

forces that had prosecuted it were directed to return to garrison. Franklin Roosevelt's death, Germany's surrender, the end of the Philippine campaign and the sharply increased devastation of the Japanese mainland by massive flights of B-29 "superbombers" set the historical stage: some form of the grand finale was at hand, and everyone, everywhere, felt pulled toward the moment of approaching climax.

Certainly this is true of the 112th Regimental Combat Team, and Norman's feelings are suddenly awakened and energized by the drama of the moment. Here, and indeed the whole while he is in the army, he shows himself capable of being drawn from his vantage point at the margin of the experience into the center of the experience itself, capable then of complex engagement at the center and sometimes, as here, discovering a kind of leaping satisfaction at the union. Forgotten for the moment is the inevitability of his failure to sustain himself as participant, and in writing this letter to Bea he remains totally immersed in his organizational engagement. His platoon moved up into the mountains in radio-equipped jeeps, advancing along steep, treacherous roads to where the line companies would be withdrawing on foot: here, the Recon radios would direct trucks up to primitive staging areas to meet the troops and transport them down to the next stage of their journey into garrison.

Norman's imagination was seized by the assignment, and one part of him was more responsive to it than anything he had encountered since Basic Training. "There was a military education

worth so much to a professional," he says about the complex logistics of the assignment. "I learned such a great deal about what vehicles can and can not do, learned indeed a definition for common sense, for every mechanical impasse represents a challenge and a hard, quick decision." He was evidently most impressed with what his officers were able to do under very demanding circumstances, and he really almost gloried in the bird's eye vantage point he occupied in surveying the same lower Sierra Madre terrain he had slogged through for two months on foot patrol. As he looked down on it all,

I was trying to find the pattern of those mountains. For a hill is not isolated--there is a beauty in it by itself, but there is a larger richness when you understand which ridge it belongs to, and what structure the ridges form. Earth has as much shape as the body of a human and its real beauty is grasped only when you are not lost in the details. There is a delight in seeing the streams grow like the moss of body hollows in all the ravines and bosom forth onto the valleys, following the full curve that goes from the climax and turmoil of the peaks into the peace of the plains. It was like having a map come alive to your eyes.

At the same time, Norman marked the effect of perceiving such natural majesty in the context of the grinding gears and sliding wheels of motorized vehicles bent on dominating the terrain. The jeeps and trucks transformed the experience profoundly:

What was a fine, quick-running stream became a treacherous shoals when we had to cross it. Every rock was a potential enemy. The stream became malign and ugly to me because my interest was with the machine. We did not see the valleys falling from the ridge--there were too many mud holes and sliding flanks on the road. The forest was mean, for the road was always muddy beneath it, and our jeep would labor sickeningly through its ruts. You do not use a machine, you share existence with it and there is the horror. For now you no longer feel the hills to the farthest extent of your senses; it all constricts into the confines of your mechanism, and you side with the vehicle in that combat.



This duality of vision, while it does not keep him from a strong feeling of accomplishment at having completed the evacuation assignment successfully, deepens in a letter written two days afterward. In it he reassumes his familiar identity as an outsider somehow polarized from the military community, explaining that on the way up into the mountains on the evacuation mission he had an accident, failing adequately to get out of the way of a vehicle backing down the road, and "got my thighs mashed between a Jeep and a Command car."

Though he managed to persuade his officers that the injury was superficial, and was permitted to remain with the mission, he offers Bea a broodingly full description of his clumsiness and almost self-destructive lack of judgement regarding, particularly, the operation of machines. Indeed he becomes over the period of a week more and more aware of the fact that he hates machines:

This aversion is beginning to have pathological traits--a machine depresses me; if I stand by one working for five or ten minutes I feel weary and my legs ache. I feel a constant anxiety about it, even when I'm not working.

In elaborate illustration, he develops a tragi/comic account of how, in garrison, he participated in the drastic mismanagement of a gigantic water-pump that was in his charge and, amid anecdotes of his own ineptitude, concludes:

You know really my only decent function as a man is to be a lover and/or an author. I really think, quite objectively, that I am useless for anything else.

His most serious problem in the army, arguably, was that he never grappled with the truth of this observation. It is as if in

these army years Norman had two identities: in his steadiest vision he fixed upon himself as the self-marginalized artist, coldly recording material that would be preserved and nurtured in his imagination, eventually to sustain his most ambitious fictional efforts. Here he needed only a self-generated strength that could counterbalance the fact that this identity must be sustained without support of any kind from the army in which he was in one sense totally immersed. For sustenance he had to rely upon his private system of family, his personal culture and, above all, his figure of Beatrice Silverman Mailer, whose iconic vitality he had brilliantly built upon from the very start. ?

But Norman's other identity, the participating soldier who had to train for and act out the several organizational roles assigned him by the army, was one that he saw much less steadily, and which indeed he apprehended only in a comparatively chaotic way. He told himself on the one hand that he cared nothing for any kind of conventional success in this context, and he both demonstrated and guaranteed this by indulging himself often enough and seriously enough in something like derelictions of duty so that no success of this kind could ever be his. On the other hand, he allowed himself to want the success anyway and, what was worse, would delude himself into thinking that his shortcomings were after all not so serious, and that he could without comparable effort win out both as artist in training and as participant in the field. So wrong was he about this last, and yet so persistently did he drift into a sort of sentimentally



false expectation--that the army would relent and give him some cause for conventional self-respect-- that the whole while he was in uniform he would suffer seriously from the consequences.

From the point of view of either of his identities, in any case, it was comparatively easy to perceive the long-range military situation that now prevailed, and after he and his comrades had been transported by the navy down the island to a new location, they quickly figured out that garrison for them constituted a retraining stage in preparation for their next and in one sense or another their final mission of the war. Norman had been a combat soldier in the field for just two months, during which he took pride in what he did, describing action in careful detail and self-consciously toting up his armament (besides his carbine he was eventually issued an M1 Garand rifle--he called it a canon--a .45 caliber pistol and a U.S. M1 Thompson sub-machine gun, prompting him to tell Bea "You may address me as Dear Machine Gunner".) Eventually he wrote to her about the Combat Infantry Badge he had been authorized to wear, saying "You've probably seen it--the silver rifle on the blue bar with the wreath around it. . . . It is one little medal I am proud to wear," and he was pleased as well with the retroactive combat pay he was awarded.

Now, however, living in garrison tents that had to be kept clean, he was required to prepare for parades, learn to handle his canon according to the Manual of Arms, and to return to the discipline of blind and automatic acceptance of orders.

Norman felt sufficiently demeaned and disadvantaged by the new situation that he resolved to try to escape it by volunteering for an assignment that, almost by definition, his hang-dog service record would prevent his being given.

It was for an elite troop of special--and specially hazardous--Regimental Scouts, which he thought would at least pull him out of the rut of parade-ground discipline, and incidentally would require him to enter a program of physical training more demanding than anything he had ever undertaken. (He liked this idea enough so as actually to quit smoking for two days in anticipation of the rigors of training, but when his application was more or less automatically denied he immediately resumed. The Scout Training idea had been developed in tandem with a kindred soul who would become Norman's only close postwar veteran friend, Francis Irving (Fig) Gwaltney, a sergeant and chief radio non-com in Recon, whom Norman had met about the time he was trying to get transferred into that Platoon.

"A Welshman by way of Arkansas," as Norman called him, Gwaltney read a lot and himself harbored hopes of becoming a writer, and Norman--who said that he had about ten fairly good friends in the regiment--liked him from the start. At least two of his other friends dated back to Fort Bragg, one or two others were also literary, but Gwaltney was special in at least two respects: he had some real potential as a writer, and he was a southerner. As a regiment of Texans, the 112th offered Norman an ethnic experience he did not at all enjoy: men from the American



south seemed to him to be cold, unsympathetic, clannish and quick to hostility, and it became important to him to discover a relationship that allowed him to break through that mask and prove it to be unthreatening. For some three months the warm and friendly Welshman from Arkansas had been happy to provide this opportunity, and though he was himself accepted into the Scout Training program and left the outfit temporarily, there were to be repeated and important reunions.

Before Gwaltney's departure, Norman had persuaded him to buy a copy of Malraux's Man's Hope, "and now he is infatuated with Andre and bemoans the fate which made him too young to get in the Spanish Civil War." Norman reports to Bea that he and his new friend were "very simpatico on such things." The move into garrison from the field evidently increased the opportunity for reading, and during July and early August Norman makes his way through a real literary charcuterie: a volume of novellas by Georges Simenon ("the Dashiell Hammett of French detective fiction"), Charles Jackson's The Lost Weekend ("I realized with some fear that if I'm ever a failure I could become an alcoholic so easily"), e.e. cummings' The Enormous Room ("Figured I'd . . . fill out a little gap in my profound knowledge of Mod Am Lit"), Alice in Wonderland ("I see why you love it so much"), Richard Wright's Black Boy ("I enjoyed it....But there was a note of truculence in it which surprised me" ), Mann's Tonio Kruger ("For all his vaunted acuity I think he's stupid and blind about the essentials"), and Kasner and Newman's Mathematics and the

Imagination ("If we are to plumb the nature of man we must understand the universe his mind creates and trace it back to his needs.").<sup>13</sup>

On July 26, after more than three months in the mail, The Decline of the West finally arrives, and Norman and Bea begin regularly to quote Spengler back and forth to each other, with Norman proposing that they make a postwar purchase of one of Spengler's favorite citation sources: the 1911 Encyclopedia Britannica. Norman reads the Spengler slowly and studiously, and always in the way that he reads everything that he takes to be important: does it help him to illuminate the workings of his own imagination? The sweep of Spengler's imagination reminds Norman of his own, and he is both flattered and encouraged to mark and dwell upon the resemblance. This search for signs of himself is a litmus test that Norman will always apply to canonical works, and certainly accounts for his rejection of Thomas Mann.

In the matter of his own writing, Norman had experienced a disappointment: Edwin Seaver reconsidered and withdrew his offer to publish a section from Transit in his new Cross-Section anthology. In a June 22, 1945 letter to Berta the editor explained:

When I read the book as a whole I thought it would be possible, but now, reading the excerpt torn out of the book, I find myself having to rely on my memory for the entire work properly to appreciate this bit of it.

---

<sup>13</sup> Bea's own citations of readings in J. P. Marquand (The Late George Apley), Katherine Ann Porter (Scrapbook) and Ellen Glasgow (Vein of Iron) round out the literary correspondence of this season.

called  
↑ Harpers  
earlier (p. 94)

At almost the same time, Harper and Brothers, to whom the novel manuscript had been submitted in the context of their annual fiction-prize competition, also sent a sympathetic but firm letter of rejection. Persuaded at last that the novel was part not of his future but of his past, Norman instructed Berta to withdraw it from circulation, and turned his fiction writing attention in two measurably different directions: the deep past and the distant future. For the future, he carefully conceives of a story to be called "The Dead Gook," based on the patrol from which he had helped carry back a dead Filipino guerilla and his captured Japanese light machine gun the previous May. Norman would not actually write the story for six more years, but, when he does, it will correspond detail for detail to his original conception of it as recorded here for Bea<sup>14</sup>.

For the deep past, he responds to Bea's notice that she has found and read the manuscript of "The Martian Invasion," written in his tenth summer. His long, carefully detailed reply, reciting with perfect accuracy the titles, situations and context not only of the Martian novel but all the most ambitious childhood pieces of the two summers previous, takes Bea over his whole original incarnation, calling the letter "This Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man," and lightly mentioning--evidently for

---

<sup>14</sup> Here cite "The Dead Gook" publication, and maybe say something about the reason for his waiting so long to do this and the other two Army stories: "The Paper House" and "The Language of Men." But, actually, the three-story citation should probably be put off until we get to the anecdote in February 1946 (?), in Japan, when the "Language" story is told. Here it might only need a "See page ..., note ... to X the spot.



the first time-- that in the summer following this peaking of his artist-identity "the great six-year drought began." It is worth emphasizing that this acknowledgement of his early experience as an artist--underscored by his use of Joyce's title to give it authority--is cast as a revelation to Bea, who had with some justice no doubt thought herself already his confidant in such matters.

