



**CUSTER'S
LAST
STAND -
AL
MASARIK**

THE BERRY BUSH

there is this berry bush out back
it doesn't look like much
a hulk of leaves & branches
berries & flowers
purple berries, white flowers.

the flowers look like popcorn &
they seem to have appeared overnight.

shortly after the flowers came
the birds came
about fifty oversize robins
pretending it's spring here
when it's only February.

the birds have taken over
& after assaulting the berries
they strut across rooftops
their salmon chests bloated
& sun warmed.

they seem to be waiting for something
lined up on the back fence
or in formation on the roof.

my cat doesn't know quite
what to make of them
he's a little too young yet
but he studies them carefully
lying out back on his belly
low crawling thru the dirt
making these clicking noises
with his mouth

waiting for understanding
for some blood sent command.

FATHERS & SONS

the last time I was home it was
pretty bad & we never got around
to talking much
or relaxing with each other
I mean it was his turf &
we were a lot like a couple
of dogs in the park
pissing on trees & bushes
& setting up boundaries
& what with my long hair
& mustache & poems he

seemed to view me as
something other than son
like maybe I wasn't the
howdy doody look alike he
taught to fight & play ball
maybe I was some kind of
sissy or fruit
& when the relatives came
to observe this curiosity
& my polish aunt asked me
to read some poems
the final perimeter was
pissed upon & we stood there
facing off & growling inside
steamfitter & poet
father & son
both of us caught up in it
a couple of privates in a
war waged through centuries
a war we neither understood
nor wanted.

MOTHER

it's not that I never liked her
that isn't exactly true
she just wasn't very
important to me
or at least not as important
as she thought she should be
& there was always that
disapproving gaze
that well I don't know
you suit yourself I'm
only your mother
& always searching for defects
in her creation
like when I was really little
the times when I'd feel her
studying my face
& then hold still a minute
& then she'd lick her finger
the way she did when
turning pages in a book
& then I told you
to hold still
& then the wet finger
on my face
rubbing away at a
speck of dirt
that smelly wet forefinger
sculpting my face.

THE SALVATION ARMY

the dress would have looked good
on the Andrews sisters
it's tissue thin &
coming apart on the side
& you can see dark nylons
& a garter belt
as she wobbles thru the door
on spiked heels.

decked out like that
in thrift store
elegance
you get the feeling she
might have walked in there
naked
& bought the whole wardrobe.

she has trouble walking
& stops at a parking meter
to adjust one of her heels.

she leans on the meter
& the old guys in front they
quietly watch the girl
& all that flashing leg.

they look pretty serious
they don't know this is a joke.

THE PLANT LADY

three days a week she comes around
& waters the plants
climbing up this ladder
in front of my shipping table
wearing a pair of faded jeans
cut off about mid-thigh
& made into a skirt.

good legs are like good poems
they belong to mankind
& her legs will take your breath
away, long & tan &
laced with curly blonde hairs
they speak the language of
sunsets & sunflowers
& just looking at them
can make living a
whole lot more
tolerable.

but legs are attached
unfortunately
to a person
& this person has all sorts of
intellectual pretensions
& all sorts of
ontological obsessions.

still, for a while it seemed
we might hit it off
she even liked my poetry
but soon enough she found
the person behind the poems
& she found him to be crude &
disgusting & not nearly
as good as the poems.

when she waters the plants now
I try not to look
at those legs.

KISSING TIME

she has her boy friend's initials
carved into her arm, tells you
she did it in reform school
all the girls did it.

it is 1958 & you are selling
popcorn at the speedway
it is demolition derby time
& the girl is wearing what
the guys call a see-more
blouse.

you can't stop staring
at her big tits &
she catches your eye &
asks you if you like
what you see.

all those reform school movies
flash through your head &
you know she must do it
figure she's at least
done it with TK
the guy on her arm.

at intermission Bobbie Rydell sings
Kissing Time on the loud speaker
& you turn in your vending gear
telling the man you don't feel good.

you have six hard earned dollars
in your pocket
& you walk out of there
with the reform school girl
holding on to your arm.

in back of the speedway she
makes you come with her hand
& promises to go all the way
next time.

you're fifteen years old
& you'll never feel any better
in your life.

