

Phil Weidman's



BACKTRACK



with



drawings by



Rody Stains

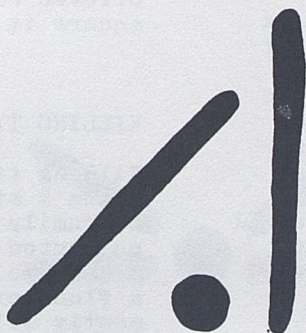


is



WR: 139





BACKTRACK

One fall when he was
in his 60s my dad
packed into high sierras
east of Philbrook lake,
built himself a lean-to
& stayed a week
hunting with his bow.
We always went hunting
together with friends &
I never understood why
he went into that
wilderness alone until now.
I'm feeling the urge
he must have felt.
To get back to basics
& backtrack. See if I
can put together the
puzzle pieces of this life.

Phil Weldman

SOMETHING FOR NOTHING

Before he retired from a job he thought was killing him, he bought a five dollar lotto ticket twice a week. He was hoping, even praying, he would hit five numbers so he could change his life. Now he buys a rub-off ticket or two when he feels lucky, still hoping to win something big to spice up his life.

HOMESICK

We're perched on cliff edge just north of Bodega Bay in Marilyn's rented house. We have a spectacular 180 degree view of Pacific Ocean. A vacationer's dream. But I'm unhappy. I miss our animal friends waiting for us at home. Today a seagull glided down & stood very close. I fed it pieces of French bread & tried to talk to it by squeezing air out between cheek & gums. It ate & listened to my strange squawks, nodding sympathetically until I ran out of bread & stepped inside to get out of the wind.

WALL

Sunday afternoon drove down town to Pioneer Towers to Janet's book signing party. When I saw the crowd (mostly old people) & recognized only one person (a local university poet) & saw from a distance Janet's colorful, hard-bound

book, I couldn't go in. Tried twice & couldn't. Called her Tuesday & offered congratulations to square it with myself.

KILLING TIME

Killing time pick up album & study photos of family & friends collected 10 or more years ago. This triggers a flood of memories mostly welcome, yet one reminds me there is a great spirit at work here that does not discriminate & is beyond influence.

JUMP START

What I need is a jump start. Something to get me out of this emotional bog I've been stuck in too long. I look at Platte Valley whiskey jug sitting on top of kitchen cabinets collecting dust. I stand on stool, reach up & shake it & hear liquid slosh. Stepping down empty handed I feel my strength return.



GOLDEN EAGLE

When we were kids
Rody & I were exploring
a small creek bordering
Stain's upper ranch when
a huge, silent shadow
shaped like an airplane
passed over us. Looking
up we saw a giant golden
bird flying low toward
the Warner Range. We
watched in awe until
it disappeared then jumped
up & down yelling in
wonder & jubilation
believing we had witnessed
something priceless
& we had.

MY WOBBLE

Five days a week
I walk two miles.
Everyday I do
75 lean-ups (an
old guy's push-ups).
Every other day I
exercise my grip,
both hands, to
strengthen my wrists.
Every other day I
also hold out a
five-pound weight,
alternating hands,
to strengthen my
shoulders & arms.
Why? To cut down
on my wobble
so I can sneak
up on perfection.

SEARCH

Haven't had a home since
I was 18 & entered U.S.
Army. Lived in seven
different houses, but none
felt like home. Now I
have another chance.
Try to trace my roots,
but they branch out in
six European directions.
My wife & I love Sierra
Nevadas, so I search there,
hoping to find a magical
place to plant myself where
I can love & care for
the land & all it holds.
May the ancient Sierra
spirits accept & guide me.

I SHUT OFF TV TALK

& go outside to
listen to backyard music.
It's after seven & day
light is fading. I hear
cars motoring up & down
Elkhorn, a child scream

in play, a house door
close loudly, a dog bark,
a motorcycle downshift,
my dog pant, my pen point
scratch over paper.
Now an airplane.
I wonder what sounds
were heard on this spot
two hundred years ago?

HARD TO TAKE

Shopping at Home Depot
left store with cart
almost full which I
unloaded into cab of
pickup. Locked door &
went back for something
I'd forgotten. Back at
pickup discovered one
of my bags was missing.
I'd locked cab with
driver-side window down.
Theft was irritating
but the pain of acting
stupid is with me still.

BAIT

On clear liquid diet
in preparation for
internal exam tomorrow,
reach for Diet 7up.
Take a gulp & notice
large white letters that
circle rim of can.
Look inside! Instantly
win! Try to look
inside, but it's dark
in there, & I don't
feel like getting a
flashlight to see if
I'm a winner in some
trumped-up advertising
scheme designed to
bleed my greedy ego.
Pisses me off that
I even tried to look.



CLARITY

Clarity is rare.
At least to my
experiences. I
remember seeing a
drinking glass clearly
maybe 20 years ago.
It rested empty
on dining room
table. I sat in
a chair & looked
at it without
thinking. I was
just glancing at it.
But in an instant
it became crystal
clear & in some
inexplicable way,
I was able
to pass beyond
nature's structures.

PUNCTUATION

Driving 15 miles to shooting range, listening to Sonny Rollins blow on radio, the poet lets his mind glide back to check in on a small event in 1972. An art critic is examining the poet's drawings & even though the critic likes the inventiveness he says he thinks they are a little thin. He says to the poet you ever consider traveling in Europe? (To him the poet is a bit of a hick.) The poet says I'm too busy traveling in here & points to himself.

CORRESPONDENCE

Secured in my fireproof safe inside a manila envelope is correspondence from three artists. All date from the 60s except a letter post stamped 19 Jan 1988. All three artists, poet, short story writer & collagist made names for themselves before they died. My daughter, Lisa, attended a retro in New York City for the collagist who drowned in January. Says she saw my name on one of his pieces. Got me thinking about times past. Good times. Even got the letters & cards out but didn't read any.

SHADOW OF TRUTH

At a reading she organized, Kathryn asked him if he experienced the Muse. He thought hard because his memory is going soft but couldn't remember such help. He told her he thought he had an angel that guided him thru tough times so he could continue to write. He only half believed this, but after 30 years of hard work he was willing to share credit for his existence but not for his art.