Notwithstanding his easy final parenthesis--"(Of course it was really a healthy sign, the artist fallow, as Berta might say)---we do well to mark this casually tossed off recitation of something that had evidently remained altogether unacknowledged for exactly thirteen years, and in doing so we might mark as well a linking detail in a letter he writes just two weeks later, where he abruptly sets down: "I have some trauma I cannot recall. Somewhere the cold, tall man with the steel rimmed glasses and the cruel business man's face hurts me. (Could it be Dad?)" In the conscious here and now, of course, large though the presence of Norman's art and its origins might loom, the significant parental figure was not his father, and indeed the full focus of the family consciousness was in this season to be locked unwaveringly upon Fan.

Bea had completed her relocation from Norfolk to Brooklyn, settling in late July into Pierrepont Street and her new position as a Communications officer at the Navy Yard Annex on Staten Island. She had also begun preliminary work on her novel, sending Norman some outline material, as well as assorted sketches and

? See 110  
vignettes. Bea's arrival at Pierrpont Street coincided, however, with a development so radical that it in many ways eclipsed not only the significant change in family structure created by her own addition to the household, but even the more general cultural excitement and anxiety created by the questions of when and how the Second World War was going to end. Norman had foreseen the development in mid-July, and in one letter referred to it as "The coming Battle of Barbara."

Jack Maher, who had been stationed in Panama for most of the time Norman was in the army, had been transferred back to the States, had spent some time visiting with Barbara at Radcliffe, and in July had finally been stationed in or near Durham, North Carolina. Barbara, in turn, secretly went down to join him there at the end of her summer term, and it became clear to them both that they wanted to marry. Fan had of course been aware of and had steadily opposed the relationship from its inception, but when her tireless investigations revealed that her opposition had been ineffective, that the couple was intimate and that marriage might actually take place, her reaction can only be described as apocalyptic. Bea walked right into the center of the explosion, in which the eighteen year old Barbara was forced--under the shrieking threat of otherwise causing her mother's death--to refrain from communicating with Jack for two years. Appalled though she was at such a continuing display of unreasoning force, Bea was nevertheless cowed into seeming to support the action, and Norman received two letters from his mother so full of naked

fury at his alleged sponsorship of the Barbara-Jack relationship as abruptly and absolutely to silence him on the subject.

It had become a recent fashion in the family rather to patronize Fan, keeping her in the dark about Norman's exposure to combat and otherwise spoon-feeding her adulterated versions of historical reality, as if her ability to deal with adverse experience had become somehow enfeebled. The war, after all, presented her with an immovable, irresistible force, adversarial in the most absolute way to her hopes for the lives and fortunes of her family, and the family in turn saw itself as trying to soften the blow the war delivered to her. But the fact of the matter was that the war had not so much defeated Fan as it had detoured her, requiring that her plans for her family be adapted to the dictates of historical necessity. Her fundamental wisdom, however, remained the same: form alliances with the most powerful institutional forces in the gentile culture, and through those forces come into possession of your own. It was the same strategy that had sent Norman to Harvard and Barbara to Radcliffe, and--if somewhat against Fan's better judgement--that had sent Norman and Bea into the alliance of their marriage, in order the better to succeed in supporting Norman while he was in the army.

great

What the war made dramatically clear, on the other hand, was that these institutional affiliations were risky, that joining at close quarters with the gentile barbarians and anti-Semites that Fan saw all around her--within the ranks of the armed forces and without--must be accomplished with the greatest caution and the



clearest understanding of their ability to do harm. For Barbara to threaten marriage with a gentile, and an Irish-Catholic gentile at that, was to trigger not only all of Fan's very great apprehension on the subject of inter-marriage, but her whole only-just controlled hysteria at the dangers they were all of them daily being exposed to in this anarchic historical time. It drove her over the brink, and in her extraordinarily distraught state she frightened the whole family into a state of frozen acquiescence with her wishes.

Fan would seldom, if indeed ever again so openly insist upon her authority as leader of the family, and her furious throwing in her children's face the sacrifices she had made for them, her demanding that they acknowledge how their leisure had been purchased at the cost of her own commitment to controlling both Barney and the family fortunes, was shockingly anomalous. While her campaign against Barbara's relationship would carry into the postwar period, no analagous situation would arise again before, only a few years later, Norman would himself respectfully but firmly replace her as family head. In doing this he would draw in significant part for his identity there upon qualities he found somehow represented in his father. In 1945, however, Norman still was best identifiable as his mother's son, far from being either able or inclined to explore any alternate identity. overused  
?

Norman's father was at this time burying himself ever deeper into his own labyrinth of silence, exile and cunning. Living away from Fan for what would be a span of more than four years, Barney

fashioned a largely undocumentable but easily inferable private life. It had to be a subterranean chamber whose most basic safeguard was that he could never acknowledge let alone advocate its existence, and which required him, in such surface matters as the debates concerning Barbara's situation, to side with his wife in tones of the most elevated moral righteousness. Since there was no possibility that Barbara could even begin to fathom, let alone to follow such an example as Barney's, and since in the final analysis there was no one--with the possible exception of Jack Maher's much misrepresented mother--with nerve enough to defend the proposed union, Barbara was required to join the rest of the family in learning who it was, at least in this wartime season, who still reigned as that family's undisputable head.

While this domestic opera played itself out into early August, the drama of the Second World War was of course unfolding as well. Norman's training, though he could only guess at its ultimate design, was actually part of the Sixth Army's grand master-strategy for the invasion of the Japanese island of Kyushu, titled Operation Olympic and tentatively scheduled to take place in less than three months: on November 1, 1945<sup>15</sup>. When the first Atomic Bomb fell on Hiroshima on August 6, and the second on Nagasaki on August 9, an international shock wave of reaction and widespread anticipation of Japanese capitulation

---

<sup>15</sup>Jacob Neufeld, "Japan in Flames," Chapter 17, p. 278, in Pearl Harbor and the War in the Pacific, op cit.  
QUERY: SHOULD THIS NOTE DISTRACT THE READER HERE, OR BE PUT WITH THEN END-MATTER?

swept the world. Norman and his fellow soldiers fell into a frenzy of speculation as he expressed feelings of ambivalence about President Truman's use of such a weapon, regretting that it should have to be employed, while at the same time rejoicing in the prospect of an end to the war. He reports how the soldiers agonized over the insistence of the Allied leadership--supported by popular-opinion polls on the American homefront--upon an unconditional Japanese surrender.

But when the announcement confirmed that indeed the end had come-- with a uniformed Bea reporting how amidst the honking of horns on that morning in Brooklyn a passing motorist leaned out to call "You'll sure look good in a dress, sister!"-- the elation at the cease-fire announcement by Emperor Hirohito on August 15 subsided quickly in Norman's garrison community into a post-climactic mood of something like depression. Having been able to guess with considerable accuracy what the army's original plans for them had been, Norman and his fellows started by attempting various forms of celebration, but he at least had real trouble getting into the mood:

I felt drained and empty, such a familiar GI experience when you have been sweating something out for too long, and your capacity for feeling it is gone. It reminded me of the way those veterans felt who were going home on rotation when I hit the outfit. They had sweated it for so long, had known so many disappointments and frustrations that when their time came they had no elation left-- only the old familiar depression of the GI who knows that nothing can ever happen to him in the right way at the right time. That is so essentially the soldier's knowledge, and I am half a soldier now for I anticipate nothing with either pleasure or aversion so long as I am in the army.



He ended the portentous day with a long, solitary walk in deepening twilight, and then sat alone in a shrouded motorpool jeep as the last rays of daylight died, letting it all sink in. "So," he signs off to Bea with a sort of bruised satisfaction, "So I did have my victory celebration after all."

Having ingested the news at last, the men of the 112th turned with considerable pessimism to wait for an answer to the question of what would be done with them now that the war was over. In a surprisingly short time they found out: less than two weeks after the August 15th Hirohito announcement, amid feverish journalistic anticipations of the ceremony of formal surrender, Norman and the 112th found themselves on a troopship at sea, their destination the very place where that surrender was scheduled to take place. Shortly after 8:00 AM on September 2, 1945, their vessel steamed into Tokyo Bay in perfect time for them to watch--while an armada of four hundred B-29s roared across an overcast sky--the surrender of the Japanese High Command to General MacArthur and his entourage on the forward deck of the battleship Missouri.

[End Chapter Three Part Two]

#

## [CHAPTER THREE]

### Part Three

#### i

After watching the surrender ceremony and listening to the Armed Forces Radio accounts of its significance, Norman's Reconnaissance Platoon joined the rest of the Troop in loading their gear and disembarking onto landing craft that headed towards the beach. At the shallows the men jumped in to wade ashore and Norman, clumsy under the weight of his equipment, stumbled and fell backward into the water. As he staggered up to the beach, streaming and swearing, he saw that the Troop was being greeted by an unexpected presence:

There was a reception committee of about ten Jap civilians all lined up very correctly and wearing American zoot suits, green coats and yellow pants and red neckties and Jap hats. All neat, all at attention. They looked like a reception committee from the mayor's office, and turned out to be press correspondents

The Americans had landed near the tip of a sweeping, mountainous arm that reaches down almost to enclose Tokyo Bay; just short of this peninsula's end, guarding the channel that protects the great Bay from the sea, sits the modest town and harbor of Tateyama. This town area, with its adjoining military air base and

coast-guarding piers, was to be garrison for Norman and his regiment during the first season of his stay in Japan. The 112th moved into a cluster of recently abandoned Japanese army barracks, scrubbing, scouring and sweeping in exactly the way that they would always do wherever they went, and with the usual total lack of reference to their larger human location. "It's hard," -Norman noted ruefully to his family on his third day ashore, "to believe you're anyplace but in the army. Even the Lamaseries of Tibet would be dull in the army."

It is, of course, quite possible that this levelling routine, humdrum as it no doubt was, served a certain purpose. Considering the fact that only a bare month before, Norman and his fellows were training for a Japanese invasion action that promised casualty figures even greater, it may be, than the ones they had imagined, and considering that the stunned Japanese population was still reeling from the concussion of bombings so unimaginably savage as to transfix the world's imagination for the following fifty years, it may have been just as well that for a while both the occupiers and the occupied all across this land should nourish their imaginations on the plainest possible diet. In any case there was nothing war-torn about Tateyama, which had been spared the bombings, and whose airstrip was already in use for light-plane traffic.

Norman soon proceeded out on routine assignment with the 112th reconnaissance platoon, exploring in jeeps for navigable roads ("a northwest passage") through the beautiful mountain range that



divided the Tateyama bay-side of the southward sweeping Boso-Hanto peninsula from the Pacific ocean-side. The cool, brilliantly clear Japanese air revealed a topography and indeed a society to engage his gradually awakening perceptions, and Norman began to record his discoveries with quick enthusiasm. Driving up the Pacific rim, through villages, "I saw an old woman grinding some meal in a great stone bowl in the middle of a stone floor. The action seemed a thousand years old, and the village as something out of the middle ages." The country transfixed him as much as the people, and he tells how the hills facing the Pacific "become very steep here and drop in long, fearful plunges down to the ocean." He registers his excitement to see how "the little fishing villages, cramped and fearful on the narrow ledge of beach," were built of light-hued stone whose "colors were grays and lavenders and dark greens," and how the "the magnificent contrast of a contorted wrathful earth" created a "palette of color-tones as striking as anything I've ever seen."

