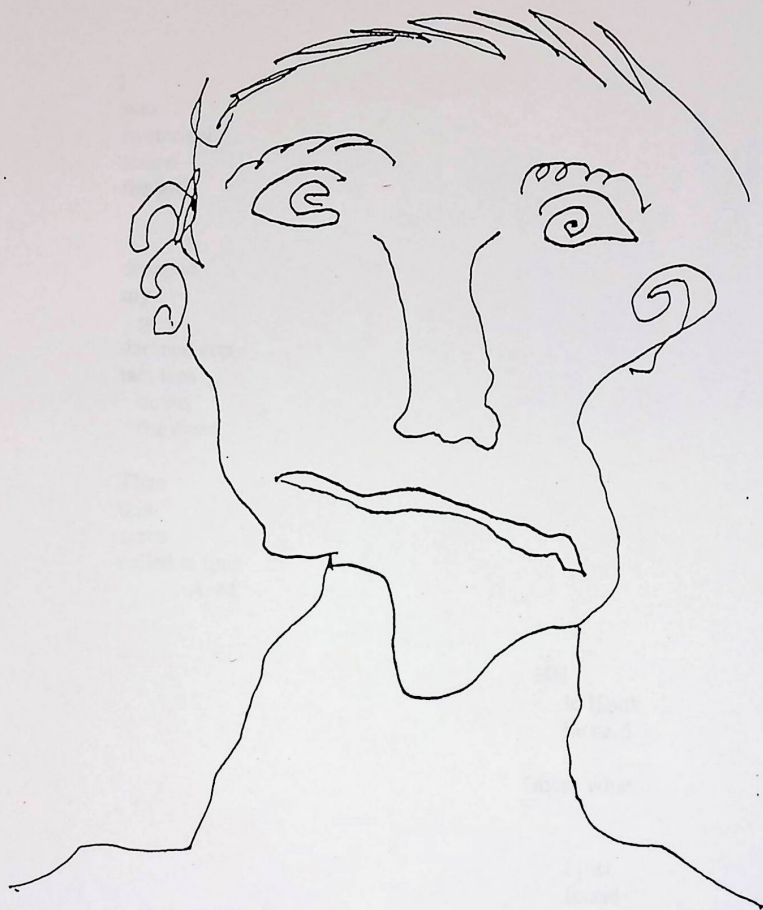
options.com Shoot me
an E-mail.



I never dreamed that I
would be the one to sell
our family home.



My mother tells me
that I would be a
beauty if I would
just pull myself
together.



My dream girl
is
Julia Roberts

I
was
hysterical
stated
the girl

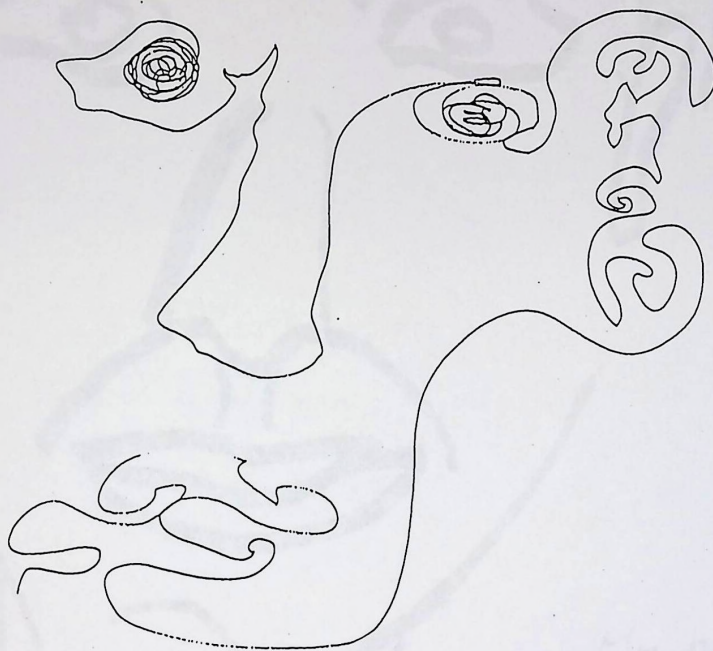
I
dropped
my
god
damned con
tact lens
down
the drain

Then
this
creep
called at four
A. M.

Hel
lo Kook
he said

Guess what:

I just
found
your
contact
lens.



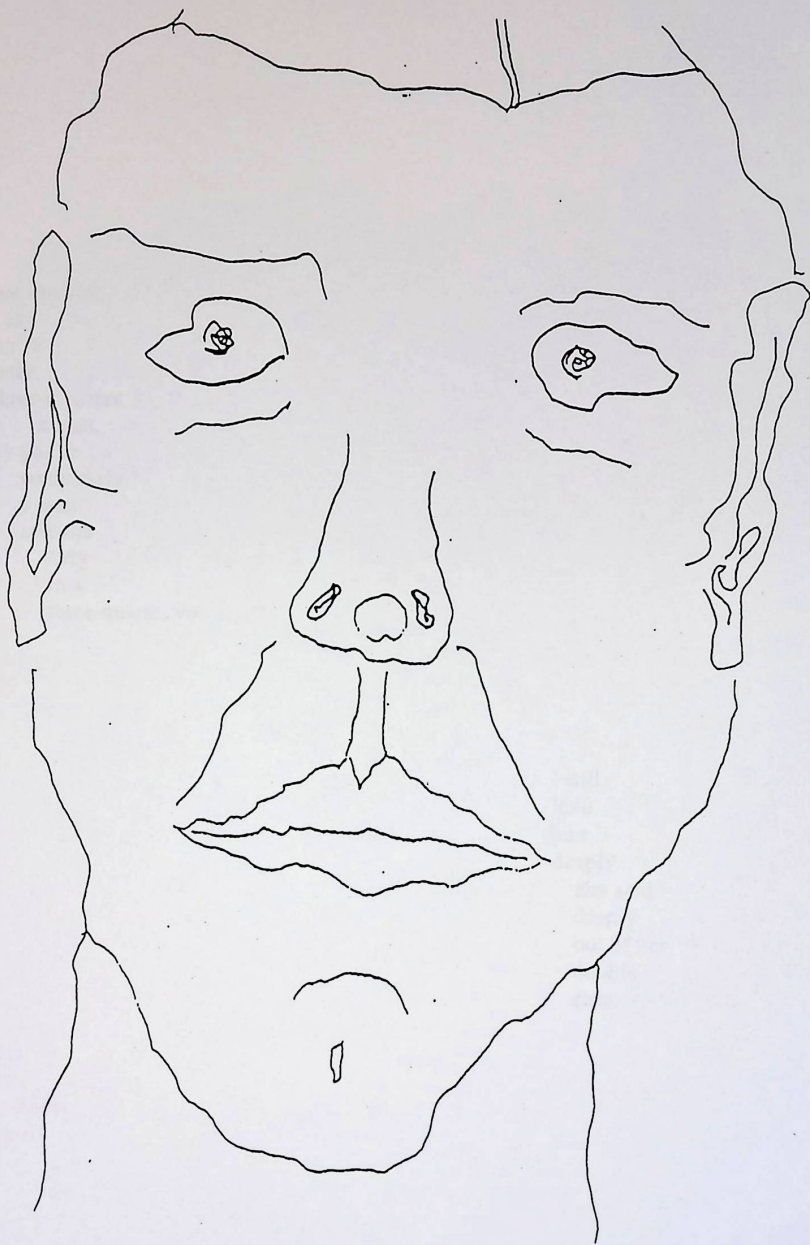
I feel
as if
I'm beginning
to look like
my cell phone.