THE FIGHT

the kids had traffic blocked &
no adults could get thru
to break it up
& from my upstairs window I
had a hundred dollar ringside
seat
but the fight itself wasn't much
one of the boys didn't really
want to be there
in that circle
in that ritual
but the crowd was worth the view
there must have been fifty kids
running up the street to see it
all sizes & ages & they
could've been running to a
carnival or circus or fire
& some of the kids had dogs
running along with them
& the guys would be shadowboxing
& bobbing & weaving as they ran
& there were plenty of girls
making even more noise than the boys
& I hadn't heard so much laughter
in a long time
& one of the boys in the circle was
dancing & jabbing like Muhammad Ali
while the other backed up
fear all over his face
& then something happened
the scared kid got lucky &
landed a roundhouse right
flush on Muhammad's nose

& the crowd was suddenly silent
& Muhammad looked like he
didn't want to fight
anymore
& just about then a couple of
grownups got thru &
broke the thing up.

IT'S ONLY A GAME

ah yes, it is truly crazy
to be freezing your balls off
10 o'clock at night
playing softball
the 33rd annual city wide
men's softball league
& a whole lot of the players
look like they've been here
every one of the 33 years
& it's just for fun
you know
nobody will hassle you it's
only a game
but things do get hairy I
mean their bald headed 1st baseman
would block the base line &
the ump would ignore it
till our 50 year old catcher
got pissed & sunk an elbow
deep into baldie's beer gut
as he was rounding first
& by the time he got to second
most of their bench was out
on the field after him &
when the ump tried to calm things
someone on the bench tossed a beer can
his way & called him an asshole
& the ump said he'd forfeit the
goddamn game if we didn't start acting
like mature adults
& with much griping & bitching we
went back to the game
& the final score was 30 something
to 20 something
& the only other excitement came late
when our shortstop kept telling
our left fielder where to play
& what he was doing wrong
& some clown hit this pop fly
that dropped between them

& they stood there staring at each other
& cussing each other & then no shit they
started duking it out
right there in left field
while the ball sat on the grass
& this old guy who could hardly run
circled the bases & the ump just
said fuck it this is ridiculous
& called the game
but it was a lot of fun it
really was & next time we're
going to take it easy I
mean it's only a game
right?

HAPPY THANKSGIVING

it's the same every time they call
& they call every holiday
three of them talking at once
my mother starting it off
how is your wife's weight
she's at that age where you
have to be careful
& would she like some earrings
for Christmas
& then it's which relatives have died
& which relatives have married
& she'll be sending clippings
from the papers
some high school classmates in politics
& my old friend Rick called her
he's designing developments now
making a fortune
sounds very happy
& then it's my grandmother
on the rec room extension
she wants to know when they're
going to put my poetry
on the market
& why don't I write stories
I could write just one book
like Gone With the Wind
or Peyton Place
& I'd be set for life
never have to write again
& no one understands why I write
the things I do
& then it's back to my mother
on the kitchen phone
a martini quiver in her voice

she is being very frank with me
she says
she thought poetry was supposed
to be beautiful
she's embarrassed by my writing
she's ashamed to show my books
to her friends
& she never knows what to say
when someone asks what I'm doing
& my father's cholesterol count is
down to normal
& he's back on the beer
the gout hasn't bothered him
in months
& I can hear him belching & wheezing
into the phone
on another extension
& my mother scolding him
say something to your son, Albert
it's thanksgiving
he's 3000 miles away
& there are a few minutes of
strained football talk
some jokes about the catholic church
& my mother's pumpkin pie
& finally the inevitable silence
the four of us listening to
cross country static.

well, I guess I better go
my mother says
this is costing us
& then the three in chorus
wishing me a happy thanksgiving.

TWO GENERALS

this old woman lives across the street
she wears an army surplus overcoat
when she walks her dog
walks him all hours of the day
never stays out long
dresses the dog in fancy sweaters
carries him in her arms
when another dog comes near
lets him crap in this
patch of grass
right under my window
she acts a bit like a maniac
a movie maniac
she could be Peter Lorre's wife
& she's always looking around
looking over her shoulder
when she walks him

like it's some great adventure
some perilous mission
& when the dog is finished she
scoops up his shit
on a neatly folded paper towel
& carries it to the street
places it oh so carefully
into the gutter
like maybe it's an abandoned baby
on a church doorstep
or some kind of bomb
& then she marches back
across the street
lock stepping with the dog
a couple of generals
home from the wars.