A spot that struck him--even more powerfully, as he says, than Provincetown--offered a twin-peaked hill of great, steep rock some two hundred feet out from shore. He tells Bea that "in a saddle between the fifty foot peak and the one hundred foot one was a little shack, looking out to sea. I cannot imagine a more perfect place to write a book, or when the tide is high, to make love on the ocean side and know you'll never be disturbed." Norman's sense of being in a place of discovery, where he could sharpen his senses by coming alive to the unexpected and the new, would supply him

with a stabilizing element that he would draw upon over and over again during his stay in Japan. He swam in the Tateyama bay almost daily, gathering shells and writing descriptions that he sent home to Bea, declaring within a matter of weeks that he loves the country and "the steady source of pleasure" that it gives him.

He would have reason to be grateful for it, since there was much else that would bring him disquiet and distress during these continuing months overseas. Perhaps the most unfailing source of anxious distraction for all of his regiment was the question of how soon they could expect to start for home. Just after the surrender of Germany, in May, the Pentagon had initiated a widely-approved plan for discharging veterans, and over the course of the summer its administrators had been more than meeting the plan's quotas. But Pentagon planning had been based upon the assumption that the surrender of the Japanese would not come for a full eighteen months after the fall of Germany, and when it came instead in barely three an administrative confusion developed that would grow, by the first of the year, into a genuine pandemonium.

For now, though, the carefully worded official estimates in mid-September suggested to Norman that he could himself hope to leave Japan sometime in March of 1946, and could in any case be quite confident of being back in the States by summer. As a unit, his regiment was scheduled to be sent home somewhat earlier than this, but really long-term veterans in the 112th were being selected out for return on something like a weekly basis, while enlisted men much younger in service than Norman began joining him

in his Reconnaissance platoon as replacements. In the context of their doing so, ranking non-commissioned officers began to disappear, and the question that he had long ago tried to erase from his mind came back to trouble him: Private First Class Norman Mailer, proud of his stripe and proud of his record as a rifleman, began thinking about rising in the ranks.

It was a fatal thought. What modest success he had shown as a soldier was as a rifleman in the field, alive to his responsibilities as a member of a squad on patrol, honorably exhausted with his comrades when the grueling day was done. As soon as the troop returned to garrison on Luzon, he tried to legitimize his inability to respect the chickenshit requirements of inspections and parades by volunteering to train for a hazardous scouting assignment to escape it. But he had been rejected as a volunteer, almost surely because of his questionable record as a garrison-soldier in the Philippines and before. Now, in Japan, it was again as a garrison soldier that he would be reviewed for possible promotion. It required some self-delusion for him to suppose that the results now would be any different than they had been in any of his other garrison reviews. Indeed, precisely to avoid garrison routine, he had almost immediately volunteered for another assignment that would, as he explained to his family, get him out of "all details, all inspections, all training (naturally the 112th still has classes on weapons and gas mask drills.)"

Along with another soldier, he took on the job of laundry man: in exchange for doing all the laundry of all the men in the troop,



the two were not only to be excused from all other assignments, but would each be paid a cash premium which Norman estimated (unrealistically) at \$30 to \$35 a week. In his letters home Norman had remarked frequently on his various strategies for escaping the daily assignments that came his way in garrison, and on the present occasion he now freely acknowledges that actually carrying out the laundry job would be a discipline for him, "for I have fucked-off on any work I detested in the army for quite some time now." Yet, seeing this clearly, he seems not to have understood that in the eyes of his non-coms his accepting the laundry job might well amount to little more than a fairly fortunate solution to their problem of getting a chronic malingerer to finally do some work. They would not likely have seen it as evidence that they should recommend him for a promotion, and in fact they made no such recommendation.

The laundry job, whatever its apparent virtues, proved to be enormously hard work and brought a cash return of only about half of what Norman had expected. He sent the money to Bea, to be added to their postwar savings account (now approaching \$3,000, not including War Bonds) and when the month's promotion list showed that he had been passed over for a rating in Recon, he angrily looked elsewhere for assignment. Brushing aside an opportunity to edit the post newspaper ("a seven-day-a-week job") he set off in quite a different direction. On the boat from the Philippines he had worked as a K.P. under the same Mess Sergeant who was now in charge of the regimental kitchen, and Norman remembered that this

sergeant had gone out of his way to praise him as a hard and conscientious worker (which was almost certainly true: Norman reserved his detestation, and his malingerling, for the many military jobs that seemed designed merely to instill group obedience. He actually relished trying to accomplish an individual piece of work.)

So when the Mess Sergeant posted a notice calling for volunteers to become cooks Norman came forward, and was pleased to have the unusual experience of hearing a sergeant say that he was delighted to have him on board. The sergeant was quick to warn Norman that there was no potential for promotion in the position--the few ratings that were available would certainly go to men with some background in Food Service--but there were advantages, including a work schedule of one day off for every day on the job. It is true that Norman's experience in army kitchens was confined to the lowly level of the K.P.--he certainly had a great deal of that, perhaps more than any man of his longevity in the troop--but he was confident that he would be able to learn how to cook, and he liked the idea of working at something as a kind of craftsman. Certainly he was pleased to be able to escape the recon assignment, where he would be outranked by raw replacements, and so he was on the whole glad to make the move.

At the outset, however, he was faced with what he regarded as a serious problem: he was ashamed of how his new identity would demean him in the eyes of his admirers at home. In the pecking order of army prestige the role of combat rifleman could be

regarded as close to the worst position in the world, but it could also be seen as close to the most honorable--it depended upon one's point of view. But no such division of opinion could be found concerning the prestige of cooks: all folk-wisdom insisted that the job was to be universally despised as the lowest enlisted assignment the military had to offer. Certainly this had been Norman's understanding, and until now he had subscribed to it as automatically as to the parallel truth for enlisted men which held that all officers were swine. And so the heavily-armed trooper who only the previous June had told Bea that he might appropriately be addressed as "Dear Machine Gunner," writes now, on October 1: "You were proud of me as a rifleman--you will hesitate to tell people now that I am a cook."

In the same letter, however, he explains that not only does the idea of work as a cook have some positive appeal to him as being honest labor, but its conditions will blessedly protect him from developing any humiliating hopes for promotion in a system that he after all despises. And finally, even more than either of these things, the new work schedule will free him to do the things that he really wants to do with his time in Japan:

I want free time so very badly. Friday, Saturday, and then Sunday I've gone exploring into the hills. It's breath-taking country, magnificent, and I'm completely happy. I want to get to know these back forests the way I learned the foothills of the Sierra Madre in Luzon. And with those alternate free days I can do that, and I can read. It's disgraceful how little I've read in the last two months.

In her reply, of course, Bea indignantly denies having any negative reaction to the new job arrangement, and while commiserating with



him about his lost promotion, she expresses confidence that he will enjoy both the change of occupation and the freedom that it brings.

As it happened, Bea's prediction turned out to be perfectly accurate. Norman's enjoyment and even love of the local countryside becomes one of the most striking things about his record of experience in this season. He climbs alone into the mountains at the tip of the Bosa-Hanto peninsula, and looks down on water that is "a magnificent blue, lined with a white foam along the sweep of the cove." Then he explores on down beyond the ridge:

The trail was a soft one of trampled grass, and it passed through a forest of dark green, so dense it might have been jungle. It wound up and down over the hills, and there was an intense sensation of solitude that I found a little frightening--aloneness is so unique in the army that you're uncomfortable at first.

He comes down out of the forest to find a narrow stream of a rice-paddy at the foot of the hill, "ready for harvest now, and turned to a golden yellow. The trail curved along a ten foot bluff above the thin creek of grain, and the gold in it shone oddly and brightly as if the sun was open upon it."

He followed the trail:

Sometimes my rice stream was five yards wide, sometimes twenty, but never could I see it for very far ahead. Occasionally it would remain in sight for a hundred yards before it veered sharply around the next hill set against it.

And then he cuts back on a trail that intercepts his own, pleased that he knows where he is and can find his way back. He tells Bea that this "is the one knowledge I have gained overseas. I can walk into hills now, tread a forest maze, and come back to my starting point."

Norman revels in these excursions, which he usually undertakes alone, and in the lift of mood that they supply him he addresses his new job with something like real enthusiasm. "It's hard full work," he tells Bea, "that makes the working day pass quickly." Baking bread and gutting chickens really is demanding, he writes, but he doesn't mind, and he positively enjoys serving up the food on his side of the chow-line:

I know all the guys (I've been in every platoon in the troop) and I roar at them when they bitch about the food and threaten to put them on K.P. and they sass me back. The cooks like me--I'm a tough guy from Brooklyn (the thousand roles I assume) and I work hard.

There is a dark side, as well, but it is one that takes him out of himself as he addresses it, and he sounds more like a writer than he has for some time as he explains it to Bea.

The cooks are no great shucks but they're men and quite individualized. Like almost all G.I.s they have the frightening bitterness that I know myself. They are bitter against officers, they are bitter against women and there is so much cruelty here, and they are bitter against Negroes, and here it is very ug.

Yet, he says, the cooks are likeable too. "I have found that the credit side of nearly all men is not in any goodness they possess but in some charm or idiosyncrasy." Bea had, earlier, suggested to Norman that his attitude toward Filipinos revealed an element of unconscious prejudice, and in discussing the question he had acknowledged some truth to the charge, explaining that the ongoing human conditions of army life, especially in the field but actually anywhere, worked to erode tolerance and moral sensibility. He develops the point much further here, using their correspondence as he had so often done as a kind of writer's memo-pad. He is

writing of a Chicago gang-rape that a fellow cook described to him:

I'll tell you about it if you remind me, for I shall not forget it. But it was brutal, baby, inconceivably so. Indeed, the wonder is that I was startled by it. I have seen so many brutalities, heard of so many more. Whores are bullied out of their ass every day in the week, Negroes are shot by MP's on the smallest pretext. Remind me that I have a story here. And a story of York and the whore he fucked twice before an audience. You and I are awfully healthy, baby. It took the army to show me that.

Norman indicated that one of the reasons that he became a cook was the time it would give him for reading, and he was right to recall that his once prodigious appetite for books has faded since he got to Japan--indeed it quite understandably began fading in early August, when his attention was commanded by the news of the A-Bomb, the cease-fire, and then the hasty transplant of the regiment to its present location. The last text he mentioned having looked at in the Philippines was The Decline of the West, and it is this tome to which he now returns with his new-found leisure, noting that after considerable effort he is still just halfway through the First Book. The only earlier reading in Japan that he records is the 1940 best seller The Ox Bow Incident, read in a single sitting in mid-September. He calls it "a perfect novel," and especially credits Walter van Tilburg Clark's profound insight into the individual and group psychology of Southwestern American men, such as were so often to be found in the 112th. Like a very great many other things he reads during the rest of his time in the army, Norman uses Clark's story to take him to the drawing board of his own novel--now very actively in a state of conception.

He does the same thing, but more insistently, with Jules



Romains' Verdun ([date]), read in mid-October, and James Ramsey Ullman's 1945 Book-of-the-Month selection, The White Tower. In the case of the Romains--"which was a helluva good novel, and a stimulating one for it set my brain to churning up new ideas again, and more important made me feel like writing once more"-- Norman's commentary is admiring.

The thing about Verdun is its magnificence as a war novel. I've always heard of Romains as a Humanist, a liberal with the Mann kind of optimism, and I've dismissed him as such. But if he does believe in a better world it is not in this book. There is the deep pessimism that comes always from regarding war too closely, and beyond that a universality about it which if the names and the idiom had been changed, could have been a novel of Americans in this war.