My new
phone
is fantastic
Don't try
to steal my
cell!

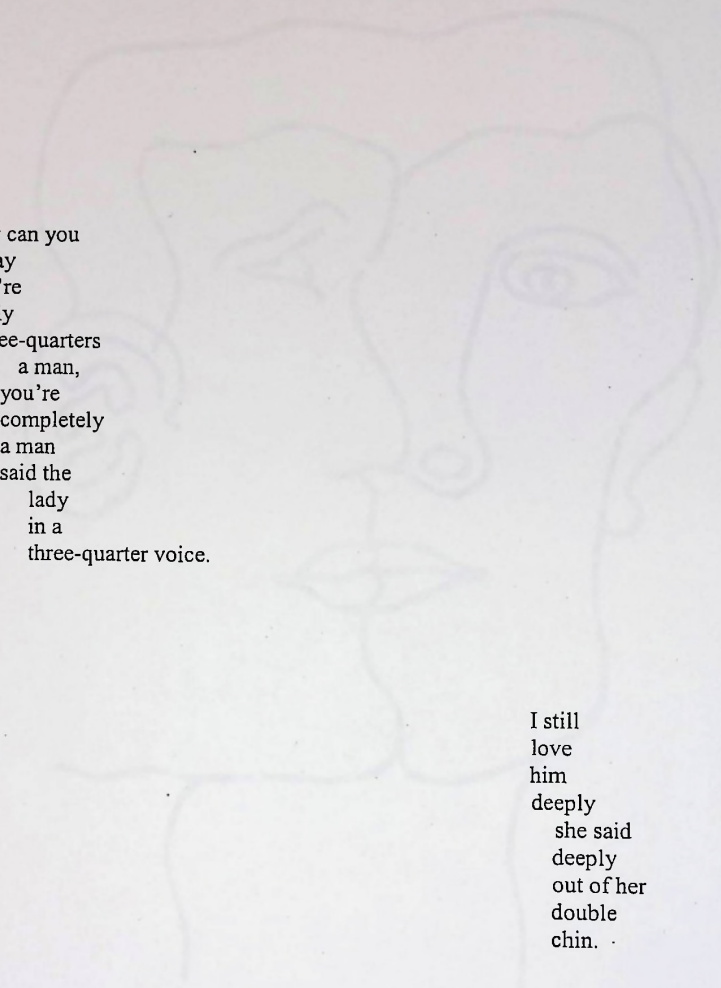


My new
date
is fantastic.
Don't try
to steal him,
Girl!!

I don't really believe
that I am gay. I'm just
a little bit of a
freak.



I don't really believe
that I am gay. It's just...



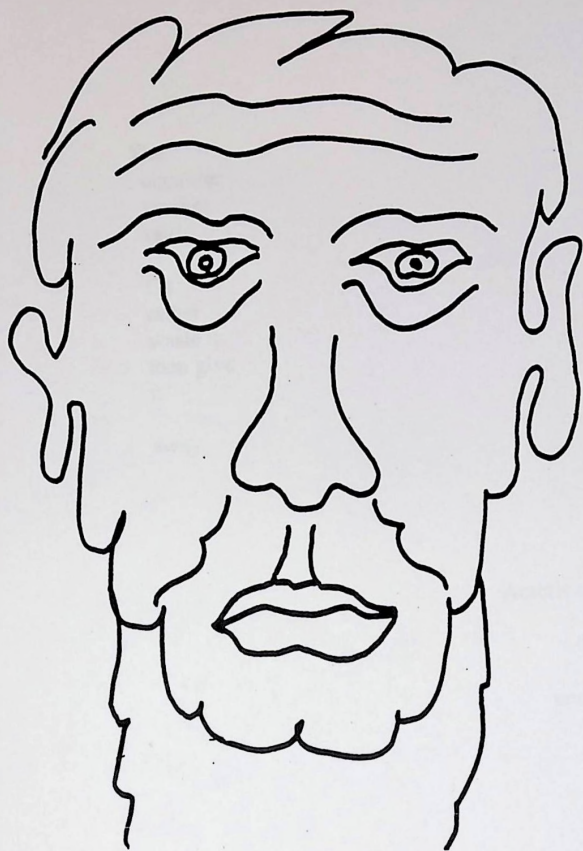
How can you
say
you're
only
three-quarters
a man,
why you're
completely
a man
said the
lady
in a
three-quarter voice.

I still
love
him
deeply
she said
deeply
out of her
double
chin.

Don't try to tell me,
Randy, that Fabio P.
didn't know what it
was all about.



Don't try to tell me,
Randy, that Pablo P.
didn't know what it
was all about.



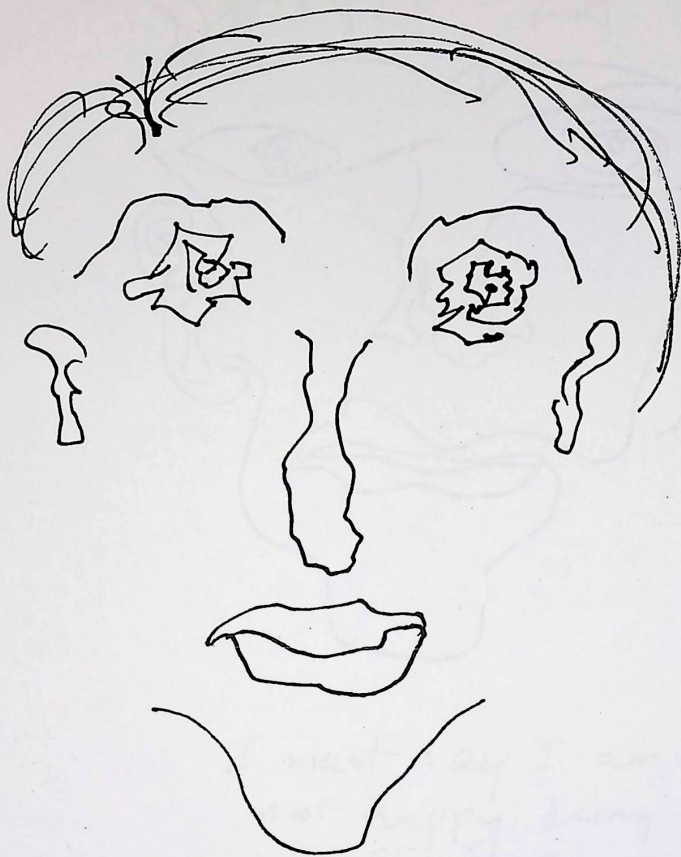
I've made money
all my life. So,
why do I feel
punched-out?