ITCH

I'm itching to head for wide open spaces. Check out land & game. I've got roadways marked on a map leading to Winnemucca, Twin Falls, Ketchem, Stanley, Salmon, Missoula, Butte, Bozeman, Cody I've already laid out my gear, talked it over with wife & plan to put this fantasy to the test in September — see if I can uncover the voices urging on a man past his prime.



THIRD PERIOD

JoAnn got me a paying
job reading & discussing
my poetry with three of her
English classes. Third period
we got talking about poems
that led straight to me &
some recent pain & before
I could get a grip I let
my feelings slip out & then
tears — a bunch of us in tears,
I turned to a poem I thought
was funny to save us but
no one laughed. I learned
later from their writing
my display of emotion
surprised them but
did them no damage.

WHAT IT USED TO BE LIKE

Tonight drove downtown
to an art show with
Lisa (on vacation from
school back east) & Pat.
Visited with old friends
but never relaxed. Still
learning how to behave
without booze. Then there's
the question of art. Most
of the work looked weak.
How do you tell friends
you truly care for that
their art is weak? I don't.
I could be wrong. I talk
about pistols or what
it used to be like
to teach. Or sex.
What little I
remember of it.

A SOBER FEAST

Reading A Moveable Feast,
listening to Hemingway
detail his conversations,
his writing, his eating
& drinking & the wonderful
landscapes of Paris,
I yearn for a glass
of bourbon to savor
with this clean writing,
but wanting more to
keep a clear head so
I can see what he
saw then, I choose a
cup of hot British tea.

A WARRIOR

Today almost took home
a pup 1/4 wolf
to replace one
I got. He's 14,
has trouble getting
up & down &
catching his breath.
Other day he jumped

a rottweiler but
his hind legs gave
out & I had
to save him.
Sometimes I catch
him staring at me.
Get the feeling he's
tired of waiting
& wants me to
make my move.

RIGHT MIND

Bill's an ex-marine
in his late sixties
& blind in his
right eye.
Friday morning he
shot out the X
ring with five shots
from a Colt 45
with fixed sights
he bought in 1950
for 19 dollars.
You could have covered
his one hole group
with a quarter.
He did it right
handed aiming
with his good eye.
His mind, I would
guess, was as placid
as an early
morning pond.

AT THE CONTROLS

This guy I know owns
a big revolver that will
push a 335 grain hand
loaded bullet thru a
12 inch fir log. I mean
BOOM it's thru & dirt
flies. This guy loves his
gun like some guys love a
Corvette. At the controls
he feels invincible.



VISIT WITH ALICE

In L.A. went with
Pat to see her mother
Alice Stone at Villa
Sorrento, a rest home.
Alice, 81, (a sweet lady)
can barely walk & is
losing her glasses,
her shoes, her room
key, her underwear.
Her roommate Norma
is wearing a pair
of Alice's best shoes
& neither of them
know it. Pat marked
everything of Alice's
with waterproof ink.
Stone in capital letters.
Who knows if it
will help? Alice
can no longer
distinguish letters.

STRUNG OUT

Get jumpy when phone rings. Hate to see blinking green light on phone recorder when I come home. Been like this for couple of months. Tonight at 11:30 phone rings. For me. Heart is pounding in both ears. Carol says she died. Tears well from confusing mix of loss & relief but I'm too tightly strung to let go.

LOSS

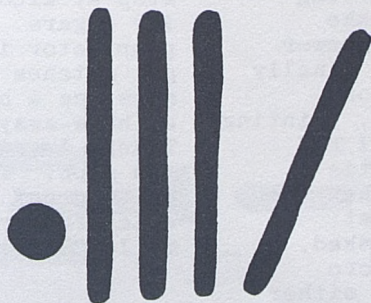
When my Dad died I couldn't cry until I got drunk. When Mom died I'd stopped drinking & didn't cry. I kept my raging feelings bottled up macho style. When a boy I cried easily. The time my parents had the huge poplar tree in our back yard cut down my sister & I cried until we were exhausted. It was an old, magnificent tree; the largest in Alturas & we loved it because it helped us feel important & somehow protected us with its giant, spread-out limbs. One day soon, I hope, when I can let humility back in my heart, I'll cry for losing Mom.

MAGIC WATER JAR

Did you know the Hopi have a magic water jar filled with an unending supply of water? That's how they survive in dry country. A chosen Hopi whose life is perfect in every way cares for it. I'd like to meet this holy one, hear the story of the spirit jar, but I'm a white man & doubt that I'd be trusted.

SCOUTING HIGH SIERRA

Slowly walking migration trail that passes thru Spicer meadow, checking deer tracks, see a bear is ahead of us. His track in soft dirt is clean & small. About size of my hand, fingers curled under. There's water in meadow & grass chomped short by cattle. I try to imagine what this guy looks like, what his next meal might be but I've been a city boy for over 30 years & don't come close.



SPLITTING FIR ROUNDS

Absent mindedly, after soaking maul in bucket of water, I set a fir round on a bigger one buried & packed half its length in the ground. This should be easy. These rounds have been piled in front yard for a year. They're dry & brittle. But forgetting to read knots I swing & bury sharply tapered blade deep in unyielding wood. Feeling stupid, I bounce maul out & swing again, hard, aiming for a telltale crack. Round explodes, one half slamming woodpile, other half sailing halfway to street. Jesus, I think, forgetting my indoor problems, I used to be good at this. Grateful neighbors aren't watching, I suck in breath, focus my thoughts & select another round.

SUPPORT

Been having trouble with left wrist since trying to tug a rented snake out of our plugged sewer line last August. Finally had it checked & bone specialist told me, pointing to an x-ray, that I had bone spurs, arthritis & one short bone broken when I was 15. So I just live with it? I asked. He handed me a velcro laced brace & said either that or we fuse the bones. I slip on brace when I shovel snow, do pushups or fire heavy loads in my Bowen Redhawk 45. Gets me by.

COWBOY BOOTS

When I was little, five, six, seven, I used to slip into a pair of E.W.'s cowboy boots (when visiting) & stomp around feeling very important. My grandfather had a horse ranch & a large cattle ranch in Ash Valley. Even tho he was five foot four, I have always looked up to him & today, when I wear my cowboy boots, I feel special, more masculine, less vulnerable to nagging self doubts.