In clear stages, Norman moves from the world of the novel to his own world, which he uses here and always as the measure for determining reality itself:

One scene--the end of a long infantry march where a battalion comes into sight of Verdun at midnight and sees the city afire--is quite magnificent. There is so very much of the exhaustion-nausea, and with it the curious exaltation that war gives when one beholds it as a spectacle.

Norman explains to Bea that the novel's main character "thinks a little like me--I felt close to many of his observations, and the talk he has with \_\_\_\_\_, toward the end was brilliant for me--perhaps because I have just gone through a war."

He proceeds to explain that the novel had set him to re-examining the conception he had been working on for his own novel, and in detail offers examples of the way he might now have to revise. Indeed, the final page or pages of the letter are now missing--part of the ubiquitous evidence that he later returned to his letter-file as a major source for actual working memoranda in

his composition of The Naked and the Dead. Norman makes very similar and even more pointed use of The White Tower, though he judges this novel to be, unlike Verdun, a failure in its own terms. He characterizes it for Bea as being "about a mountain in Europe which impels five or six people to climb it." Norman's own novel-in-embryo will require soldiers to climb a steep ridge, and so "naturally I was interested in anything which had to do with a symbolic mountain." While he is drawn deeply into the book's detailed presentation of the discipline of climbing, he rejects the novel otherwise, making in the process an interesting comparison with his own much-criticized "Transit to Narcissus":

Everything about this White Tower is spurious, cheaply felt and the cheapness embedded in language which is too elegant. Indeed I think this was the trouble with Transit, why it was a romantic novel in the worst sense of the word. I had not characters but idea-symbols with faces & I don't believe you can work that way.

Two days later, having finished reading the novel, he writes about it again, now completely brushing aside its artistic pretensions while being eagerly drawn to its adventure:

As you might have expected, I am infatuated now with mountain climbing. The White Tower was an awful novel, but its descriptions of mountain climbing caught me, and I know I want to do it. Indeed I read as a ten year old might read an adventure novel, fuming at the love interruptions (what an awful love story in there) and impatient for the climbing to start again.

The practical realities of climbing are the elements in the work that Norman finds reliable, and their most immediate effect is to lead him directly back into his own novel-planning, requiring him to rethink "some thorns of probability in my novel:"

I must reduce the scale of my mountain range for I cannot have

snow, or too improbable ascents. My G.I.s with their M-1's and grenades & rations and ponchos, with their diarrhea and jungle rot and clap, malaria & dengue would not get far at all in a tropic sun, and they would not carry mountain tools. The range will still be high, fabulously high for them, but it must be after all, a minor series of mountains.

In its earliest incarnation, Norman's "Ridge Novel" plan envisioned an artillery platoon climbing out of the jungle up onto an exposed ridge, only to discover that their movements were visible to the Japanese in the cover below: the action was to be their effort to get back down and under cover of the jungle before it was too late. Now, however, Norman has recast it so that the mission is as he explains it to Bea:

The platoon's original mission is to see if the Japs are guarding the pass through the mountain spine of the island where the fighting is taking place. When they discover that the pass is covered, they attempt to cross the mountains by another route and fail because of the mightiness of the mountain. I have no more story than that yet, but I wish for no more--the details, the incidents will come out of the men --of that I am certain.

If he needs no more "story" than this, Norman very much feels the need at this stage for creating the identities of the men who will make up the platoon. Authentic identity, which he has decided was missing from "Transit," is now his primary goal, and he thinks he knows how he will create it.

He is going to draw the characters "from men I've known like Amerson & Matthiesen and Martinez," whose separate realities for him are completely sharp in his mind's eye: "so clear & real that I don't see how I can miss when it comes to putting them on paper."

What I'm going to do when I get home is to list the names of every man I can remember clearly in the army--there should be several hundred. Out of them will come a few as themselves, and a half dozen more as synthetics of several. (I want to



wait till I'm out of the army so that the men I'm with now will not have an undue prominence.)

With Bea as his auditor, he projects still further the work he will do on the novel when they are back together:

I'm going to make a table with my dozen or so men in which I work out for myself their relation & attitude, toward each of the other men, and their view toward the mountain. That ought to lay bare the many as yet unposed problems, and more, in investigating relationships should generate story business. This story must grow out of the characters, and I've worried very little about the details so far.

Norman does worry a little about the identity of a single not at all concrete figure in his tale, who he at this point is reduced to calling "the youth with the vision", but before the end of this month his letters show him returning to the question of central figures with confidence. He has, in fact, begun planning the creation of a certain kind of sergeant:

I've finally anchored my vision hero. He'll be the platoon sergeant or a squad sergeant, a cruel hard man (remind me of Freestone & his Natl. Guard service) with an inarticulate tension that fastens at last on the ridge which he tries to climb after the lieutenant is killed, because it serves in his mind as a personal affront. His character will have the frightening paradox that Captain Bligh's had, the cruel tyrant who alone has strength to lead men through an over exorbitant travail.

Having set all this down, Norman turns with a burst of feeling to address Bea directly: "It'll be so good when we can talk about it, and really darling, I count on you so much in the planning of it."

All along, of course, he has counted on her for still deeper support than this. It is certainly a signal achievement that Norman has been able to plan his way so far into his great postwar novel project--and, indeed, he will plan farther still before his army

time is done-- but his truly premiere achievement goes much deeper than the literary. By the time he went into the army at the age of twenty-one he had already developed an impressive inner identity as a writer, but he had accomplished this under circumstances far different from those he was about to encounter. He had rediscovered his crushed and buried childhood identity of imaginative creator thanks at first to an institutional experience at Harvard that could hardly have been more liberating, protective and nurturing. Then, in the context of this already powerfully protective masculine environment he had found Bea, an embracing female presence almost miraculous in its unfailing commitment to his life as a man.

Both had been sources of empowerment to his sense of himself that not so much created as protected his own headlong affirmation of an artist identity, but neither would be available to him as he risks another crushing, this time by a ponderous military world that--by the paradoxical dictates of his identity--he needed as artist to be able somehow to inhabit and make his own. If Norman may be said to have in a sense smuggled his Harvard education with him into the army, in a much more literal sense he also undertook to smuggle Bea. They had been divided by the dynamics of their post-college relationship while in Provincetown and Boston together in the weeks surrounding Norman's graduation--she wanting to get married, he so appalled at the idea as apparently to have considered breaking up altogether--but by the end of 1943, in their snow-bound retreat in Conway, Vermont, it was Norman whose

insistence on marriage carried a now-reluctant Bea into the elopement. With his Draft Board's summons nearly in hand, he must have come to understand the clear and simple truth: he might not be able to make it without her.

How much help Harvard provided to Norman in his two-year struggle to sustain himself in the army is difficult to say, but Bea was in one sense or another his secret weapon all the way, bringing him a life-giving erotic presence that allowed him--however battered and reduced--to power his way either through or around every obstacle. She had posed like some dazzling icon of carnality at the end of the tunnel of Basic Training, alluring in her brilliant guise of Wave officer, and this fleeting period of contact, combined with their San Francisco tryst before he sailed for the Pacific, produced a memory-bank resource that would radiate far more energizingly than the actual, in-the-flesh experiences could ever have done.

Indeed, once separated beyond even the wildest hope of physical reunion, the two imaginative young correspondents stored up every intimate moment they had ever had--Dunster House, furnished lodgings in Cambridge, Provincetown, Conway and even their wretchedly beleaguered honeymoon--for the purpose of collaborative replaying in their great ouvre-cache of secret letters. (Norman's tactics in getting his past the overseas censors were perhaps his only totally successful military execution during the eight months that he had faced the challenge.) While he was in the Philippines, he scorned and was in fact appalled by the squalid



substitute for erotic experience offered by the local prostitutes. Indeed, Norman's only consistent sources of masculine pride while serving in the army was an almost hypnotically reasserted affirmation of his command--his frankly superior command--of the inner-reality of true carnal knowledge.

In this respect and in this respect alone he regarded himself as not only the equal but the superior of the mass of men around him. (His power as an artist, in this company, constituted not a source of strength but an Achilles heel--which he had to strengthen himself in order to protect.) Bea's letters show perhaps even more clearly than Norman's a passionate understanding of just how powerfully they could erotically empower one another in this medium: there can be no doubt that this was the resource that permitted Norman to both survive and, within important limits, even prevail as the inhabitant of an alien, potentially annihilating military environment. It carried him through his eight month period in the Philippines with remarkable success, leaving him at the end of that suddenly terminated time feeling stronger and better than his almost constantly debilitating encounters with the military could otherwise have allowed.

over-written  
After Norman's removal to Japan, looking now toward a proximate reunion that could be imagined in plausible plans of the most life-giving actuality--and with military censorship blessedly suspended--the two correspondents proceeded to outdo themselves. For them the language of erotic love drew tirelessly on the vocabulary of costume, and they designed whole wardrobes--for one

another, but especially for Bea--that would sustain them through their elaborately dramatic sexual scenarios. They intended it to be breathtaking and it really was, as on an average of twice a week--each wrote to the other seldom less than five times<sup>5</sup> weekly--they passionately proved themselves in their marvelously wrought identity as heroic lovers. In this context, Bea had said that she could never imagine him, under any circumstances, having to hire a prostitute. She admits that she had supposed it probable--he being such an attractive man--that some discerning lady in the Philippines or, now, Japan, might have invited him into what could after all have been an acceptable temporary arrangement. But since this was apparently not to be, it now seemed that they would each have the pleasure of personally relieving the other's enforced physical abstinence.

But about a month later, Bea receives an<sup>6</sup> somehow-delayed letter Norman had sent six weeks before. In it, experiencing a moment of depression, he remarks:

Sometimes I'm close to going to the geisha house. I know you will tell me to go, even want me to, but I dislike to yield. Adding that in addition to a whole list of other reasons to abstain, he would be "accepting the double standard, for I could not tell you to take a man," he in any case abruptly shifts his mood and returns to their lovemaking-by-mail with redoubled ardor. Bea, however, replies in the coolly self-confident voice of a woman who has been absolutely in charge of a desperately passionate relationship for nearly two years. She tells him that while she would still be against his going to a common prostitute, a Geisha

House could by contrast be properly regarded as a kind of opportunity for cultural experience. If he should become interested in having that experience, he must have no fears that she would feel threatened in any way. With striking nonchalance, she in effect invites him to be her guest.

Bea's early-November letter must have reached Norman just before Thanksgiving--a Thursday distinguished not only by the fact that it is a famously heavy day to be a cook, but also by being the anniversary of their last parting in San Francisco--and, on the Sunday following, he writes a long letter in reply. It begins:

Curiously enough, I feel a little hesitation,  
even embarrassment in writing this letter.  
Nat Ellis & I went to a geisha house yesterday,  
and I got the time-honored American purchase--  
a piece of ass.

ii

From the start of their relationship and all the way through their marriage so far, Norman and Bea continued to hold fast to the doctrine of unrelenting mutual candor--they called it "honesty"--in the matter of their sexual dealings with and even their feelings about other men and women. The fact that up to now neither of them had anything very substantial to be candid about did not lessen their belief in their commitment to this principle, and in the course of his long letter about his (more or less satisfying) Geisha House experience, Norman invokes the principle several times. In their follow-up correspondence he even boasts a little about how his intention to give Bea a full account of the



experience had shocked his comrade/companion, the also-married Nat Ellis.