The
cigarette
smoker
said

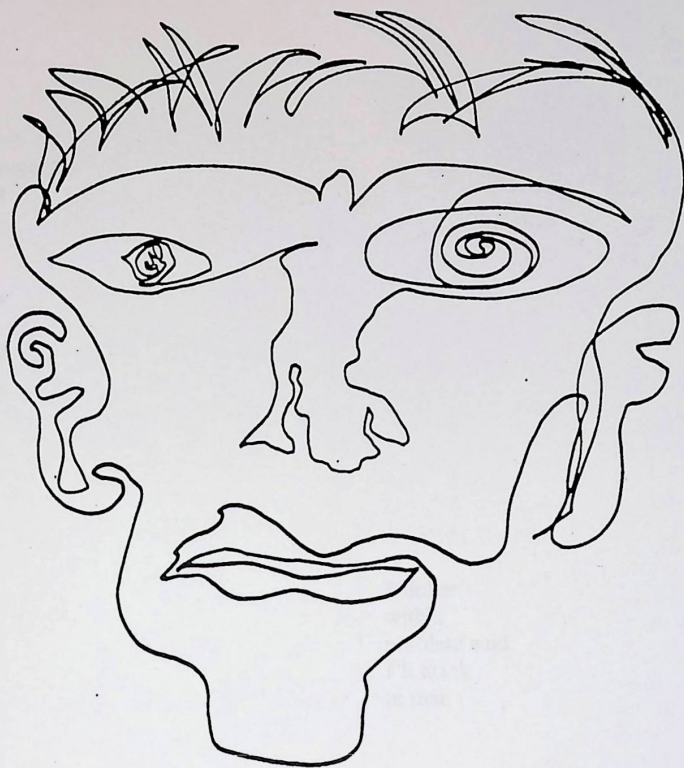
I'd
rather
waste it
than give
it

away

America should have
two churches
one for people
who smoke
and one for those
who don't



Some day you will realize
what you have lost by
forsaking me.



I must say I am
not happy being
a divorced man.

I think
I'll switch
from ginger ale
now

to a
nice
glass
of
Soda.

Drinker
with a
problem said:
I'll drink
to that.



I'm getting
very little
out of this.

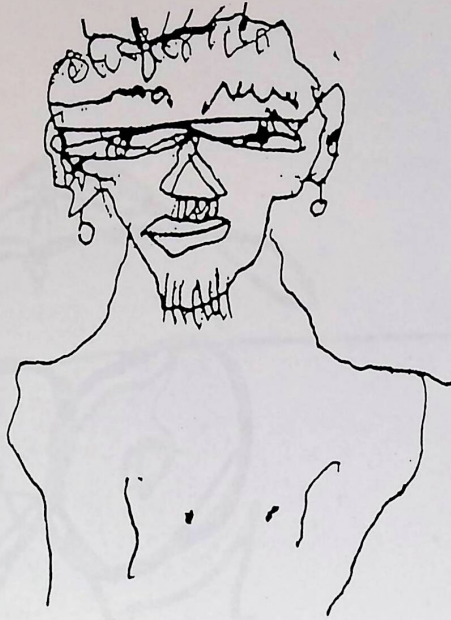
I'm getting nothing.



Can't you see?
It's time to leave.

Cocktail Party

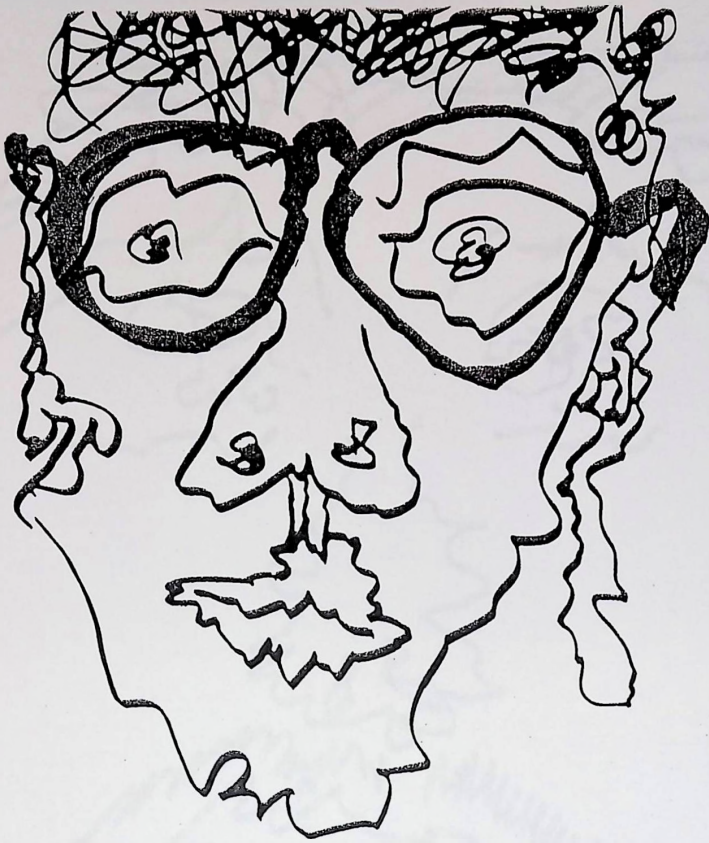
B. The Lingerers



Why can't
Garry Trudeau
find a spot
for me?



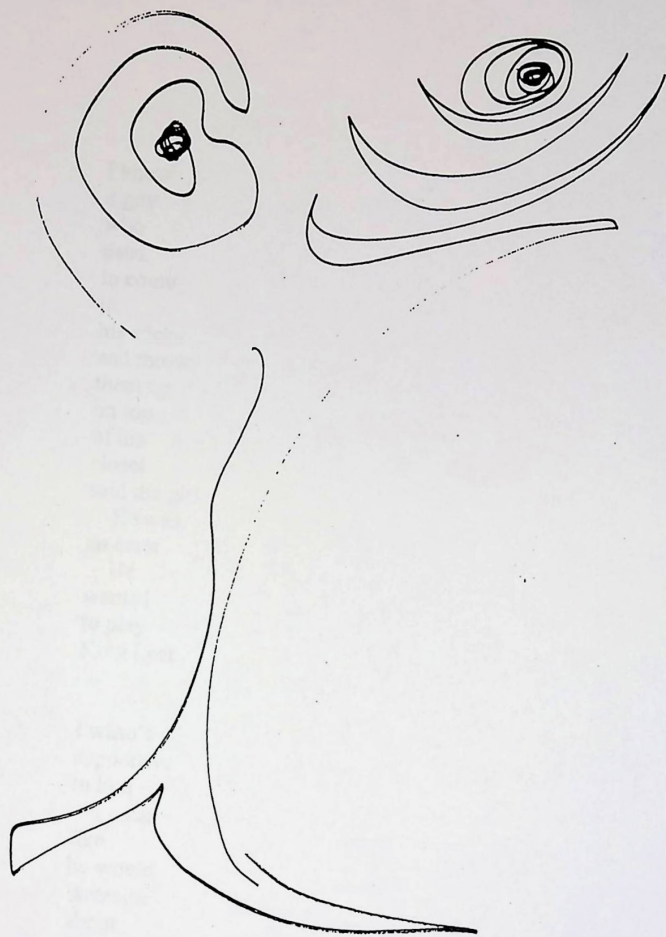
This much
I know.
Speed will
never
betray me.