CHILD PROOF

After gassing up Jeep stop at liquor store for cigars. I ask proprietor if he's got matches & he says yes & hands me a throw-away lighter. Thanks I said but spoke too soon. This is a child-proof little devil which rudely humiliated me for 15 minutes.

OMEN

For an instant he saw his wife (who's 45) as her mother. He rushed to a mirror & saw himself as he really is. Setting his jaw he promised again to change direction of his misspent life.

NOT SO OLD

Waiting for 6000-mile service, check out new four-wheel drive trucks. Red ones, blue ones, white ones, all beautiful. I picture myself in red one with oversized mag wheels & all-terrain tires. A genuine image booster. Then I scan sticker & decide I'll do next best thing. Get new seat covers for my not so old Chevy pickup.



NO EVIL COULD

Used to walk to El
Rey theatre for movies
Friday night because
that's when the girls went.
I'd always look for
the one I had a crush
on & try to sit near
her. After the show I
had a three-mile walk
home in the dark. I
carried a fish knife to
ease my fears, but when
I got to Buschmann Road
I took off my shoes &
ran. There were no houses,
just thick brush & shadow
festering fields bordering
the road & I ran in
my socks so fast my eyes
watered & no evil
could hear or catch me.

PARCEL

He listens for the rumble of the truck. He has lost his high range but still hears low sounds as well as ever. A jet roars up from the base nearby which irritates him. He can hear nothing else. Again, he listens for the truck, its rumble, brakes, driver's door closing. He's been waiting two days. Maybe his parcel is lost, stolen. His head throbs. He feels foolish & tries to give it up, this painful yearning, & be content with what he has, but he can't. He's 58 with the heart of a six year old waiting for Santa Claus.

DISCOUNT

Got a surprise this morning when I stopped at McDonald's for coffee. Lady behind counter handed me a cup, black, & said 27 cents please. I'm used to paying 65 & said you got a sale on coffee? She said no, senior discount.

LUNCH IN PARADISE

Perry & Joe went pig hunting early this morning over in Lake County. I'd of gone too but I had to drive to Paradise. Promised aunt Joyce & Mom's friend Fran I'd take them to lunch. Got there

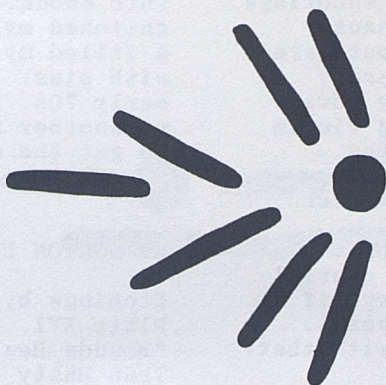
early so I could drop by cemetery for a word with Mom & Dad. Gave each a rose. Dad's granite headstone is stained by the red dirt up there. Mom's is still new looking. The long hot drive home gave me a chance to identify a few of duty's rewards. There were poems dancing in the ladies' lunch-time stories.

WISHFUL THINKING

Got my Levis, cowboy boots, flannel shirt, denim jacket, out-back hat, sixgun, pickup & Bear. All items comfortably broken in including me. Plan on heading to Elko. See if those rhyming cowboy poets will let me up on their stage.

LOST

At 4:30 this morning driving sister & brother in-law to train station got lost in fog twice going wrong way up one-way streets. Embarrassed me. Thought I knew this city. When we finally found station the place was locked & still as a midnight morgue.



MACHO SIDE

I have a 44 magnum that
kicks like an angry mule.
I've mounted a scope
on it & have fantasies
of hunting wild boar.
When I was a young man
I hunted deer with bow
& arrow which was very
difficult. Handgun hunting
should be easier except
for the kick & thunder.
But I don't need meat
& killing isn't my trip.
What I'd really like
to do is drive into
Nevada desert & blow
over plastic milk cartons
filled with water out
to a hundred yards.
See if I can master
this short barreled canon.
Creatures living out there
are used to sonic booms.

SHOOTINGS

I dislike watching shootings in movies. Not because they don't happen out here. Because they are rarely treated honestly by movie makers. A shooting victim, if he or she survives the shock, pain & damage to the body, must suffer a deeper anguish.

The delicate webbing of the psyche takes a fearful battering & recovery, if it happens, takes years. Who wants to deal with that?

MEMENTOES

This afternoon Pat bought two t-shirts with Truckee printed on one & embroidered on the other. I bought one with a cowboy hat & a holstered sixgun hanging on a fencepost silk-screened on it — Truckee scrawled under picture in small letters. This'll probably be our last summer up here. Deep snow that practically buried our cabin last winter cooled our romance with this beautiful place. Cabin is too small & winters too rough to live here year around once Pat retires. Figure it's time to sell, pack our memories & move down the hill a little.

MESSAGE

When I had a studio near Sac State I kept a half pint of bourbon on my drawing table. One day when

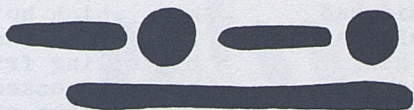
I came in to work I took a nip & went into shock. Someone had snatched my whiskey & filled my bottle with piss. This was in early 70s. but it took me another 20 years to get the message.

AT NORTON SIMON MUSEUM

Etchings by Goya.
Plate XVI.
"Wounds Heal Quicker
Than Hasty Words."
Wrote down title
but can't remember
image there were
so many of his
midnight creature
filled wonders
to look at.

TWO OF ME

Right now I'm Reading
Angels: God's Secret
Agents & Hunting
For Handgunners &
enjoying both. Makes
me wonder about myself. It's like I've
come to a fork in
the road & I'm
taking both roads.
Mind divided
down the middle.



BUBBA

Lisa drove to Syracuse
& had to leave one
of her cats with us.
Bubba, raised in alleys
of San Francisco,
wouldn't come out of
garage for a week.
Maybe because we have
three dogs. Anyway,
Bubba is big
& tough & he's
worked out home
privileges. Right now
he's outside zeroing
in on suburban rats
that prance down
fence tops dividing
neighboring yards.