*overwritten?*  
Bea's reply to Norman's report, while notably lacking in nonchalance, is carefully even-tempered and understanding: above all she shows a thoughtful and self-conscious awareness of what a tremendous resource they have built-up through the process of their vicarious intensity, and of how important it is that they try to keep it intact. While less self-aware on this point than Bea, Norman clearly reveals ~~an understanding~~ that he has run a significant risk in proceeding as freely as he has—~~he expresses~~ *is clearly* audible relief when, after two weeks, Bea's positive reply to his confession arrives, ~~and the two are at pains to begin in their letters a more or less deliberate recultivation of their original~~ *then begin to recultivate* secret garden. They knew it was important to do so, but, on the other hand, a significant measure of the pressure that had driven them to create it in the first place had in their eyes measurably been relieved. Surely this perception of lessening-pressure had contributed to Bea's self-confidence when she encouraged Norman's excursion, and even now, as they mended their private fence, they just perceptibly seemed a little less apprehensive about their fortunes than they had been in the past.

For one thing, they now found themselves being pulled into the festivities of the first postwar holiday season, ~~in their lives~~ together, and even though they had to be apart during its celebration they both reacted to its spirit. Christmas 1945 was to be a hail and farewell for the 112th, which as a unit would sail

for home before the end of December, and Norman's sense of belonging to this cavalry regiment--however qualified that sense may have been--had in eleven months grown very strong. His regimental command, pressing for ways to occupy the troops during their diminishing time overseas, decided to offer them a range of high-school-level academic courses, and in November Norman was invited to teach a class in American history. Despite his oft-repeated resolve never again to look to military assignments as a source of what he here calls his "self-respect and confidence," Norman accepted with pleasure. The first session met on November 31, when five students out of the ten registered appeared in class (by contrast, 250 showed up for Automotive Mechanics) and Norman decided to continue--on a daunting five-day calendar of two classroom hours a day--for as long as the attendance held up.

He had never taught, never taken a history class at Harvard, knew very little about American history as such, and was able to stay ahead of the class only by an extraordinary daily effort, but he had been flattered to be asked ~~to do it~~ and he stays with the assignment for as long as his circumstances allow. His ongoing duties as a cook begin to seem unattractive compared to the teaching, as well as to another possibility that suddenly is dangled before him like an ornament on a tree: a G.H.Q. staff job in the Tokyo offices of the renowned army newspaper Stars and Stripes. Nat Ellis, who also is staying behind the regiment in Japan, had landed a position with the paper and got Norman an interview with its managing editor. After the two met--on a

memorable trip to the great, ravaged city--Norman becomes optimistic, and remains so when, on December 15, still another unexpected development is added to this half-hilarious, half anxiety-stricken season.

The previous May, during his regiment's evacuation of its line-troops from the lower Sierra Madre, Norman had got both thighs badly scraped when he clumsily allowed himself to get squeezed between a jeep and a passing truck. The neglected abrasions developed infections over a period of time, and by December these had drained into his lymph gland, causing a fever and a painful swelling in his groin. Not knowing the cause, and being of course apprehensive concerning his recent Geisha House sojourn, Norman reported for sick call and was forthwith assigned to the regimental hospital, where he was pleased to linger for some ten days while recovering from his lymphitis. He spends the period letter-writing home and receiving visits from departing regimental friends--Gwaltney prominent among them--who bring beer, candy bars and other contraband, but who also bring the disappointing news that the Stars and Stripes job has fallen through.

Instead, Norman is to follow a number of other refugees from the 112th to the seaport city of Chosi--some 100 miles up the Pacific-side of the peninsula--where he will join the 649th Ordnance Ammunition Company for the remainder of his stay overseas. The prospect leaves him wary, but, on the whole, not unduly pessimistic. Checking out of the hospital on December 27th, he writes Bea a letter recording his new mailing address, and also



detailing plans for the novel which he has been exploring in a number of letters <sup>5</sup>written while he was convalescent: Then he packs his effects, and, bidding farewell to the Tateyama terrain he has enjoyed so much, embarks on what proves an unfomfortable and isolating all-day train ride for Chosi:

I had a miliary coach all to myself and the women & children & old men were crammed into the other shabby coaches like too many clothes in a suitcase. I told the conductor I'd like to have some of them sit in my empty coach, but he said it was forbidden.

Chosi-- which had "caught a B-29 raid and the core of the city is very flat with the rust-color of the war junkyard"--presented a bleak enough prospect, initially, but Norman was approaching his new situation under a compensatory head of steam. He had enjoyed and taken pride in his brief experience as a teacher, he feels secure in his proven competence as a cook, his bridge with Bea-- having survived a serious test without significant damage--still offers him the richest kind of secret support, and his novel, both by itself and in the context of other reading he has been doing, is continuing to take shape within his imagination. Indeed, setting up the Stateside domestic conditions under which the novel is to be composed stands <sup>is the chief burden of</sup> ~~at the dead center of the whole game-plan that has~~ been evolving in their correspondence ever since Norman's arrival in Japan. Before then, their postwar civilian life was imagined without nearly so much reference to practical reality: their sexual fantasies required little more than a film-strip of bedrooms, as it were, whose settings resembled nothing so much as the rudimentary props employed by the makers of old-fashioned blue movies.

As the prospect of reunion became more real, however, their planning matured accordingly: its first model had seen them back in the same university setting where, after all, Norman had done most of his writing to date. Under the cover of variously imagined courses of Harvard graduate study--Norman continued to favor for himself a curriculum in the history of philosophy and religion--he would produce a novel that distilled ~~the raw material of~~ his ~~two~~ ~~year immersion in the military experience.~~ That novel would in one sense be modest in its design: "I wanted to write a short novel about a long patrol" he remembers, years later. But in another sense its embryonic ambition would be great. Norman after all wanted to prove, to himself and to all the others who needed to be convinced, that the whole rest of his life not only should but could be devoted to the production of literature. He knew he was an artist; he wanted to know if he could make his living at it.

The more they thought about it, however, the less the idea of an academic graduate program seemed necessary. They would have saved over three thousand dollars in cash, there was an additional nest egg of War Bonds, and it was now clear that there was to be some kind of <sup>post-war</sup> government support for veterans who were addressing ~~the question of their rehabilitation into civilian life.~~ In addition, Uncle Dave Kessler had with increasing insistence been offering to underwrite their expenses for as long as it took Norman to write the novel. It seemed realistic under these circumstances not only for Norman to abandon the graduate-study plan but for Bea to do so as well. Why shouldn't she test out her ability to write

a novel? She had made something of a beginning already, she really wanted to find out what she could do with it, and they thought that the complimentary character of their mutual undertakings could only serve to increase their intimacy. ~~So with this consideration resolved, they turned to the question of where and under what structural circumstances the whole effort was to be undertaken.~~

They envisioned three immediate stages: first, a short but desperately desired vacation; second, a working summer in Provincetown; third, an apartment in Brooklyn or New York, which they could use as a working base. The vacation really required no planning; just a room with private bath in Brooklyn, New York or Boston--it hardly mattered, as long as it was a place where they could be alone until the summer began. Because they expected to be out of uniform no later than early April, they would just vacation--away whatever time remained before their summer lease began. That lease was already in the process of being arranged in consultation with the Provincetown Chamber of Commerce, on the one hand, and Mr. George Barns, proprietor of the Crows Nest Bungalows--just outside Provincetown--on the other. They had stayed at Barnes' North Truro establishment in June of 1943, and Bea had already written asking him if he could provide something large enough to allow them to have privacy, working room, and additional space for entertaining their families and friends. One way or another, they were confident that they could count on Provincetown as their setting for the summer. And during this time, they could press forward with a search for a suitable post-summer apartment.



Norman had all of this in mind when he got up to Chosi, and he also had an increasingly clear plan for the novel itself. All through December he had returned to it in his letters from one angle or another. Once he quotes Robinson Jeffers, citing an observation evidently well-known to them both:

It (life) is rather ignoble in its quiet times, mean in its pleasures, slavish in the mass, but at stricken moments it shines terribly against the dark magnificence of things.

And he adds, "I want to get that across [in this novel], as indeed I must in all my work--I could use that phrase as a guide for anything I ever write." E ~~Norman's focus in this letter is to imagine the novel in the context of background effects and the broad thematic implications of its particular situations.~~ J At this time he imagines that the novel might open at sunset, with the men who are going on the reconnaissance patrol embarking on a barge from their own side of the island, to go around and land at night on the other side. He asks Bea to remember his description of a sunset written in his long journal-letter on The Sea Barb during his December, 1944 crossing, saying that he might use that description in the novel.

*huh?*

He had written:

The sun had disappeared and the horizon was like an orange-glowing wire which lapsed into yellow oranges and yellows and greens and finally into a pale blue, almost bottomless, that flowed by the arch of the sky into the darker blues and blacks of the night in the west.

But before the horizon were clouds, thick black purple ones, defined linearly against the yellow-green of the glow. And since there was not a wispy trace to any of them, you had a sky of volumes and colors, nothing atmospheric or nebulous. This was a hard sculptured sky, a massing of solids across infinity, like branches and stones over a deep well. And what noises those purple clouds made against their yellow

backdrop. Big growling tones. Bass clouds.

Norman of course does not have the description in front of him--he had seen the sunset almost exactly a year before, and had mailed off the description at the end of that month. But he evidently feels that he remembers it well enough, and says that he is now thinking of putting it at the novel's beginning,

when the reconnaissance platoon is setting out in the barge to travel around the island and land from behind. It could serve a lot of functions--as an image of concrete beauty against the misery which follows, as an naive touch, and as an awakening to the men who have not thought for so long of the vision.

Elaborating, he goes on:

I don't want to make the novel too allegorical--there'll be the overall symbolism of the birth (the onset of the birth struggle) the terrifying colors of the sunset, the long dark liquid passage through the night, the thrust through the jungle brush & the emergence into light & danger. And after the birth, the alternation between the poles of the mountain vision and the safe, and blind tangled security of the jungle. But all this will be implicit, suggested perhaps by titles of the parts like Birth, Turmoil, The Poles, & The Choice or something of that sort. The [focus of the] novel itself will be on the inarticulate [surface] feeling of the men with a suggestive shadow here & there of the deeper meanings of their lives that most men never see, and the few who do, see only at isolated stricken moments. [ibid]

Most of the thoughts Norman expresses to Bea about his novel are not of this sort, however, and are usually associated with his current reading of other fiction. Bea has sent him Liam O'Flaherty's 1925 novel The Informer, and, reading it at the start of December, Norman already suspects he will need a copy "to study technique from" when his own composition begins. He is admiring what he calls O'Flaherty's brilliant ability to give particular identity to each individual in a group of characters. Only part-way through, Norman already apprehends that O'Flaherty can show him how



to solve what will be a central problem in his own "Jungle novel":

At least twenty people have been described by him so far, and in a page or two he's caught each of them and made you feel them. He starts off with an intense description of feature and body that makes you see them, and then with one large caricaturish stroke, he exhibits the basic pattern of their action, and makes them move.

Norman describes the way the novel represents Katie, Gypo Nolan's mistress, "a once-attractive wreck of a woman," now a prostitute and drug addict:

He describes her motions, standing akimbo with the backs of her hands on her hips, says something about her like this, 'With the remnants of her womanesss, Katie loved Gypo completely, but these shreds of femininity were so scattered in her soul, that she spent most of the time upbraiding him, angry and scolding & cruel.' And Katie & her relationship to Gypo comes into your mind, and you can see as if thru their memory, the long receding vista of quarrels and malice and blows, lightened here & there by the moments of tenderness, and passion & maternalness.

~~Also in connection with The Informer~~, Norman goes on to mention the presentation of a certain kind of military leader <sup>in O'Flaherty's novel</sup> there that he knows will appear in his own novel: O'Flaherty's Commander Gallagher, "the Communist leader who has tasted the ecstasy of power, & is interested now only in controlling men. By the description of him, I believe it is supposed to be Eamon de Valera in the strong manhood of his late 20's."