Just let me kiss
her once and she
will kiss me back
a hundred times



We'll leave the kissing
to me. So, chill out!



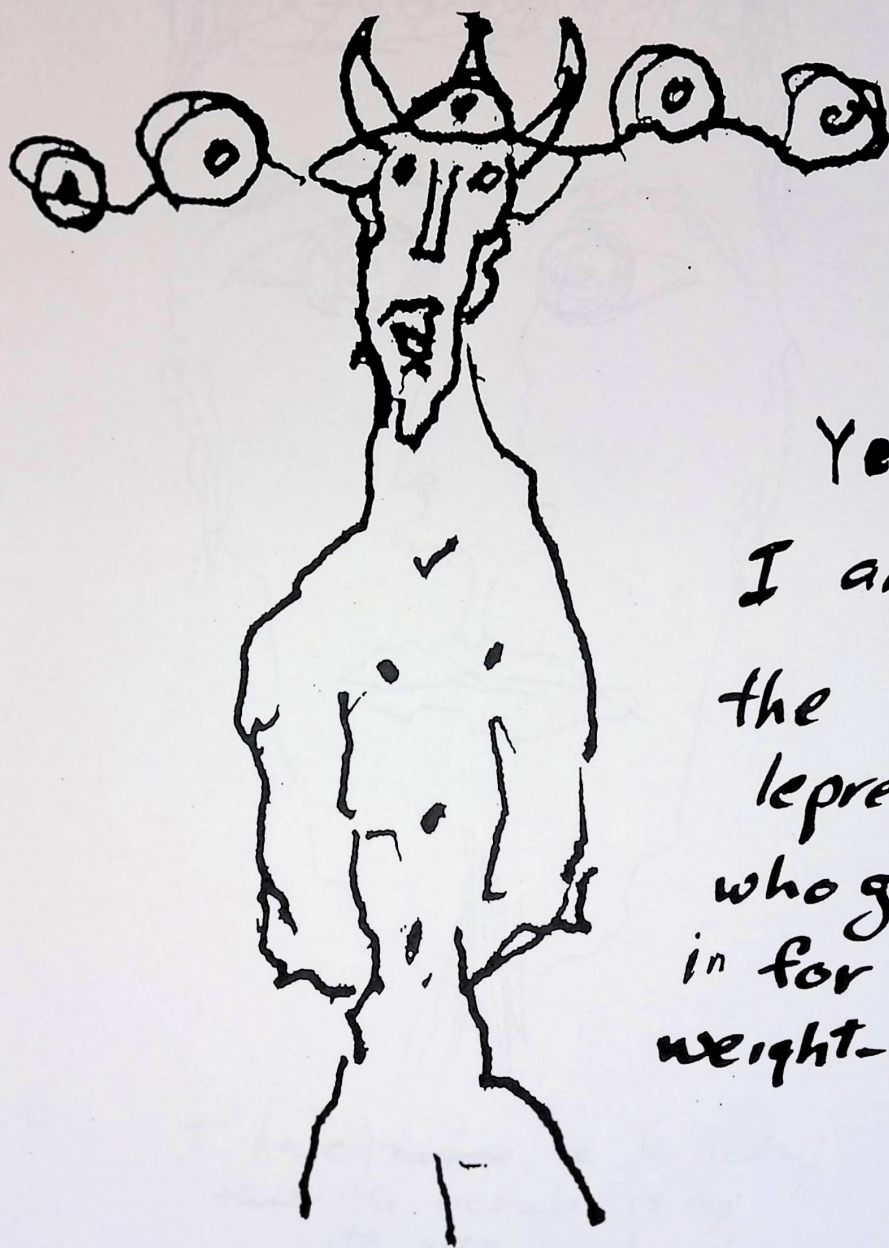
It's not only that.
I'm afraid of things that go
bump in the night. It's more
that I just don't trust
the universe.

I know
a guy
who
used
to come
in
his socks
and throw
them up
on top
of his
closet
said the girl
He was
an actor
He
wanted
to play
King Lear

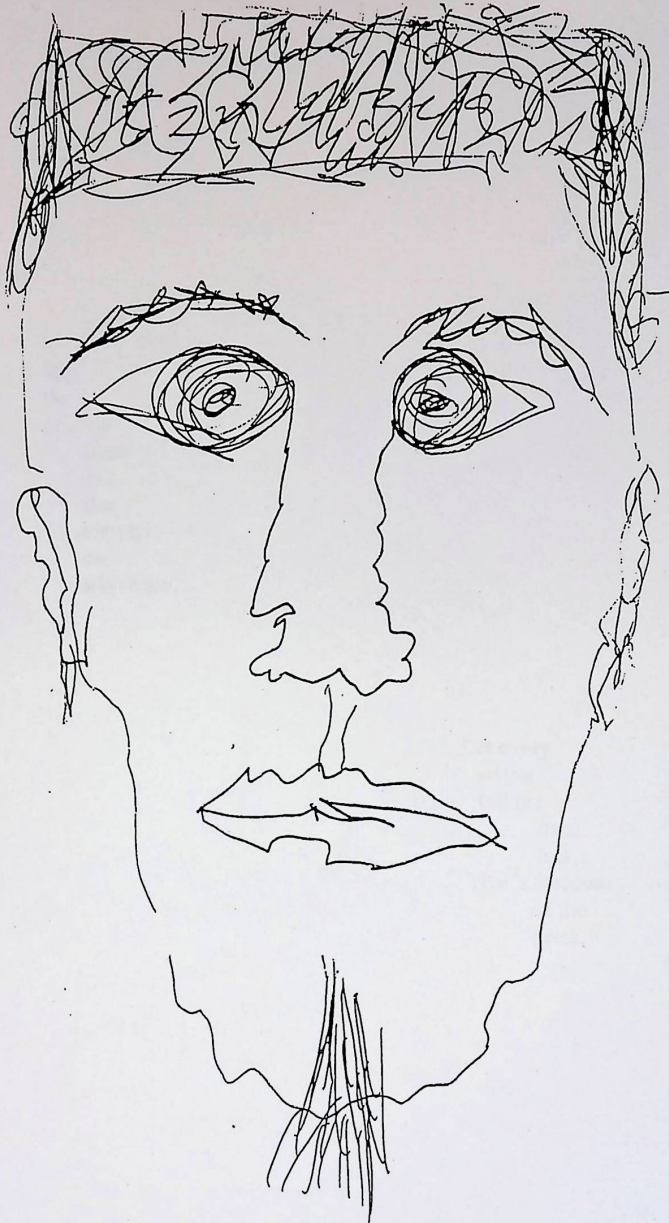
I wasn't
supportive
to him

I mean
like
he would
fantasize
about
suicide
pacts
with me.