THESE OCCURRENCES

Harold is just 16,
but he's being tried
as an adult along
with eight other West
Sacramento gang members
for murdering Pierre, a
young East Sacramento
man who they said had
bad mouthed their gang.
Police say the gang
had been drinking all
afternoon & had a
15 year old girl set
Pierre up. When another
15 year old member with
a handgun couldn't
shoot, Harold grabbed his
hand & forced the trigger.
These occurrences are
no longer uncommon.
Is this now the
rite of passage
for our youth?

AN ARTIST

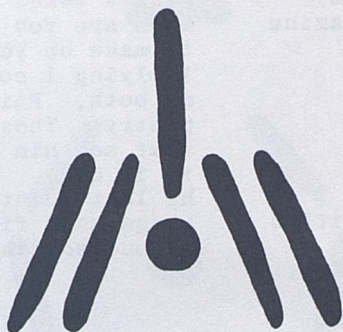
I asked Don, who
has been on the
wagon for a year,
why he started drinking
again, & he said
he's short tempered
& wine softens
him, makes him
easier for Vicky
to live with. Then
why did you quit
to begin with I
asked & he said
lack of energy.
He has plenty of
energy now. In
his sly way I
believe he's measuring
wine to fit his mood
just as he measures
each brush stroke
he lays down inside
a chosen canvas.

BAD

I used to lie
about Chuck Keeny,
the kid who busted
my left wrist boxing.
When I got home
I told everyone
he was a tough
kid, which he was,
but I stretched it
by telling friends
he cold cocked two
loud mouths at a
ball game. I thought
making him look bad
would make me
look a little better.

BEFORE ME

I sometimes think
Buffer knows more
than I do. When
I act strangely,
in a way that
would embarrass
me if another
person watched,
he looks at me
thru half-closed
lids, his expression
subdued & tolerant.
He either loves
his human friend
unconditionally or
has lived this
life before me.



MOM'S BELL

Lost Mom.
Got her bell.
It's brass with
wood handle bolted
thru top of bell
to heavy iron clapper.
Mom used it to
call Riena & me
home when we were
kids growing up in
Alturas. Everyone in
our neighborhood could
hear bell ring when
Mom shook it, so
even though we might
have been deeply
involved in momentous
play there was no
excuse for ignoring
her wishes.

SQUEEZE

At 11 am mail drop
received three copies
of a good little magazine
from Colorado with
one of my poems
printed in it.
Read my poem
& all the others,
then mine again.
My ego is always
sizing up the competition
& trying to squeeze
just a little out front.
Embarrasses the hell
out of the rest of me.

FOR THE TEACHER

When I was a boy
Mom made it a priority
to teach me to be honest.
Today I'm cash register
honest, but that inner,
deeper honesty has come
hard for me. I was an
expert at telling the truth
on someone when I was
drinking, even to the point
of destroying friendships.
I saw my sins in others
but didn't have the courage
to point to myself.
Several hours before she
died last December Mom
told me she loved me
that I was the best son
a mother ever had,
preparing, I believe, to
release me, trusting that
her teaching had taken hold.

MADE UP

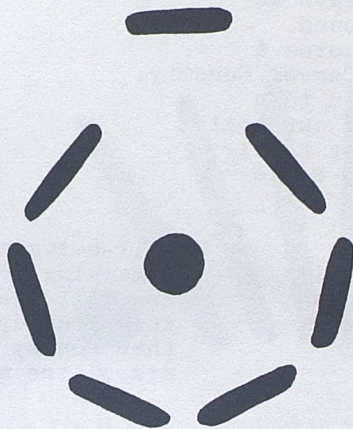
25 years ago Doug
Blazek asked me
when are you going
to make up your mind?
Implying I couldn't
do both. Paint & write
poetry. Those of you
that see him tell him
it is done. Made up.
My last painting
hangs half finished &
untouched since 1991.

READING

Left Tom's creative writing
class with sharp pain in
my gut. I'd been invited
to read along with Ann
& Luke. I read last, rushing
seven poems that I trusted.
Right now I'm not sure why
I rushed them.
Too much coffee,
lack of time, competition?
Whatever, my swollen ego
felt cheated & stabbed me.

LET IT RIPEN

There's a poem waiting
but I can't trigger
it. Used to release
it with a stiff
drink or two.
Now I'm learning
to be patient,
let it ripen.
When it's ready
I'll be there.



SETTING THE WORLD RIGHT

Meeting in Truckee with the remnants of the 7th Stage, an art group that came together in Chico in late 50s, Frank, Rody, Peter & myself asked & answered the same enduring questions, vigor undiminished. Were we meeting the challenge — raising the consciousness of our individual audiences? Was there anything more we could do? We shared grand ideas, as years before, then fell back to what we are, each within his own capabilities, determined still, at this late date, to expand & make each work count. Later, my wife would call our get-together male bonding.

HARD-BOUND

Tonight Al & Jane gave me
a beautiful hard-bound
book filled with photos &
literature titled Carver Country.
Thumbing thru it I'm torn
between feelings of curiosity
& sadness. Jealousy really.
I knew Ray at Chico State
& liked him & want
to know more about
his life & writing,
how he carried himself
so far, while childish
part of me chokes
on sour grapes.

well-being of her
remaining 26 students.
How will she explain
this tragedy to
them Monday morning —
dispel the madness ...

SCRUTINY

Rushing to meet
friends for dinner,
finished a construction
in time to take
a shower & shave.
Couldn't wait to get
home to look at it.
See if it was
really as good
as I thought.
Usually it takes me
several days of scrutiny
to separate wishful
thinking from hard
earned success.

PAT'S DILEMMA

My wife, Pat, who
teaches 1st grade, is
in a dilemma.
Michael, one of her
students, died Friday.
His mother shot him
& his sister
& herself to death.
Pat is extremely
worried about the

GORDON'S BLUE SHOES

This morning at Cordova
range Gordon said I feel
like I got a hangover,
even tho I didn't drink
last night, & he showed
us his new white jogging
shoes he forgot to change
yesterday before he did
some painting for his wife.
Now they're stained an
uneven blue. We felt a
little sorry for him until
he proceeded to plunk
five consecutive shots
into the X ring with his
model 14 revolver,
cutting one hole the size
of an odd shaped nickel.