Another novel, read in December, that has struck Norman strongly and in a somewhat similar way is The Cross and the Arrow, a new novel by Albert Maltz. After the war, Maltz will acquire a sort of fame as a member of the "Hollywood Ten," but now Norman identifies him for Bea as "one of the minor but more brilliant proletarian writers that fall in the age gap between Edwin Seaver



[Norman's Cross-Section editor] & Paul Peters." Norman goes on to point out that The Cross and the Arrow is a novel about the war in Europe, and is striking "because it is the first believable novel I've read about Germans, without heroics, without blackguards, and without a Hollywood Underground." It is this achievement of credibility that makes the novel important to Norman: "He gets people across, and he creates the impossible--he has a good man in his book who is believable, lovable, and even Dosty missed there."

*Citation from E+C essay?*  
Invoking Dostoyevsky in this context is resonant for Norman, since his ongoing literary discussions with Bea have characteristically polarized the novelistic landscape between the exterior, panoramic world of Tolstoy's work and the interior, narrowly but heroically conceived world of Dostoyevsky. The "Jungle novel" has, so far, been understood quite self-consciously in Tolstoyan terms, with its drama based upon the interrelationship <sup>among</sup> ~~between the disparate~~ members of a group, but Norman continues to worry that such a scheme might sacrifice the element of moral subtlety. He is thus drawn to Maltz's apparent ability to render difficult moral distinctions in the context of an external, Tolstoyan drama. Yet the ~~to-Norman inherent improbability of the~~ novel's moral claims immediately sets him to doubting:

In portraying nobleness art runs into a conflict with the author's sensibilities, for a man must recede from, even regret his nobleness in the attrition of time, even as a body that knows the meaning of love will still decay like the others and feel the cramps of the aged. I think it's significant enough that man may rise beyond his self-interest if even for an instant. When we try to believe in more we become sentimental and then cynical in the resulting crash.

For the moment, in any case, Norman cannot escape Maltz's

spell, and ~~not only~~ does he urge<sup>s</sup> Bea to read and report back on her impressions of the novel, but he actually includes it in his inner-circle of fictional guides (for his own novel-planning purposes). Indeed, ~~it is~~ <sup>T</sup> the remarkable idea of having such an inner circle, and selecting the right volumes <sup>to guide him is very much on</sup> ~~to make it up, that is most on~~ Norman's mind in this season. He has just finished reading John Hersey's widely-praised A Bell for Adano (1940), and is selecting models for his own guidance as unlike it as possible:

What a stinker! It has got a little warmth (which is what the old farts like J. Donald Adams went overboard on I suppose) but there's no balance, a book in which everybody's good is as flat as one in which everybody is bad. And Hersey writes like a cross between Hemingway & Steinbeck which is an affected mongrel. And more, there's no resolution. I don't mean of plot, but you must have a resolution of character--your book's revelations about the people must build up to a more final one about each of the main characters. The love affair is an example of this. I get the feeling of a book in which the first half was written before he knew how the second half would go. And the people don't really come across--there's not one with any variety of dimensions--compared to The Cross & the Arrow which is also affirmative. It's a piss-poor book. I get discouraged when I read the things that draw praise.

Norman immediately goes on to say that "there are about 4 novels I've read in the past year that I want to keep as models for my novel. I'm going to steep myself in them before I begin work." He lists them, and after each he adds the quality that he thinks will be provided:

The Informer, which I want for its magnificent projection of people that live in a paragraph or two.

He explains that "I need that for I'm going to have a lot of soldiers for the comparative shortness of the book--perhaps 90,000-100,000 words." He then adds a title he has listed among his reading many months earlier by an author he and Bea have



discovered together:

Home Town [not to be confused with the 1940 Sherwood Anderson volume of the same title], by [Georges] Simenon, which has some very subtly created insights into the weakly Evil, the men who are small of soul & afraid rather than malign.

The Cross & the Arrow--I want to see how he achieves the goodness you feel in Willie Wegler.

Anna Karenina, I want to re-read and steep myself in a good humanistic mood.

"Anna K.," he goes on to say, "is so damned modern--I suppose everybody discovers this once for themselves." And Norman closes his letter with a P.S. "And too, I must reread Verdun to bring back the war to me."

This December 27 letter was Norman's sign-off from Tateyama, and the next morning he travelled up to Chosi. It would be surprising if he found the place attractive, and he did not. For an almost pastoral town he exchanges a darkly strange city, and his new assignment seems an even worse bargain. For almost all of the year he had been overseas his affiliation had been with a crack cavalry regimental combat team, commanded and staffed with tested, proven officers and non-coms. He may have resided in its lowest echelon, but it was his outfit and he was used to its organizational environment. Even as it infuriated him with its tireless efforts to <sup>keep</sup> ~~make~~ every soldier keep busy ~~at some task~~, and even as he became known as a fuckup in most if not all of its platoons, he depended upon its disciplined way of life.

Now he finds himself with an isolated, butt-end "ordinance" outfit of only sixty men who pretend to load disposal barges with condemned Japanese ammunition while civilians do the work and



everybody else does nothing. Before becoming a cook, Norman took pride in evading the arbitrary work carried out by so many of his fellows, but suddenly to be in an outfit where few were required or indeed able to do anything at all was punishment of an elegant, almost Dantean sort. He, who had railed against the cleanliness-obsession of his various platoon sergeants, is suddenly nauseated by the filth of his new, totally neglected barracks. Former members of the 112th who had preceded him to the 649th tell Norman hair-raising stories of rampant alcoholism and epidemic venereal disease: he records for Bea the words of a former troop-mate:

I'm about to blow my lid, Norm. I've had two weeks of it, and I'm going crazy. In Tateyama, I went to a geisha house once; here I've gone already six times. Half the guys around here I've never seen sober.

Finding that company disorganization was such that he could have laid-low almost indefinitely before getting assigned to duty, Norman all but rushes to the mess sergeant and asks to be put to work. The company kitchen proves to be in such a state of flux that within two days Norman gets appointed First Cook on the day shift, in charge of another cook and the k.p. staff, and is at first relieved and then positively proud to discover that he is up to the task. As he tells Bea:

I'm pleased with myself & I'm getting confident & capable. It is a responsibility being a first cook, & yet I did not fret over it and I got my supper out quite on time. In fact I like responsibility--you know that brief bit of teaching must have done me a lot of good.

Furthermore, when he ~~more or less~~ follows the flow to the Giesha House (it was the only place in Choshi that his first soldier-companion knew how to find), he tells Bea that he had an awful

experience:

I had my second intercourse since I've been overseas (I call it intercourse because I dislike the word, and it's a shame to dignify it by calling it fucking.) Anyway, baby, the novelty was off this time and I had a very drab time and a very passionless bedding. I had a unique emotion afterward--disgust at myself and at fucking.

His problem, he realizes, is that unlike his earlier seasons overseas, he now is very close to going home and "patience is strained, & I'm far more prey to monotony." The monotony inclines him dangerously toward a feeding of "my self pity against the bleakness of this momentary environment." Thus he resolves to stay away from the geishas for two weeks, reasoning that "in two weeks I'll have adjusted myself to the barrenness of this life here, and I imagine I'll be able to do without them [altogether]" for the rest of his time. His plan is to work hard in the kitchen and "go healthy, take long walks" when he is off duty, and spend his off-duty hours planning out the novel. After all, as he says, "I have about ten or eleven more weeks in Japan, and I want to make them go fast."

iii

Ten or eleven weeks would translate into a mid-March departure, and it turns out that this estimate was no mere rule of thumb for Norman: perhaps without his fully realizing it, mid-March had become his own private measure of exactly how long he could go without cracking.

The forecasting of a departure date had gradually grown in importance since September, fuelled by the operation of a points-system not designed and not able to channel so many veterans home as quickly as their points-total seemed to promise. When the inevitable backlog began to build, and Norman<sup>now</sup> found himself still in the unhappy company of men who should, by original estimates, already have gone home,<sup>and</sup> he came to fear that his own estimated return-date was too optimistic. By November he was suggesting to his mother and to Bea that they investigate the possibilities of various kinds of intervention on his behalf. He thought that his mother's allegedly poor health--which the quite healthy Fan sometimes affected as a kind of rhetorical weapon in such family disputes as Barbara's stubborn desire to resume her friendship with Jack Maher--might be invoked through an appeal to the Red Cross to get him an emergency leave.

When this was attempted and failed, they all --Norman included--wrote letters to congressmen and senators, and Bea's mother used her considerable influence in the Jewish War Veterans organization, identifying various reasons why Norman should be given some special consideration in the prioritizing of discharge candidates (the most original special-plea was that discharge-points ought to be awarded to couples who both were in the service.) With Norman's urgent encouragement, his mother gradually developed into a formidable one-woman lobby, directing letters toward legislators, newspapers, syndicated columnists and assorted other public and private targets ~~on a scale that, viewed out of~~



context, might suggest a certain excessiveness. But in fact the family temper proved to be a faithful reflection of the temper of the times.

Throughout the war, a kind of common-cause had been declared among such traditional antagonists as the three branches of government, the military establishment, private industry, organized labor, religious, ethnic and racial interest groups, and the public information media. Peacetime conditions permitted these entities to resume the pursuit of their diverse, often-conflicting goals, and a point of particular division among many of them was the formation of policy regarding the administration of the armed forces. The Pentagon, caught flat-footed by the premature conclusion of the war, of course wished to proceed with a policy designed to conserve the organizational effectiveness of its military forces at home and abroad, and President Truman's administration was committed to a postwar policy that supported this goal. The issue of a calendar for the processing of military personnel back into civilian life, however, proved to be the rock upon which this policy would founder.

Both houses of congress were swamped by constituent mail demanding "the return of our boys by Christmas," and the White House in turn was flooded by twin streams of petition from the embattled congress and directly from the constituents themselves. Both management and labor leaders demanded the return of basic industry workers to run the railroads and dig the coal, and the Wall Street Journal and the Chicago Tribune struck what proved to

*editorialized for*

be significantly symptomatic editorial postures, crying for the drastically accelerated demobilization of the ~~close to~~ twelve million-man armed forces. Every command in the army experienced preliminary tremors of apprehension from its increasingly restive enlisted men, and in the midst of this growing expression of grass roots concern, in the first week of January, Secretary of War Robert Patterson announced that the military had to renege on its promise that all men with two or more years of service would be brought home and discharged by the late winter of 1946. He pushed the discharge of two-year men back to July 1, 1946.

The reaction to this announcement, at home and abroad, was explosive, and for the first two weeks of January a kind of pandemonium ruled in the military and in the vast portion of the civilian population which had already been engaged by this issue. Patterson, who began a tour of Pacific bases just as his statement was released, reaped the whirlwind:

When he arrived in Guam, angry demonstrating soldiers burned him in effigy. At each stop thereafter worried commanders arranged for him to meet soldier delegates to vent the GI ire. On successive days in Manila he faced shouting mobs of up to 10,000 soldiers and sailors. The Pacific edition of Stars and Stripes bannered PATTERSON CALLED NUMBER ONE ENEMY BY JEERING MOB.

These scenes were repeated in the European theater of operations, where "Military police noted sharp increases in arrests for drunkenness, reckless driving and slovenly dress, [and] hundreds of GIs marched down the Champs Elysees waving magnesium flares and shouting 'scab' at men who wouldn't join them."