Yes,
I am
the
leprechaun
who goes
in for
weight-lift
by



Yes,
I am
the
leprechaun
who goes
in for
weight-lift-
ing



I have reason to believe
that the occult is on
its way back

BEVARE

Rip
the
prisons
open.
Put
the
convicts
on
television.

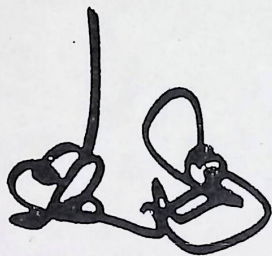
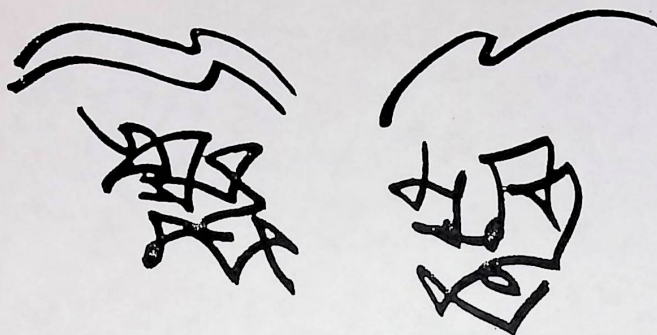
Let every
writer
tell his
own
lies
That's freedom
of the
press.

BEWARE



I'm loaded!

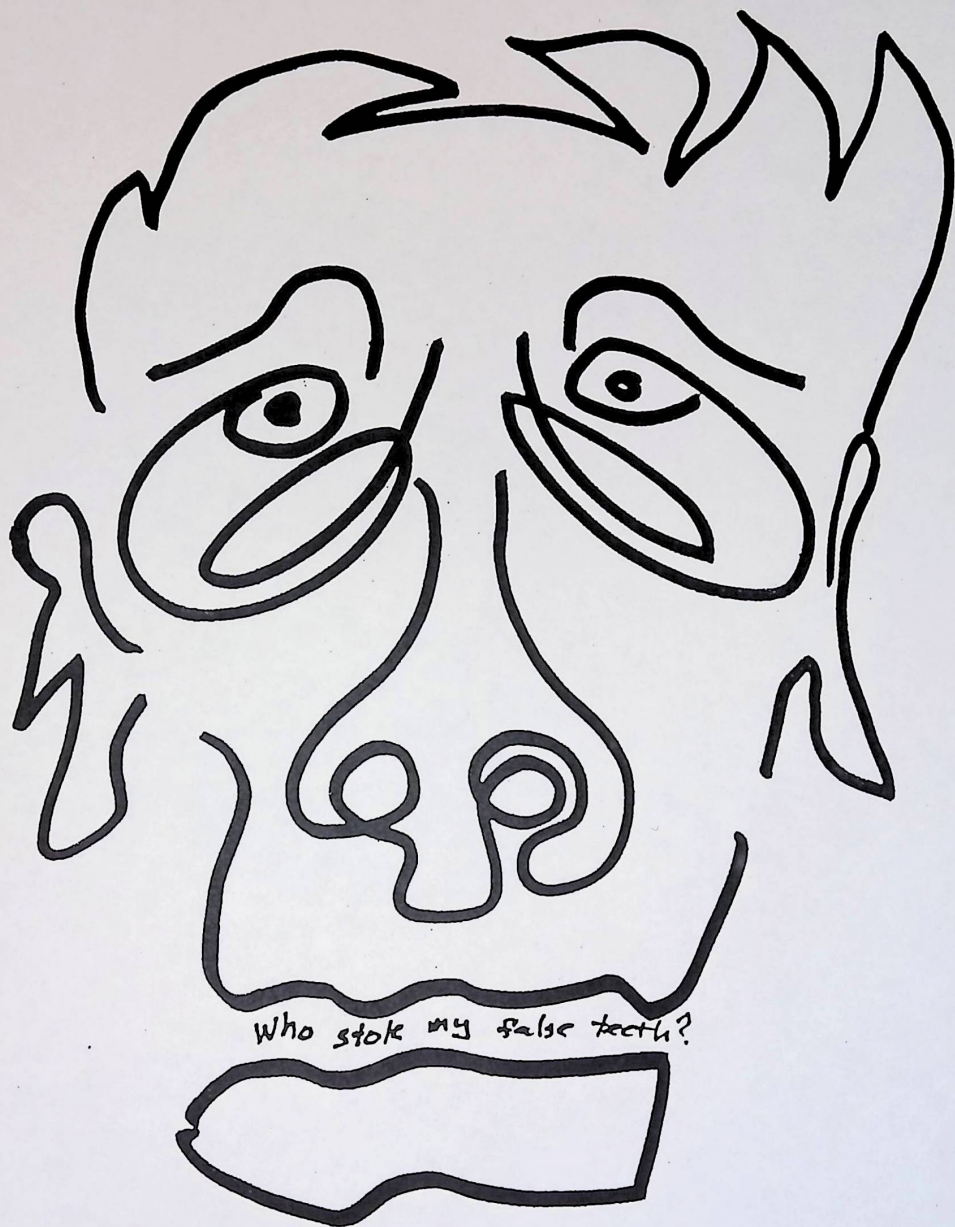
BEWARE



I'm loaded!

I don't mind
a party that
gets
a little rough
but did you
have to throw
up
in my foyer?

Despair never
said the
drunk,
I'll pick
it up
I'll really
pick it up
because I don't
believe
in leaving
my leavings
at a ladies'
door
when she's a lady
like you
you crappy
old
unhappy
bag of an armpit
anyone ever
say
you're beautiful
said the drunk as he fell on his nose
trying to kiss lady and her fortune.



Who stole my false teeth?

II

Maladies of Centralists

She believed
in the
efficacy
of patterns
So she worked
on the
Avenue
of the
Madison
and
sold
glop

The steel
and
glass
of some womb
that
lacked
the love
to
give her eyes

This ill
whose
first
symptom
is
a
monotony
of nights

United Citizens Protest

Gather
me
a
monotony
of
names.

Repetition
kills the
soul
for its offers
dull the
hole
of memory
where life
was once
a tree
nestling the root
with gyres
of sky
and
midnight's
murmuring
summer.