MESSAGE

Drinking Diet Rite
soda. Haven't touched
vodka since placing
wife & daughter in
jeopardy two weeks
ago. Turned into
path of oncoming
car. Looking right
at it, heard its
tires screaming, but
didn't see it.
Didn't crash, but
I got the message.



LETTERS

After Mom died my sister
gave me a box full
of letters. They're all from
me to my Mom. She saved
every letter & card I ever
sent her. Why did she save
them? A few memorable
ones, sure, but all?
What was she thinking?
What do I do with them
now? Save them? Read them?
That notion spooks me.
Grief is little sister
to insanity ...



SOME FRIEND

What I remember is
walking down a rutted
dirt road in my
cowboy boots. There was
a male friend walking
with me & there were
dry, thistle-filled fields
on either side & barb
wire fences following
the road. I don't
remember who the friend
was, but when I rose
from the road, floating
gloriously up in the
still air, the son of a
bitch grabbed my leg
& yanked me down.

IN THE MIRROR

It's six pm & he's preparing dinner: barbequed chicken breast, bean salad, watermellon & artichoke. But right now he's going crazy. He can't find his drink. He searches the house, holding off dinner. It's nowhere to be found. He looks at their three dogs. They appear sympathetic. If it isn't his drink, it's his glasses or pickup keys. The last time he lost his glasses he found them when he went to brush his teeth. He saw them in the mirror.

YOU GUESSED IT

Over the years I've seen individuals do odd things while driving their cars. Combing hair, applying lipstick, shaving, reading newspaper, book. This morning driving behind guy in blue pickup noticed every time we stopped at a red light he'd open his door and spit white liquid into the street. You guessed it. He was brushing his teeth.

THERE'S A LIMIT

I've pushed alcohol out of my life & shaved a beard I've worn for 20 years, but I'm not willing to substitute Pat's computer for the old Royal portable. I've pounded the Royal for 34 years & we've grown comfortable with each other. Working the computer is like entering a foreign country without knowing the language. All my insecurities surface.

NO THANKS

Got propositioned today. Nine ten this morning. Thin little gal with glasses came up to my truck while I was waiting to get onto Auburn Blvd. Couldn't understand her at first then realized she was asking if I wanted a date. Would like to think it's my mature good looks that attracted her, but she had to be a pro, probably hurting for a fix. No thanks I said.



LINKED

The vultures have gathered
in large numbers. Media people,
lawyers, trading card & t-shirt
salesmen One of our celebrities
is down & he's being picked
to the bone. Most of the rest
of us wait at a distance,
fascinated. It's far easier
to sort thru another's failings
& peer into his soul than
into our own. We feel compelled
to watch & listen, uncertain
whether to forgive or condemn
for we know in our hearts
we've contributed, however
remotely, to this tragedy.

IN ESCROW

We sold our Truckee cabin.
This weekend we've been
filling cardboard boxes &
trash bags with our stuff.
At four thirty I sit on
deck with El Producto
queen & a can of diet
coke. Rays of sunlight
filter thru several pine trees.
There's a cool breeze. Three
dogs mill around me & bark
at people & their dogs passing
down Greenwood. We're giving
up this lovely place but
there's not much pain in
it. Rich with memories
we'll find a new place
in sierras a little farther
south, a little lower down.

CIRCLE

In late 50s many of
my best friends were
painters. When they hung
shows of their art I
asked to join them &
they kindly allowed me
to put up poems next to
their work. That led me
into painting which I
struggled with 30 odd
years. Recently an artist
invited me to join others
in an exhibit downtown.
I put up three hand
written, nicely framed poems.

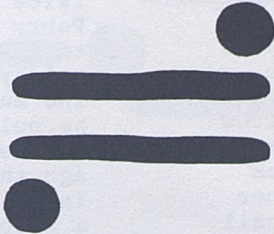
UNSTABLE

Waking to two jarring
explosions down the
street just after midnight,
he jumps out of bed,
races anxiously to
window but sees no

movement. In darkness,
trusting memory, he
unlocks his 45 &
listening between breaths
takes it to bed,
resting it unloaded
on floor. Still uneasy,
he pops in a loaded
magazine, fantasizes
a little, always winning
the battle & falls
into a fitful sleep.
An hour before day
light he wakes &
releases the magazine.

COUPLE

We've been wondering
what happened to couple
who live across street
three houses down. Car &
pickup sit unused.
Grass grows unmowed.
This morning gave Scott
(kid next door) a ride
to high school where I
walk my laps. He said
they got divorced &
the man shot himself.
He was an alcoholic
you know Scott said as
if that explained it.



TOO LATE

Feel like writing
Mom a letter.
Unload some repressed
baggage with someone
I trust. But it's
too late. Her body
rests next to my
Dad's in Paradise
cemetery. When I
drive up in couple
of weeks to close
her checking account
I plan to buy two
long-stem roses. One
for each headstone.

OLD TOPPER

My Mom's mom used to call me Old Topper when I was a boy visiting her in Susanville. She used that name when I pleased her & she was feeling affectionate. No one else ever called me that. Grandma lived to be 93 & was a staunch Republican until Jack Kennedy shook both her hands. She didn't call me anything her last 12 years. I'd become a stranger like everyone else.

ERNIE'S WISH

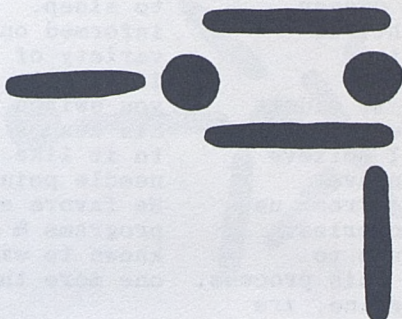
When I was 11 my granddad tried to coax me into shooting his 250 Savage (he wanted me to hunt deer with him) but I begged off. I was afraid of the rifle's kick & its report hurt my ears. I loved Granddad & knew I'd let him down. He never said so but I believed he thought I was a coward. He died the next year before I could make it up to him. When I turned 15 I shot a beautiful three-point buck with his rifle. This should have healed me, but when I reached the dying deer & read the terror in its fading eyes the joyful pride I felt left me.