Such reports as this triggered, in turn, alarmed perception at home that there was a whiff in all this of the presence of

Communist agitators, and Congress, spurred on by new waves of constituent demand, turned on the President and the Pentagon with something like confrontational fury. Only a dramatic appearance by General Eisenhower before a joint-session of Congress was able to restore order. Having just issued a general-order for military personnel to end demonstrations upon pain of court martial, he brought his tremendous prestige and influence before the Congress on January 15. He apparently convinced its members--and enough of the huge audience that listened-- that he would do his best on the matter of hurrying up the discharge process, but that he would do so only in a way consistent with the mission that had been entrusted to the military by the Congress and the people of the United States. By late January the fire-storm had burned out, and in its wake the Pentagon and the War Department quietly tried to meet their original deadlines, despite the fact that the price they had to pay was a gutted postwar military force, barely the shell of what they wanted and what their diplomatic strategies required.

And Norman? Norman almost lost it. For a period of perhaps a month his painstakingly-achieved, always fragile sense of self-possession came near to failing, and but for ~~the~~ <sup>the</sup> stabilizing anchor ~~provided by~~ <sup>of</sup> his position of responsibility in the kitchen, he might have cracked up altogether. In his mind's eye, if not in fact, he seemed even to be in danger of losing Bea. When he got the preliminary news of Patterson's announcement, and knew only that there would be a slowdown of some duration, he was at first struck dumb. Having written to Bea almost daily since mid-December, his



New Year's Day letter was abruptly followed by seven days of silence, as he attempted to recoil from the shock of hearing that a major calendar announcement was about to be issued. Then this on January 8:

You've got to forgive me for not writing for several days but the news of the army's discharge slowdown made me so sick and furious I did not want to get it on paper.... Yesterday, the news of the G.I. riots in the Philippines made me feel better if only vicariously. I could murder any General with the utmost pleasure. I hate brass now more than I ever hated the Nazis.

Though Norman urges Bea to take immediate action in the form of letters of protest, the full force of the Secretary of War's announcement does not hit him until January 10, when he sees the details of the proposal, and writes on the next day:

Yesterday was awful. When I heard the news--2 year men home in June, I was closer to weeping than I've been since that last day when we cried in each other's arms. The wildness and the numbness of the days before when I didn't know what the new schedule would be was gone--I was just miserable.

Ominously, he concludes the letter by saying, "Wait for me, will you darling. If you fell in love with someone else, I should want to die." This feeling of being forced apart from Bea is ominous because he has had nothing from her to feed the feeling: no mail had reached Norman since his departure from Tateyama, and it is not until January 19 that "the rains finally came" and he is handed a batch of ten letters from her. Unfortunately, they ~~of course~~ were all written before the explosion of bad news, and some of them contain a few details that she might perhaps not have included had she known the state Norman was to be in when he received them.

*75 state of mind.*

Bea, after all, subscribed with Norman to the policy of total candor regarding all erotic feelings, and she had met and

occasionally been seeing a couple of veterans of the Spanish Civil War. Communist in their politics and their circle of friends, the <sup>were</sup> ~~men and their scene~~ seemed attractively enlightening to Bea--she is very drawn to the political left at this time--and she of course tells Norman all about it. Indeed, consistent with their policy, she mentions a few details in this relationship that reveal her as the object of considerable carnal desire. In doing so she sets Norman's "demons" of jealousy into active motion, and for the next few weeks he is unable to leave the subject alone. It becomes linked to his feelings of desolate isolation created by the prospect of the army's delay of his discharge, and he feeds it still more by a drunken night he has with a geisha girl who comes back with him to his barracks. In a revealingly complete break from his past representations of such experience, he actually boasts of how accomplished he has been as the girl's sexual partner, and how thrilled she was with the experience.

And yet, as he has frequently remarked in observing his fellow soldiers, such unfaithfulness as this on the <sup>his</sup> ~~part of the married male~~ almost invariably engenders in him dark suspicion concerning his wife's fidelity. Though Norman professes to try, he cannot refrain from falling into regularly repeated fits of jealousy, until Bea tells him, in level tones she has never quite employed before, that when he returns he had better not act-out such feelings with her because she will not stand for it. Tempered though it is with assurances of devotion, her remark is more than enough to kindle in Norman the fear that he may be losing her. For

a number of weeks his letters cloud the air with horrified apprehensions of both breakdown and break-up. And as this is going forward, their correspondence is further pressured by the fact that his mother has become almost frantic about his situation and ~~in doing so is transformed into a domestic presence that is,~~ quite simply, very hard for her daughter-in-law to live with. In reaction, Bea at one point confesses to panic and a terrible desire to flee the whole unbearable business.

It is a business that lasts no longer than a month, hardly more, and then the wild, uncontrollable swings of circumstance fall back into a tolerable arc: though their various boats continue to rock, the whole family is again able to manage. Stability gets restored for two reasons. First, during the problematic period--early January through mid February--President Truman's government, preaching one policy but practicing another, has cast military considerations to the wind in an determined political effort to get demobilization onto a faster track. By mid-February the Pentagon offers reassurances that delays in the originally published schedule will not, after all, be a matter of months. More likely, it will be only weeks--four or five at the most. Norman receives such information regarding his own status, and happily writes to his mother that he expects to be sailing no later than early April:

you know that I appreciate all of the letters you wrote. I think it was that which got my homecoming moved up from June. Because you know, my dear, that storm the army raised really frightened them, I think. It put their discharge program under a strong light, and they have not been able to hold their surplus men as easily. So take a bow, mother.

Norman's other stabilizing influence derived from his



particular status within the 649th. Under a captain and a few lieutenants, the company had been assigned to Chosi--where no other troops were stationed--to supervise the loading of Japanese ammunition onto barges that then dumped their cargo out to sea. This activity was divided between Chosi and Onahoma, a smaller harbor some two hundred miles to the north, and the outfit had thus divided itself between the two: some sixty men at Chosi, and perhaps thirty at Onahoma. Norman cooks at Chosi until January 21. During this time he is of course racked by his feelings about demobilization, but though they distract him from everything else he stays with his work schedule, getting his job done and--hardly aware that he is doing so--gaining the confidence of his mess sergeant.

Thus when the need develops for a cook up at Onahoma, Norman is given the assignment and ~~transfers forthwith into that mess hall, where~~ <sup>there</sup> he begins cooking on January 23. He has worked there for barely a week when, out of the clear blue sky, he is notified from Chosi that he has been promoted: PFC Norman Mailer suddenly finds himself with three stripes on his arm and the title of Technician-4. He is now a sergeant, with the additional responsibility of acting as the Onohoma Mess Sergeant. The totally unexpected promotion makes a tremendous difference to him. As he puts it years later in a story, characterizing himself as he had been back at the moment:

On the surface he was happy; beneath the surface he was overjoyed. It took him several weeks to realize how grateful and delighted he felt.

The promotion goes far toward restoring his emotional self-control and thus his ability to rise above the panic generated by the delay in his separation. In the week or so that it takes him to learn of his accelerated discharge calendar, and thus climb down completely from his moods with Bea, he is actually staging a kind of celebration in the little mess hall that has, as he feels it, become his own personal property. It is a warm room, filled with sunlight, and he records that the very sight of it brought him pleasure. Almost at once, he starts trying to upgrade the whole project: fresh eggs and toast prepared to order in the mornings; double desserts at lunch and dinner; garlic and paprika rubbed into the roast chickens; meat pies instead of stew. He looks to completely change the quality of army eating experience.

What he is really trying to do, no doubt, is make the men of his detachment thank him, like him, and somehow ratify the judgement of his mess sergeant. The result is that he tries too hard to achieve a goal that proves in any case to be unachievable. Not even double desserts can wipe away the power of military folklore, and that folklore asserts two truths: army chow is lousy, and army cooks are aliens. Norman may have impressed his mess sergeant, but ~~even though he now is consciously trying,~~ he can't impress the men he feeds. Before long their indifference to his efforts angers him, he pulls back from them in turn, and thus sets the stage for an experience even more harrowing than his long military history of rejection by judgmental superiors.

The detachment was approaching the date of its return to the

outfit in Chosi, and some twenty of the thirty men were planning a farewell fish-fry at the local geisha house. Because they needed five-gallons of cooking oil, they sent a spokesman to Norman to get him to donate it and he, stung by having been excluded from the party, surprised himself and everybody else by refusing. Suddenly he is alienated indeed: surrounded by over a dozen angry men, he is accused of selling so much of the mess hall stores on the black market that he has nothing left to contribute to the recreation of his own people. Since his actual reason for refusing is that he and his past efforts are not appreciated by the men--of course he has never sold anything on the black market--Norman is outraged by the charge and denies it. When for a reply he is called a liar to his face, he has no choice but to hurl himself into the first fight in anger of his entire military--indeed of his entire adult life.

Five years later, recollecting the whole thing in comparative tranquility, Norman writes it up in his short story. As he remembers it--and a contemporary letter to Bea backs him up--there were two really important things about this experience. The first was that he had really been ready to fight in response to being deliberately insulted, despite the fact that Hobbs--his antagonist--was the among the biggest, toughest men in the detachment.

He had no hope of beating him. He merely intended to fight until he was pounded into unconsciousness, advancing the pain and bruises he would collect as collateral for his self-respect.

For a man who had worried until now that his physical cowardice as a child would dog him into the army, this was a landmark



development.

The second thing was that after the fight was prevented by a (to Norman) welcome intervention, and the conflict over the oil averted in such a way as to earn the mess sergeant a group apology from his men, Norman started to become friends with his erstwhile opponent. They came so close that Hobbs, a southerner and a farmer, personally apologized and even offered--as a courtesy-- to fight Norman if he required such satisfaction. Amazed and delighted, Norman reached too quickly for the friendship he saw being offered. Re-insisting that he really had never sold anything on the black market, he confessed that he had never wanted to fight and had been relieved when it was stopped. Perhaps he supposed that his new friend would admit to the same, and that their admissions would seal their friendship. But since the other man regularly sold army gasoline on the black market, and would have been perfectly happy to go ahead with the original fight, he was merely puzzled by Norman's response. Hobbs was always friendly thereafter, but Norman could see that he had said the wrong thing, and that he simply had not known how to talk to the man. Norman's story concludes when he says of himself as an inhabitant of the military world:

[He] began to wonder about the things which made him different. He was no longer so worried about becoming a man; he felt that to an extent he had become one. But in his heart he wondered if he would ever learn the language of men.

It would be hard to overstate the change in Norman between the early January time when he had been floored--virtually while walking in the door of the 649th--by the news of his discharge-

delay, and the time of his return to the outfit from Onohoma in late February. From a man hanging on by his fingernails he has been transformed into a responsible, fairly self-confident non-com, ranked only by the company mess sergeant and the first sergeant. In returning when he does, Norman is entering a situation that has also changed in its externals: his previous commanding officer, a captain, has been replaced by an old-army officer of the same rank who has taken a more authoritative command of the company. Before, there had been no recreational facilities supplied by the outfit, and the men had called the local Geisha House "the day room." Now there were regular movies, an actual day-room with magazines and newspapers, an improved mail service and much-improved living quarters for all (certainly for Norman, who has been additionally upgraded in keeping with his new rank.)

Norman seems comfortable with his situation, including his new kitchen assignment as dessert baker. Six evening a week he puts in a shift after dinner, baking "pies or cakes or cookies or turnovers for dinner & supper the next day," as he explains to his parents in mid-March. His only other responsibility is seeing to the K.P.'s cleanup and closing of the mess hall.

It's not bad--I'm nearly always finished in three hours, and I've fallen into the habit of sleeping away the morning. That way there's just the afternoon to get through, and then work again & bed, and a day is gone. . . . March, always a long month, has been passing quickly.