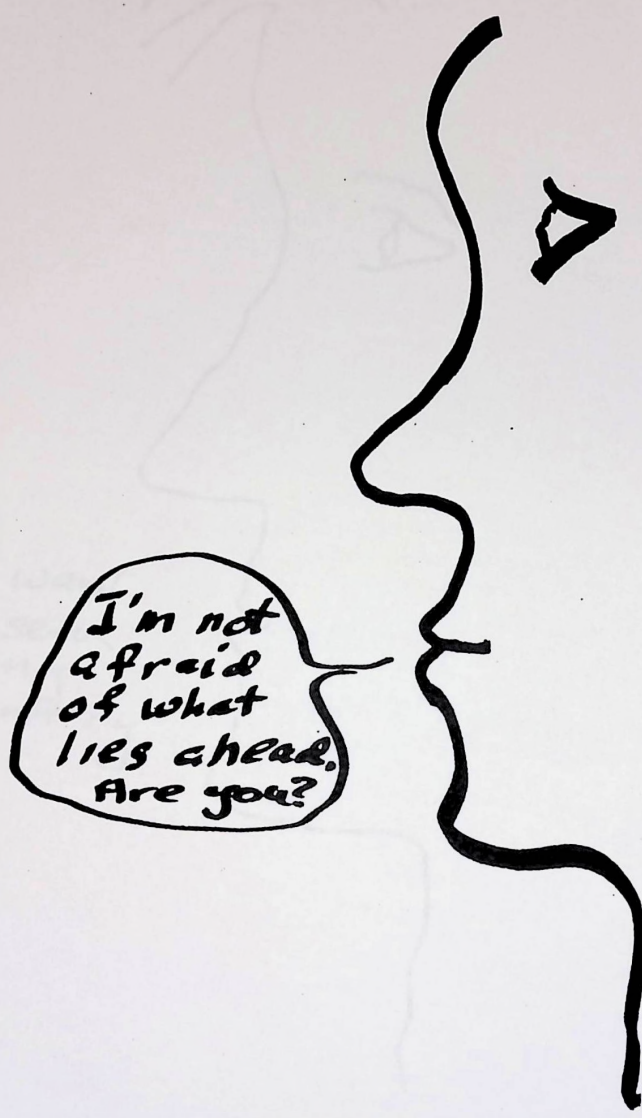
The Suburban Arts

Putting up
with
something
you don't
like
and calling
it charming
spells
age-in-the-face,
dear,
said
the
skin
graft
as it
said
hello
and moved into its new home
on the neck

People
 who
despise
themselves
 wear
dingy
under-
garments
 said
 the
 psychiatrist
flinging
the sorrows
 of his
 seed
 out, off, and away
 into a
 white
 linen
 hand-
 kerchief
 with a
 hand-
 rolled
 edge.

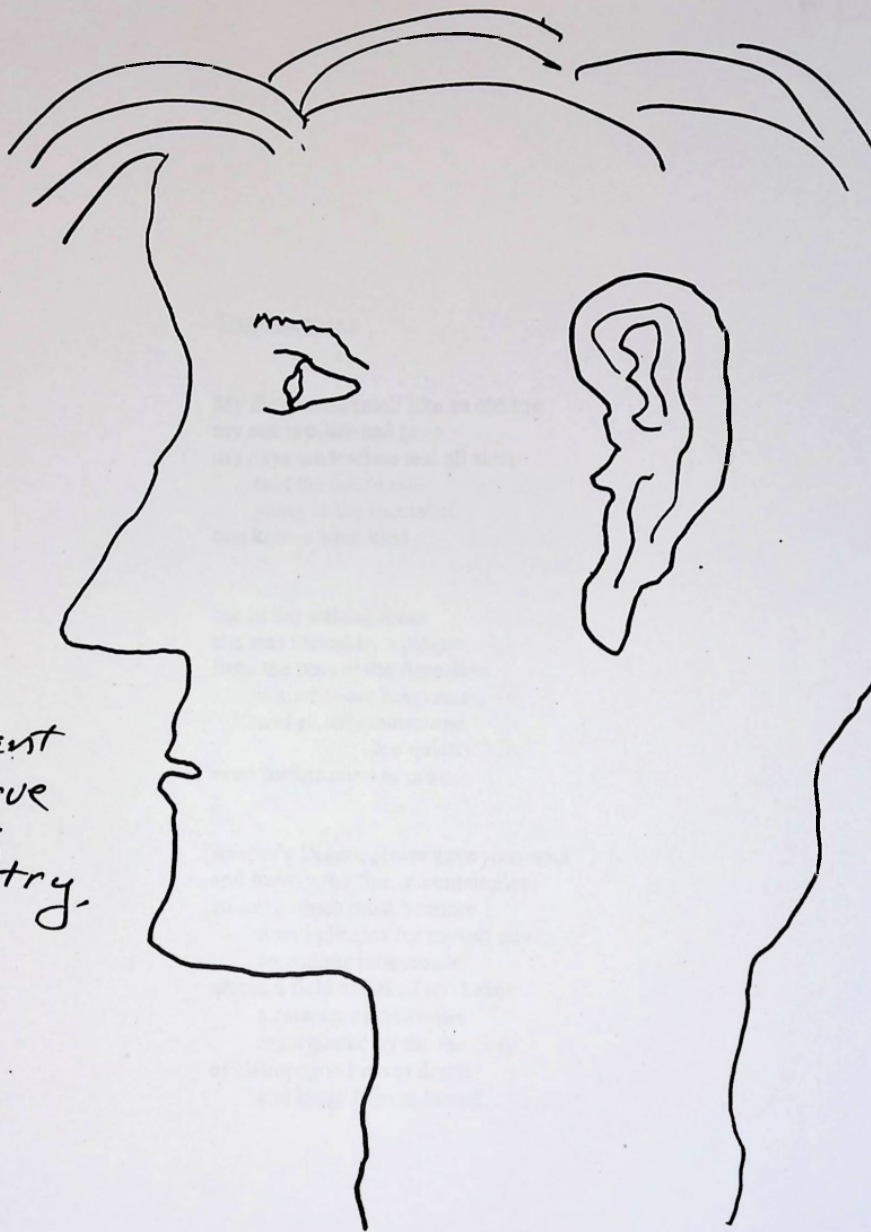
A plague is
coming
named
Virus Y S X
still unsolved
promises to be
proof
against
antibiotics
psychoanalysis
research projects
vitamins
awards
cash programs
crash diets
symposiums
foundations
rest
rehabilitation
tranquilizers
asprin
surgery
brainwashing
lobotomies
rises in status
box office boffo
perversions
and
even
a
good
piece
of

When that unhappy day
comes to America
let the Muslims
take over.
The best defense is
infection.



I'm not
afraid
of what
lies ahead.
Are you?

I want
to serve
my
country.