CUSTER'S LAST STAND

baby, we have to cut this out
I mean, it's getting to be like
Custer's last stand
around here
& you've got so many horses
so many arrows you're
shooting my way
like why don't we ever go out
& why don't I cut down on the drinking
& why do I have to stay up all night.

but it's always like this
when I'm writing
you know that
the poet's isolation is not a
romantic myth
& like Custer I've gathered
my wagons & my cavalry
all about me
closing myself off
from all those Indians out there.

& listen it's bad enough
knowing I'm not going to win
knowing they'll get to me
soon enough
so please baby hang on
just a little longer
these poems I write they
aren't bullets & they won't
make those Indians go away

but they will help me to stand tall
& look those bastards in the eye
when they come in for the kill.

THE STAR TREATMENT

the photographer used about four rolls
& we must have hit ten bars
that day
& there would be pictures of me with old men
& pictures of me with peroxide floozies
pictures of me with bartenders
pictures of me pissing
pictures of me shooting pool
pictures of me passed out at the bar
etc.

I was driving home drunk that night
listening to the Giants game
on the radio
feeling like a real star
my picture would be on the book
a book of my own poems
I was on my way
on my way to
something or other.

when the cop pulled me over
for missing the stop sign I
kept the radio on
& when he asked to see my
registration
I told him to be quiet
to wait just a second
the Giants had the bases loaded
& Bonds was at the plate.

the warrant check turned up
two outstanding parking tickets
so he was afraid he'd
have to take me in
& he kept apologizing all the time
asking me about the ball game
while twisting my arms
behind my back &
snapping on the cuffs.

on the way to the station I
told him I was a poet
& I told him about the
picture taking session
& how it seemed ironic
that my day should end
like this.

not much was said after that.

THE DOG

there is nothing quite like it
just touching him will make you
feel good
or going to the park with him
& playing stick, swinging
him around as he holds
the stick in his mouth
& he won't let go even if
his mouth starts bleeding
& to please me he goes after
tree limbs & boards
struggles up this hill
sisyphus with a tail
& then there's the fire engines
when they go by we howl
together, a regular serenade
these limp howls wiggling
up thru our throats
& unfortunately for him I
don't always want to play
unfortunate because his mood
his well-being is so linked
with my own
he knows me better than anyone
from five years of sitting
under this table while I write
the good times when I get up
& dance around the room
his eyes closing
his face smiling
he can hardly take
such good times
dancing along with me
trying to wag his tail
his whole rear end shaking
& then there's the table pounding
the fucks the shits the goddamns
the fists of paper flying about
the room
& him taking it to heart so
like maybe it's his fault
cowering & trembling
under the table
every bit as neurotic
as his master.

THE BASKETBALL PLAYERS

we went over to the local playground
& it turned out to be a junior high
but there were enough baskets there
enough for a whole city
so we warmed up & started playing
some one on one
it had been years for both of us
& we hadn't been so good even then
but in a few minutes it seemed like
it was coming back
it seemed like we had the touch
but we started slowing down
soon enough
we slowed down to a walk
it was kind of pathetic
sweating out last night's booze
unable to follow up on a shot
or run after a loose ball
& we had set the game at 20
but we were having trouble
reaching 10
& then the thing got out of hand
it was all elbows & shoulders
nothing but shoving & pushing
we were taking everything out
on each other
it looked like we might even fight
when the bell rang & they came running out
hollering & screaming & full of energy
I guess they were 7th graders
the boys talked dirty & asked us
if we had any grass
they kept laughing & jiving &
stealing the ball from us
while the girls stood in little groups
pointing & giggling at this strange sight
these broken down basketball players
& one of them kept staring at me
as if she understood something
I probably imagined that
& I started thinking how nice it might be
to be alone with her
in all that innocence, all that energy
& I started showing off
trying half court hook shots
that didn't even hit the boards
dribbling behind my back &
losing the ball
& soon I was hoping for recess to end
I couldn't go on much longer
but we were on show

we couldn't just quit
we were on display
& then this beautiful gym teacher appeared
walked over & introduced herself
& the girls were really giggling now
& I didn't have enough breath
to talk to her
but that wasn't necessary anyway
& she was the director of phys. ed.
& were we there for any particular reason?
& you couldn't play basketball
during school hours
without administrative permission
& administrative permission was never given
during school hours
& it looked like we'd have to leave
which is what we started to do
as they lined up to go back inside
& the boys kept breaking ranks &
running over & stealing the ball
then driving in for layups
while the girls cheered
& the gym teacher fidgeted & stared
& waited for us to
make our exit.