NO JOKE

Perry manages a U-Haul center in the south area. It's been strong armed twice in last three months. Perry had to go to court to identify one of the holdup men. Perry saw the man's face before he pulled a stocking over his head. A few days ago the guy walked into the center with a couple of other dudes, strutting & acting like trouble couldn't touch him.

ADDICT

He's given up booze but now craves seductive food (which is mostly unhealthy) & clothes to make himself over & toys (some dangerous) to entertain himself. He's drawing that & that & that out there in to himself to satisfy a raging hunger that gives him no peace.



CLOSE TO HOME

Last Wednesday our son was shot thru window of his car as he was leaving work with day's receipts. Made late tv news. Paramedics had to cut away his bloody shirt & you could see dark red hole size of nickel behind his left shoulder as he walked to ambulance. Fragmented bullet lodged in shoulder joint. Med Center doctor got it out cutting in from front. One could say our son was lucky. I feel nauseous when I imagine where bullet might have hit him.

A SELECT FEW

It's been 25 years since Christine & Richard came to our house for dinner & Christine taught Pat how to make t-shirts with our old one-way sewing machine. We didn't suspect Christine was seriously ill. I believe we are here to unravel mysteries that confront us & share our discoveries. Most of us continue to struggle through this process. A few, like Christine, are quick studies & are rewarded with an early trip home.

WAITING FOR MARTY

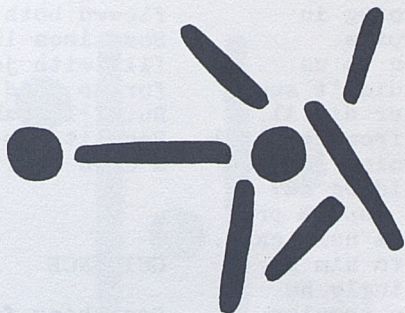
Marty's a liquor salesman. Met him in the program. Lost track of him when I moved to Later Sobriety. Tho't he'd dropped out but he showed up tonight. After class said when he graduated from Early Sobriety he wondered if Paul & I were still around (we all started about same time 10 months ago) & when he got to class there we were with a waiting, empty seat between us.

VISUAL LEARNER

Rody doesn't do much reading. It puts him to sleep. But he's well informed on a wide variety of subjects. If he's in room where you switch on a tv set his head & eyes turn to it like a compass needle points north. He favors educational programs & he's been known to watch a good one more than once.

SPONSOR

Lost Nick last night. His tired lungs couldn't carry him any further. He was using oxygen when I met him & had difficulty getting around, but when I was down he reached out to me & reading my nature gave me a small golden angel to look out for me & lift my spirits. Not a religious man he was curious about death, probably a little frightened when it got close, but he never showed it. Wrote a prayer for him which seemed to please him, but I don't know if he used it. We never discussed such stuff.



ONE-WAY CONVERSATION

There was a time
not so long ago
when I was so
stressed I started
talking to a tree.
It was a huge
valley oak, its
limbs partially
cabled together.
Looked like it
might collapse at
any moment. That,
I believe, is what
drew me to it
& steered me
into a one
way conversation.

BYPASS

Three days ago Jane called
& said Al was going in
for a triple bypass.
It seemed sudden to us
& scary. Jane didn't sound
worried & neither did Al,
but connection from hospital
was bad & his voice sounded
weak. What could we do?
Not much except hope & pray
& wait for Jane's next call.
Today I talked to him on
phone & surprisingly he
sounded like his regular
self: strong, thoughtful, in
control. Tomorrow I'll drive
over to see him, offer
congratulations, pretend
it's nothing serious &
could never happen to me.

NEVER TOO LATE TO SCORE

Having shot 22 pistol
erratically for hour
& a half felt it was
time to drive home, feed
the dogs but decide to
try one last target &
nailed nine solid tens,
last bullet just breaking
nine ring for a slow
fire 99, just one point
shy of perfection.
Gave me a high
right up there with
my first French kiss.

BANK IT

I'm happiest when I'm
absorbed in writing,
making love with my wife
or shooting well
with a handgun.
Illuminating conversation
with friends is

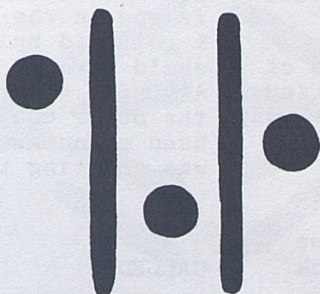
right in there.
So was teaching
when germinating ideas
flowed both ways.
Sometimes lately I
fill with joy
for no good reason.
But I'll take it.
Bank it for
a down day.

GUIDANCE

Searching for a home
in Sierras east of
Sacramento Pat was
visited by my mother
who died last December.
Driving back to valley
Pat said she felt Mom's
presence & believed she
guided us to a beautifully
treed & landscaped half
acre with a well kept
ranch style house on it.
This totally surprised me.
Pat doesn't operate
like that. She always
keeps both feet planted
in tangible reality ...
but I wouldn't put
it past my Mom.

WAITRESS

At a little coffee
shop in Torrance
I asked our Mexican
waitress if she'd
teach me Spanish.
She took one look
at my pretty wife
& said you won't
be here long enough.
Watch Spanish soap
opera on tv,
that's how I learned
to speak English.



ON HANDS & KNEES

When I was 17
a friend & I downed
a pint of Four Roses
in the men's room
of a park. When we
ran out of matches
for our cigarettes
I crossed a highway
to a little cafe.
On my way back
the whiskey hit me.
I felt like I was
living Red Skelton's
drunk act. One step
forward, three back.
I couldn't get across
the highway. Finally,
eyes squeezed shut,
I crawled across.

CRACK

Yesterday stepped into twilight zone. Dream images kept flashing after I was up & around. Couldn't remember names of friends at morning meeting. Forgot my age, the year, day. Drove to Kaiser for blood tests & EKG. Dr. Jobe said nothing conclusive & scheduled me for CT scan in two weeks to see if he can discover crack my mind slipped into.