Togetherness

My flesh must smell like an old tire
my sex is bitter and gone
my days are leafless and all sleep
 said the housewife
 going to the specialist
one knows what kind

but in the waiting room
she was racked by a plague
from the pots of the American
 maisma--our magazines,
 and so lady murmured
 too quietly
even for her mind to hear:

Reader's Digest, please save *your* soul
and leave mine free to contemplate
eternity which must be more
 than I glimpse for myself now
 an endless promenade
across a field of baked old beans
 a cataract of dishwater
 regurgitated by the memory
of champagne I never drank
 and kings I never kissed

Commuter Pool

Each time I think of some little thing
I can do to get ahead,

I feel as if
a foul fierce art from the nightmares
of constipation, the flaming waste of
stagnation

(Chime! Chime! the Vowels!)

has forced its way
up up into my brain
and played the lyre from Hades' heart.

So I say to myself (I am growing deaf,
my dear) I say to myself: Boy,
you are getting ready to trade
the possibilities of the future,
otherwise known as soul,

for the ego,
the beans and the booze

Remember: that Guy died for us.
But oh those dreams and how they burn.
oh those dreams and how they burn.

Heaven cannot have a bitch
so royal as the root of my sweet itch.

As it grows
the flower
breaks
through the stone.

It has yet
to prove
itself
against
the clay.

Gray without grace
day.

III

Levels of Procurement

Sex in the High Schools

Johnny
what
can I do
said the
girl
I gotta pee

She was in a
strange pad
three hours long

Why just
come here
princess,
said
Johnny
and I'll lead you
to the throne
who serves as sink.

Oh, Johnny
said the girl
you're funny.

will you
enjoy
it
said
the
virgin.

listen
he said
see your
lawyer,
draw
up a
contract
which
stipulates
I got
to
enjoy
it,

and
I'll
still
enjoy
it,
golden
girl.

Night Clubs: A

The call girl
walked along
the bar
escorted by
a plump
virile
pomaded
hip businessman,
minor league Mafia,
and behind them
trailed a smell
of stale
sulphur.

O sex
you are dying
I know
but in
whose name?
and for what
cause?

Night Clubs: B

Evil
fingers

up

and
down

my

spine

remind

me

that

sex

is

not

always

divine.

But

sometimes

it is

with

the most

astonishing

collection

of

horrible

pig people.

Do your duty
said I
to the beauty
as she turned
from love
(the act)
and sauntered
down the
hall
to
commune
with porcelain,
florescent light
and hound's sigh
of lavatory water
languishing
after the
souls
my beauty
chose
to taste
and flush
away.

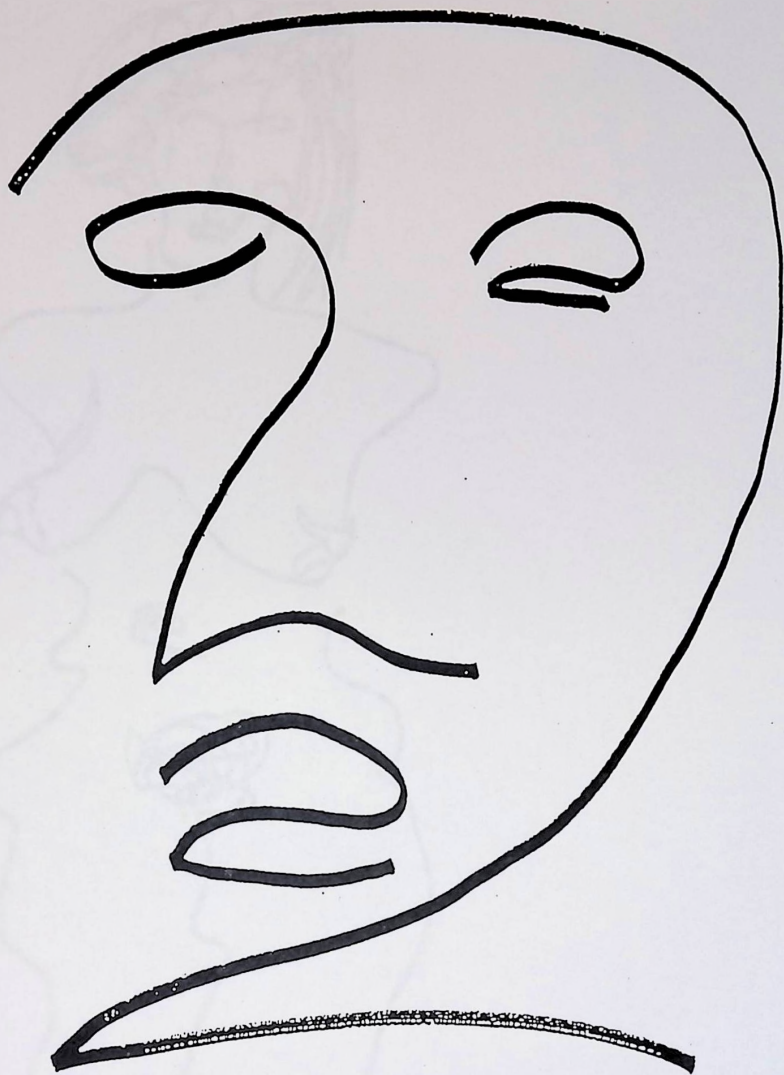
Pimping

Lie down with dogs
you rise with
 figs
said the lady
who was the loveliest
 of all my pigs.

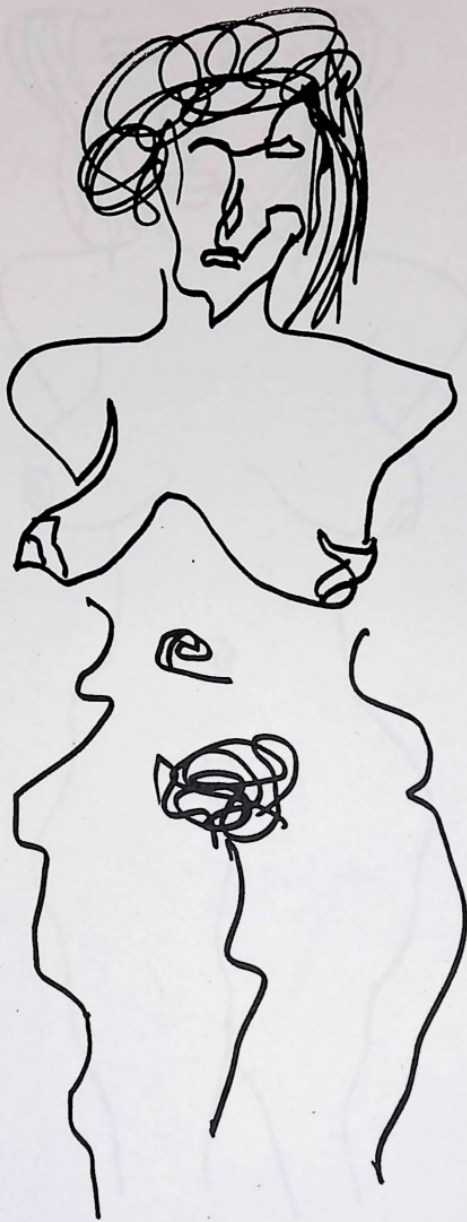
Call this poem
the Market Place
 cried
 the red hair
 Negress
 who ball my ace.