He takes two overnight trips to Tokyo, once to get new glasses, the other to have a kind of final fling with Stars and Stripes staffer Nat Ellis. This elaborately and ever-candidly described event is

marked by Norman's fourth and final overseas session with a Geisha girl (whom he believes to have had three orgasms). Notable by their absence from his letter-of-report to Bea, however, are the cries of anger and jealous anguish that ran through almost all of his correspondence a bare two months earlier. In their place we hear the quite steady voice of a man who sees himself, in all important respects, as moving out of the woods.

*could  
be  
clearer*

If at one time it might have been argued that Norman's subterranean identity as artist required, in a sense, his failure on the surface level--so dialectical did his progress below ground seem in relation to his pattern of failures above--he now appears to prosper on both levels. His letter-file to Bea through much of February and all of March is punctuated with evidence that his novel-planning is in a fecund state: pages written at this time clearly have been removed from the file for use, later, in the process of composition. In her letters, Bea makes mention of receiving character and other kinds of sketches to be put aside for future reference. The frequency and the apparent length of Norman's fictional efforts in this final season indicate that he does not see himself as requiring soldierly discontent as a spur to literary engagement. Bea had repeated to him some of the formulaic simples of far-left literary criticism, and his retort is direct.

Such "social concerns," he tells Bea, are going to be kept out of his "jungle novel":

There'll be little of the social. Naturally it'll enter--by the selection of characters, & a setting like this. You must preserve a dominant face, and the one here will be a fairly gloomy one, a portrait of men who know their work is meaningless even as they



perform it. Perhaps there'll be a little courage in it, for they do go on with nothing to support them. Sure, it's because they're afraid not to go on, but still, perverted as it may be, there is a kind of strength.

But his intention, he explains, is to avoid social formulas of any kind: "I'm not really worrying about what I want to say. That's been the fault of all my past work. I had the thesis first and cut my characters & story to fit. This time I want to go at it the other way--to get the men across, and the segment of war...." Here the letter breaks, and what has been removed, it seems fair to assume, was something he found that he could use when, months later, he began the composition proper. The frequency of epistolary gaps of this kind suggest that he was in a period of at least reasonable coexistence between artistic productivity and soldierly accomplishment.

Indeed, Norman's soldierly accomplishment seems to free him in many ways. He is able for the first time in months to hear the sounds of unhappiness and resentment in Bea's life, and he does his best to be interested and sympathetic. He tries to make some amends for his complaints and especially his expressions of jealousy by explaining that he had not been himself, and that he actually does ~~not and would not make merely possessive demands upon her in any event.~~ He is reasonable and respectful, caring and warm. But his most remarkable signs of self-possession in his soldierly role appear in an overtly autobiographical meditation. Noting that he is changed in some ways as he passes his second year in the army, Norman assures Bea of his emergence from his long-characteristic social timidity:

I couldn't go on forever having you talk to the landladies and asking for the icewater. I do feel physically stronger, tougher; I can tell a man to blow it out his ass now without keying myself up for the effort. In a way that means I'm less sensitive and it worries me as far as it may hurt my writing, but for the rest I'm glad of it. I did need social poise even if it was of the variety, 'Don't mess with me, Howell, or you'll be eatin' out o' yore ass-hole.'

Most importantly, perhaps, he sees a recent change in his soldierly persona, wherein he has grown much more like his comrades. "I have the everyman facade," says the formerly standoffish private: "I mouth comparative platitudes without wincing (I just smile internally)." Looking back on his former isolation with a kind of nostalgia, he compares it to his current, slightly preposterous homogeneity:

I make definite statements about anything in conversation without the soul-searching I used to do. When I first came in the army I was tongue-tied. How could I ever give an answer when there really was none. Now I'm comparatively tongue-lazy and brassy. Sgt. Mailer. I guess that was the push I needed to become the Compleat Ass-hole. [ibid]

Thus Norman acknowledges his new situation in the army, where for the first time he is not painfully divided between a surface life of institutional failure and a subterranean life of imaginative exploration and creation.

His acknowledgement of his newly-settled, almost bourgeois contentment, must have been meant by him to write finish to two years of tortured division and discontent. He writes Bea one more letter in March--on Friday, the 29th--remarking that though the 649th is to be sent home on April 15 his own return will probably be a little later. Most of the letter is devoted to an anatomizing of their love for each other and an expression of how very much it

means to him. He is no longer afraid for their relationship nor, indeed, for anything. He is simply ready to start for home.

Nowhere in his letters since returning to Chosi in late February does he mention that, as the weeks have passed, he has been having a small but real problem with his feelings about the new commanding officer. Quite probably, Norman thought the matter too minor for mentioning.

When Norman had acted as mess sergeant at Onohoma, the lieutenant in command of the detachment left him and his mess hall alone. His C.O. in Chosi, however, liked to cultivate his non-coms, and in Norman's case this took the form of a special arrangement for the captain's evening meal. The man was a drinker, and was usually not ready to eat with his lieutenants during the established dining hour; he would instead come in during the baking or the clean-up, saying "Make me something special, will you Mailer?"<sup>1</sup>. Norman didn't like the way he "always smiles sweetly at me" in this ritual, and indeed he disliked the captain not only for his solicitous style of command--which Norman thought insincere--but because he was a certain kind of man:

He has the real Army mentality, and more, he's the kind of old fart who talks maliciously about Russia & England--according to him we won the war by ourselves.

Norman did save dinner for the captain, of course, but he so disliked serving it--"I loathe the idea, [and] writhe at my inability to refuse him."--that he would sometimes try to be

---

<sup>1</sup>Norman's retrospective account of his problems with the captain is recorded in letters that he sent home in April.



finished up and be out of the mess hall before the captain arrived, leaving him to serve himself either while or after the Japanese K.P.s completed their clean-up.

The captain made arrangements for having his dinner saved for him on the night of Wednesday, April 3. Since the 649th was due to ship out in less than two weeks and Norman figured to follow shortly after, there must have been a certain atmosphere of termination and departure affecting everyone. In Norman's case his ~~after all new and delicately balanced~~ sense of non-com responsibility was starting to get tested by the captain's manner; Under the pressure it placed on Norman, he seems to have begun feeling the pull of his old, long-familiar state of subterranean alienation. On this evening, certainly, he felt the pull strongly enough to want to avoid contact with his Commanding Officer, so he made a point not only of leaving the mess hall as soon as he could but of going straight to bed.

He recollects--in one of two letters written to Bea the next day--what happens an hour later when, half-asleep, he is roused by his mess sergeant.

'Get up, Mailer, & get dressed.'

'What? Why?'

'The kitchen's filthy. I've just had my ass chewed by the Captain, & I want you to see how it looks.' The mess-sergeant is a pretty boy about my size who's very unpopular because he sucked-ass to get his job and did it very obviously. I vary between pitying him & disliking him. Right now, I disliked him.

'O.K. So it's dirty,' I said. 'You clean it up, & chew my ass in the morning.'

'You're cleaning it up.'

'Aw, go fuck yourself,' I said, & turned over.

'Are you getting up?'

'Go away,' I said

He did and came back in two minutes with the first sgt., a chunky, pleasant southerner who lives by the book, & is not too good a topkick because his main worry is to please the captain rather than to look out for the men.

'Mailer, get out of bed,' the first G said.

'No.'

'I'm giving you a direct order to get out of bed,' he said.

I sat up. I was very angry. 'I'm damned if I'll lose my stripes over this,' I said. 'I'll get up, but you're both chickenshit sons-of-bitches.'

'You can take that back, Mailer,' the topkick, Borchers, said.

'I'm not.'

'You're going to stick by it?'

I was angry again. 'You're fucking aye, I am.'

'All right, you asked for it,' he said, & stalked off.

The first sergeant went to the Commanding Officer and that, in a manner of speaking, was that: the beginning of the end of the whole little dream that Norman had been living since his promotion came through in early-February. Two months, almost to the day, was as long as he lasted in the balanced posture of responsible non-com, on the surface, and monitoring artist-observer buried below. His own account of what happened, along with his reflections on the meaning of it all, is recorded in two letters written to Bea the next day--April 4--and these are reproduced in their entirety in Appendix XX. To quote them at length here, however, would require us to contemplate a Norman who for the moment has reverted to the

state that gripped him during his first week of Basic Training in Ft. Bennig, two years before.

The army was again an alien monster with which he abjures any and all reciprocal association. So far as Norman was concerned, the conflict between him and the two non-coms in the chain of command above him was purely personal, and was in no way to be considered a military matter. When they and then the captain insist on treating as a military matter, and the captain furiously requires an also-furious Norman to apologize to the first sergeant, the chain breaks as far as Norman is concerned. All of the things that have meant so much to him in the past two months--the sense of accomplishment, of joining and being joined, the pride he has taken in proving himself--are lost as he is swamped by his feelings of personal outrage and humiliation.

He spends the rest of the night of April 3 composing his thoughts, and the next day appears as ordered in the C.O.'s office, where are present all three or four of the company lieutenants and the two ranking sergeants. The hearing is apparently intended to serve Norman with a reprimand, but he insists on a gesture of independence: he tries to turn in his stripes. Refusing to provide Norman the theater for a such a declaration, the captain instead takes the stripes from him, and all present leave to resume their packing for home. Ironically, the trigger for Norman's downfall are the Japanese K.Ps, whom he had always treated with special kindness and consideration. They had simply forgotten to clean his mess hall, and because he trusted his relationship with them so



absolutely, it never occurred to him to check on them. No more did he blame them when their failure was finally discovered, reserving his anger instead for those in authority over him who had been unwilling to concede the inviolability of his personal space.

His sudden, truly wild championing of the sovereignty of that space is probably best understood as a kind of breakdown. He had panicked when he was threatened by a substantial delay of his discharge, fearing that an extension of his time overseas might cause him to crack. In the event, the extension proved to be only a month, but it may have been a month too long, and when his sergeant surprised him with that show of authority, flimsy straw though it was, maybe it was just enough to snap the camel's back.

Norman didn't simply lose some stripes, after all, he lost the whole painfully earned, carefully hoarded proof to himself that he could do a man's job in this man's army and could, indeed, do it using and understanding the language of men.

The next day--April 5--he was notified that he would, after all, be shipping out almost immediately. To prepare, he went around the company giving away his few, hard-won badges of recognition. He gave them to people who in many cases had not earned the right to wear them, assuring everyone in the process that these things meant nothing to him: the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal, the World War II Victory Medal, a good conduct clasp, a Good Conduct Medal, a Bronze Star, and his beloved Combat Infantry Medal--which went to a youngster who had entered the army after the war. He even gave away his old overseas cap with the yellow piping that signified the

Cavalry.

The whole lot defiantly disposed of, he got himself a uniform with no distinguishing marks whatever, turned down in advance the possibility of a final PFC stripe that was almost automatically issued to anyone about to be separated, and in this state presented his travel orders at a staging depot at Yokohama. There he met his old comrade Clifford Maskovsky, with whom he had traveled across the United States after basic training, crossed with on The Sea Barb and whom he had last seen on Leyte. Maskovsky was the walking representation of everything that Norman was not: distinguishing himself in basic training, he had been assigned as <sup>n</sup>an Artillery Surveyor, and gone on to amass a stunning military record. Indeed, he was to be appointed Sergeant of the Guard on board the U.S.S. Grant, bound for Seattle's Puget Sound, when he and Norman shipped out on her the next day-- April 16.

The two stood now, looking at each other in that crowded Yokohama staging barracks: Norman as naked in his unmarked uniform as a peeled egg, Maskovsky resplendent with decorations and in the full regimentals of a Battalion Sergeant Major. Norman spoke first:

Whose ass did you kiss to get those stripes?

[END CHAPTER 3 PART THREE/ END CHAPTER 3]