STOP THE MOVIE

Still experiencing negative fantasies. Tonight driving to friend's house for dinner one gets triggered by guy nosing too far out in my lane from parking lot. He wants me to slow down so he can sneak in. I imagine I crash into him, jump out & yell in his face. When he pulls a gun I shout go ahead & shoot you sorry son-of-a-bitch. But I'm driving past him & I stop the movie with a potent little prayer I've memorized for just such occasions.

RALPH'S STORY

Ralph, one of my shooting buddies, is headed for surgery Wednesday & he was telling us all the stuff he couldn't do after his operation & I added no masturbation.

Right, he said laughing & told us about this knock out, big-busted gal who went to visit a male friend in the hospital & got told by a nurse she'd have to leave. A virile young man in the other bed had just been circumcised & was starting to bleed.

CALLED

I'm being called. A clear, strong feminine voice calls Phil. First two came to me at Cobb Mt in '81 while I was sleeping alone in a guest room. Woke me each time. Thought it might be wife but she was 80 miles away. Last week it called me in our empty house in Pollock Pines. I was awake. Sounded like it came from next room, not from inside my head. Same voice.

MARK

In a philosophical letter Ann asked what I really want & need. To be smothered with love, of course. Other than that I want to stretch as far as I can & leave my mark up there with those of the tallest baddest old grizzlies.



CALL

Ann called this morning
& asked if I knew that
William Stafford had died.
No I told her. She had
met him a couple of times
& said he was a wonderful
person. Kind, generous, a man
without ego. Very rare I
thought, & I went into my
daughter's old bedroom &
searched thru poetry journals
until I found Smoke's Way.
Then read & listened to him.

MASTER

There's a Cuban fellow
hand rolling cigars inside
pipe shop next to Tower
theater. People early to a
show stop & watch him
thru store windows. His
hands work in a relaxed
knowing way. His cigars
costing one forty & up
are stacked a foot deep
on counter behind him.
I buy two. Smoke one outside
at home & stick one in
Ken's mailbox at school.
These are good cigars
& remind me of Upmans
we used to buy & smoke
strutting streets
of San Francisco in
those days when I naively
believed I could will my
way to head of the line.

DECEMBER VISIT TO NORTH COAST

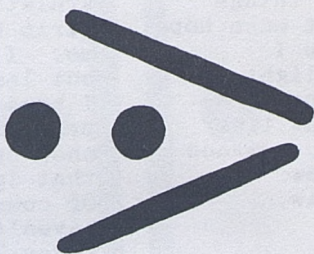
There's a spectacular 180
degree view of Pacific Ocean
but salt air, rain, wind
& waves take their toll on
this place. Gate hinges & other
metal objects rust, corrode
& give way. Fence boards turn
splotchy grey, crack & slowly
decay. The steep rocky hillside
slips pebble by pebble
down to beach. Yet ice plant
put here to hold the ground
thrives & celebrates by
giving forth joyous yellow
and pink blossoms stretching
open to sun light above its
triangular green spires.

MOM'S DOG RULE

Mom would cringe if
she knew we have four
dogs. She thought dogs
were a nuisance & a
burden. When I was six
& brought a stray dog
home she said I couldn't
keep it. I begged &
cried & she finally
said you can keep him
if he stays out of my
gardens. She meant it.
So I talked to Tubby
for an hour explaining
& beseeching & somehow
got through to him. He
never went into her
gardens until he was
very old & had earned
special privileges with
years of good behavior.

BEFORE IT GETS UGLY

I'm entering lower end
of mood cycle. You know
how it is. Nothing goes
right, no humor in sight.
If I slip too far
I tend to drag down
those around me with
disparaging remarks.
It's pisspoor behavior,
but I can usually reverse
this cycle before it gets
ugly by counting the
gifts allowed me which
are numerous enough
to be embarrassing.



6825

A young black man came
to front door about six,
dogs barking like hell,
& wanted to renew
our house number on
the curb. How much I
ask. When he says five,
I say go ahead.
He's same man that
painted our number
two years ago. Dogs
don't like him but
they don't like anyone
they don't know.
Like last time he
did a good job.

THE PERFECT TIME

The bulb in my bedside lamp burnt out. One of those peculiar, high intensity devils. I headed for the drawer where such things are stored without much hope, but to my surprise I found one, & the light inside my head popped on. This is the perfect time to play the lotto, romance my woman & send new poems out to Wormie.

CLEAVAGE

First time I saw cleavage thought it was a bloodless wound. I couldn't have been more than four when I met Aunt Daisy with this split in flesh dividing the v of her black dress. Scared & fascinated me. Couldn't stop looking. When we left I remember asking Mom if Aunt Daisy was going to be all right.

TWO-GALLON REDWOOD

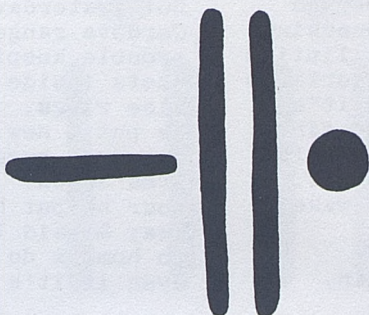
Pat bought a young redwood to plant at our new place in Pollock Pines. It sits on our deck & awhile back I caught Buffer lifting his leg on it. I flushed it with water & set it on a bench out of harm's way but the delicate lower needles & branches are slowly turning brown & brittle. Only the neglected tree devas in our back yard know its fate.

LOSER

I felt like a loser when I was a kid. I was short, skinny, had huge ears & wasn't athletic. I loved the girls but they avoided me. I could box a little but lost my one big match. I began to fantasize promising myself I'd show up all the bastards that ignored me. Of course my fantasies haven't come true & today I can see very few of those faces I wanted to impress. Still, I refuse to attend our periodic class reunions even though my head has grown to fit my ears.

BEFORE THE WICK BURNS OUT

Al said if I didn't have Jane, if I were left alone, I'd try to hire on one of those big sailboats & go wherever it took me. Me too, but I'd like to get into a log cabin in Montana backed up to national forest with a couple of dogs for company I said. We nodded to each other sharing a bone marrow desire to get away in the short years before the wick burns out.



CLAUDE'S PIN

This morning Claude wore a folded dollar bill with a small silver eagle pinning it to his shirt. He said he wore it to show his concern for the growing national deficit. The bill was folded so it framed In God We Trust. Said he'd been listening to Rush somebody on the radio.