Whores,
I prate,
make no ditties
 of my sores,
for a pimp
 who shows no limp
 in the gait
 of his will
has escaped
 all ill.

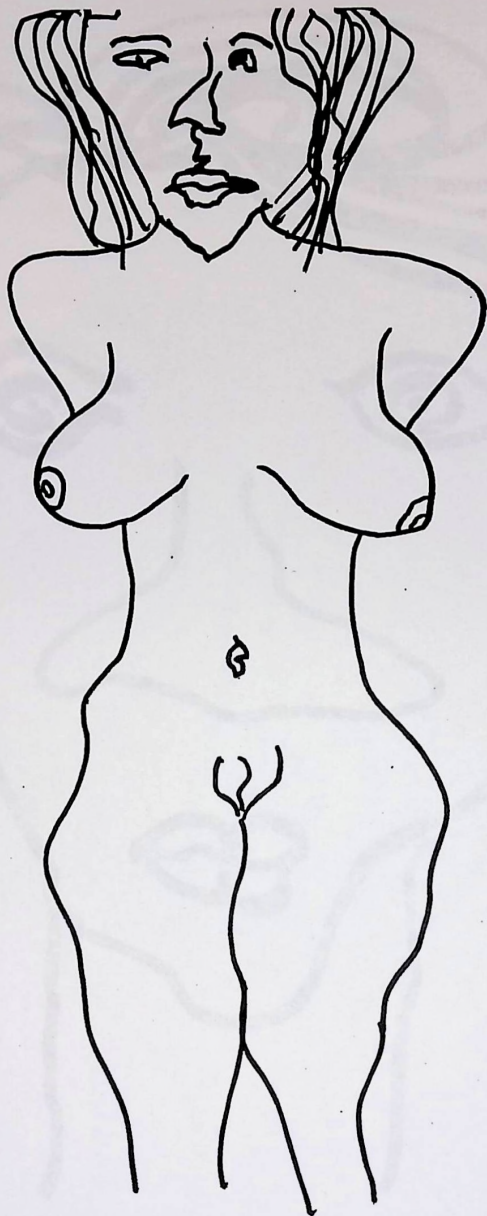
I'm tired of feeling
like a parking meter
said the sad street
whore.



I'm tired of feeling
like a parking meter
said the sad street
whore.

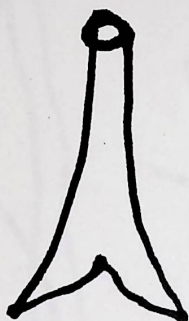
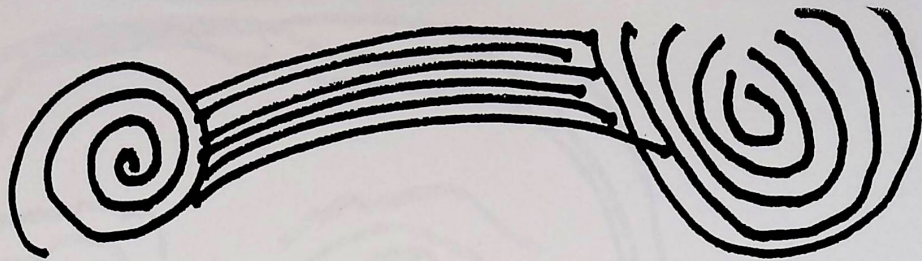


What did you expect?
The Mona Lisa?











Yes, I'm Mary,
Mary Magdalene, yes.
Why are you looking
for me?

IV

The Mediocre

We live in a world filled with all the wonderful things

which did not happen
all the passion never born
when the sperm sailed into the sheet
and left a quiver of empty arrows

(did your little womb go pitty pat pat
when midnight passed and I wasn't there?)

We walk in cities filled with second choice
you and me planned by calculation of the budget

those neon signs cold compromise
to cheat the savage dream of fire
you do not control the flame
until you put it under glass

(all those lovely modern shacks
fifty stories of steel and mass
second choice in a new idea)

Is it better that prisons look like public schools
and airports shake their hips in plastic luxury?

What a world of second choice besets the eye
no wonder I am going blind says the Lord
and oh that static in my ear

(must everyone speak in an accent
borrowed from another and all
food die a second death?—freeze my juices
seal my flesh.)

Devil torture me no longer, I will join
the oscillation in the vacuum tube
second choice of the wind when
the spirits of the dead failed, you
hear, to make us feel their hurt.

Seminars

A short hair is the chromosome of a short
story
said the sadist, an assistant protestant
professor
of creative composition. His words danced
like genes in the gism of a hate filled lair.

It was the air before his face
down from the burning glass
of his spectacle lens
to the razor of his mouth

Kill talent by teaching it procedure
said the sphincter of his nostril.
Doctor Category, said the hair
within his nose, you stifle me now

But I will grow in your grave like ivy
entwining myself in the orbital
locket of your skull

For I, royal hair of the rebellion
am the last of a lover's nerve
the poet lover who created you
old gray-haired sadistic dad
I am father of your categories
on the short hair.

Said the assistant protestant professor:
kill me, artist, curl your hair
into the bone of my grave
but I love your work

Forgive my passion for category
I must believe that God is a tidy man
besides I will go before you
there are machines to replace me

Univac and One-Hole-Trac
They will bring death to your nerve
deeper than I ever dreamed.
Upon one another we fell sobbing

before the bitch of ice
on came her machine. Yes, it said,
your short hair used to be the
chromosome of the short story

Now it is the fiber in fiberglass,
I gave one cry back clear back to
Coleridge on his lonely alp
for the horror of the albatross
was its malignant wings

Death we have betrayed your sting
and licked the long dry tongue of
intellection
much too long

We will die from anemia of the soul
in some plentitude of electronics
and her suburb

Static

Dah dit dit da dit dit dah
dah dah dit dit dah dah
dah dit dit dah dit dit dah
dah dah dit dit dah dah

Mentally cool and bright
Arms fly is the war song
Father of strong in your nave

Dum ditty, dum ditty, dum
dah dah dit dah dit dit

Bold old gold is the grave
which does not slay
but reduces
the best and worst
to mediocre

dit dit dah
dah dah dit

the mediocre

Superhighways
cut through
profit and
passion
and so
inhabit
the moon
before we've
learned
its mountain
road
which
winds
in
slow
curves
of the
root
toward
the ore
and her nugget

The Alleviation of Ague in the Advertising Age

Nothing tastes better than a good cold glass of Rheingold
Nothing is better for taste than a good glass
of cold Rheingold
Be bold, my love
Death is near
Kiss my bier.

Let's
stamp out
bad dialogue.

That's *your* problem
said the
toad.