Jehovah's Witness

two of them in front of
Woolworth's
hawking watchtowers
standing & smiling
like mannikins.

one of them
just plain ugly
ugly like
an unmarried aunt.

the other beautiful
wearing her Woolworth smile
like a chastity belt

trembling when a man
approaches

avoiding his eyes.

3000 POETS

there are 3000 poets here
in the bay area &
it's beginning to look like
a bad Hollywood movie
all these poets huddled together
like junks in a Shanghai harbor
rubbing up against each other
& going nowhere
except for the endless readings
where gay poets read to gay poets
& women poets read to women poets
& black poets read to black poets
3000 poets huddled together
like junks in a Shanghai harbor
hoping for Clark Gable maybe
in a single engine Hollywood special
buzzing the harbor
then shooting up into the blue &
skywriting their names
for all to see.

-- Al Masarik

San Francisco CA

A BEGINNING BIBLIOGRAPHY OF AL MASARIK

1. WHITE HORSE (1970) The Lone Ranger Biology Press, 57 Scott St., San Francisco CA 94117; 21.7 x 28.0 cm.; edge stapled into wrappers (black photo-montage front design on matte blue stock carrying the words "Meatball 6" and "Free" -- back cover blank); unpagged (26 pp.); black mimeographed text on blue matte paper; edition unspecified. Free for postage. o.p.
¶ Appeared as issue #6 of Meatball, a little magazine edited by Joel Deutsch. Contains 15 poems. Magazines cited in acknowledgements on page 1: Desperado, Hanging Loose, Laugh Literary and Man the Humping Guns, Meatball, and (The)Wormwood Review. Dedication (page 3) is: "for SPOTTY DOG." The central figure of the offset cover design is a leaping white horse. The lead poem is "Marilyn Monroe" -- her picture appears twice in the cover design.

2. invitation to a dying (1972) Vagabond Press, P.O. Box 2114, Redwood City CA 94064; 14.0 x 21.2 cm.; stapled into white wrappers (black offset lettering on glossy stock with portrait-photo on back cover); 72 pp.; black mimeographed text on yellowish green matte paper containing dark blue fibers; 1000 copies. \$1.50

¶ A delux (sic) autographed edition of 25 copies was issued at \$5/copy. Contains 36 poems as well as a four-page introduction by Charles Bukowski dated "late November/71." Dedication (page 2) is: "for jill." Three text illustrations by Cindy Kriebel. ISBN: 0-912824-02-6; Library of Congress No. 76-189839. Vagabond Press continues under the management of John Bennett, but now from P.O. Box 879, Ellensburg WA 98926. A three-paragraph biography appears on page 70 and cites work as being influenced by Henry Miller, Lenny Bruce and Charles Bukowski.

3. an end to pinball (1973) Vagabond Press, P.O. Box 2114, Redwood City CA 94064; 13.6 x 21.3 cm. ; stapled into wrappers (black photo cover designs by Paul Havas for front and back covers on matte white stock); 32 pp.; black mimeographed text on cream matte paper containing dark blue fibers; edition unspecified. 75¢

¶ Contains 15 poems. Originally was to have been published under the title of Blues for Son of Cochise by Atom Mind Publications. Dedication is: "for alicia." ISBN: 0-912 824-04-2. Magazines cited in acknowledgements on page 32: Atom Mind, Desperado, Focus Media, Hanging Loose, Hearse, Invisible City, Mag, Meatball, Second Coming, Vagabond, and (The) Wormwood Review.

4. CUSTER'S LAST STAND (January, 1975)/detachable booklet, center-section of magazine/ The Wormwood Review (#57), P.O. Box 8840, Stockton CA 95204; i.e. what you have in hand.
5. Red Mountain, Agatha Christie & Love (projected 1975) Caveman Publications Ltd., P.O. Box 1458, Dunedin, New Zealand (release date uncertain, but to be distributed by: Vagabond, P.O. Box 879, Ellensburg WA 98926).