WHO KNOWS?

Some of his long time friends don't recognize him. They see a subdued person who appears to be obsessing on a few recent, humiliating defeats. He's uncomfortable to be around because it's taking him forever to find there's no one to blame for his failures but himself. Who knows when he'll wake to the humor of his behavior & learn to laugh at himself again.

EVEN IF IT'S WRONG

Gordon is a dead shot with his scoped 38, but yesterday at Cordova range he had trouble keeping all his shots inside the ten & nine rings. Day before he put a new engine in his dune buggy & his arms ached. After an hour he put his revolver away & said I gotta go home & do something even if it's wrong.

POTENTIAL

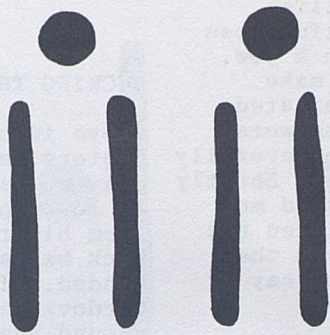
He steps up behind his wife & hugs her. She reaches a hand back & feels his oversized pocket knife. Hum, she says, is that you? No, he answers. Move over a little. Hum, she says again. It's got potential.

BLUE SUNDAY

Today I'm confused. Familiar emotions are clouded. Friendly routines stymied. Each night I make a list of chores & activities for next day. Today I rushed my tasks & deciding to stay home can find nothing I want to do. 13 good books at various stages of completion wait to be read but I balk. I try daydreaming of wide open spaces of Modoc County, a rare virgin forest in Eldorado County I've yet to see, my Blackhawk being beautified by a custom gunsmith, reveries that usually carry me, but there's no life in them today. My emotions have scrambled since I had vet put Bear down & buried him next to baby cedars at our place in Pollock Pines.

HIGH GROUND

Today Heidi & I hiked up Silver Fork past the Y into Government Meadows, light rain falling all the way. We stopped for lunch under a giant ponderosa at meadow edge where it was dry. There was a roundish depression dug in needle mulch & numerous piles of bear droppings nearby. Heidi sniffed the place over without raising her hackles, but it made me a bit nervous so we moved to high ground, wet but with a good view.



HIGH

Confessed to Judy, my
rehab counselor, that
I'd gotten high twice
this week. She gave me
a penetrating look.
Shooting in the 90s
& getting a handle on
a new poem I said.
You know what you're
doing? she asked, smiling.
What? Your body is
releasing endorphins.
That meant I was
returning to normal.
God, I felt good!

DAD'S BOW

My Dad was an avid archer most of his adult life. He made many beautiful bows out of osage orange & yew. Some he steamed to make recurves & even laminated a few. My favorites were the osage bows made carefully following the grain. Shortly before he died he told me secretly that he'd seen his bow's shadow & it was the real bow. You might say he was hallucinating. I prefer to believe he had a glimpse of the other side.

BEST INTERESTS

A registered Democrat I see myself crossing over in certain races to protect my second amendment rights. When I tell my son I'm just doing what other voters do — voting to support my individual interests, he says shouldn't we vote for the best interests of everyone?

LESSON IN AESTHETICS

Recently dreamed someone rearranged the parts of two constructions I had hanging in a museum show. A guy named Witt did it to me for real about 20 years ago when he lit a firecracker that I embedded in pink cardboard frame of one of my constructions. Blew a corner off the piece. Upset gallery director

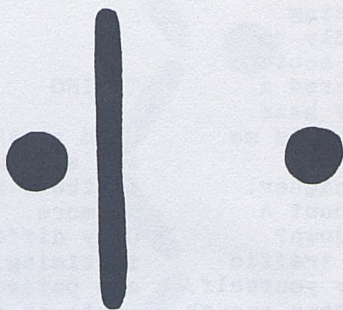
but hell, it wasn't worth much & you can say I was asking for it.

BUCKING THE ODDS

Steve is one tough bird. Doctors have been cutting away on him for years. He lost so much muscle from his right shoulder & neck he had to become left handed. Today he came to Cordova range bandaged around head & neck but he was smiling & bought me a Pepsi. He shoots a pistol better one handed than I do with two. Scoring tens is his medicine. Next week or the week after a surgeon is going to clean up & patch his nose.

WALKING MANTRA

Walking laps at Highland's track I repeat a mantra silently to myself. I use it as conditioning & to break up monotony. It goes: I'm healthy, loving, talented & smart. If I'm feeling a lack of energy I change smart to strong. Occasionally I'll substitute wise for smart but soon give it up. Too presumptuous.



WORKING STEP FOUR

Just looked in
mirror & image
said we need to
have an honest
talk. I know what
he wants so look
away, step away,
not yet strong enough
to face another
unforgiving truth.

CONVERSATION

Driving down Eastern Ave from El Camino after an emotional & rewarding reading wanted badly to stop for a double scotch. That desire triggered a conversation in my head. A voice of reason told me I was already high & couldn't get any higher. True. But what about a drink to calm me down? Keep your eyes on traffic voice said. Enjoy yourself. You'll come down soon enough.

events fell into place for me today as if I were a favorite of God.

TIMING

Used to think when I was a young man guys in their 50s didn't screw anymore. What a joke. Only difference I see is timing. Mature folks are patient & don't waste as many strokes.

WHO'S CRAZIEST?

I've got a .357 snubby hidden in bookshelf by front door & a sensor light over our driveway. Last October someone stole my Chevy truck. It won't happen again I tell myself. Not without a fight. Sometimes when my thinking clears I wonder who's craziest. Me or the thief?

SMALL SUMMER HARVEST

At our place on Sugar Pine Drive I gather small branches of pine & cedar that broke & blew off in last winter's storms. I wait for needles to dry & loosen then break bare limbs to stove length & store them inside with pine cones to use as kindling when weather turns crisp in the fall.

BATHTUB PLUG

My bathtub plug has mysteriously re-appeared in our hallway. It's been missing for weeks. I suspect our little getinsky (a five month old fox terrier) copped it. I cussed him blue back then when I couldn't find it. Seeing it this morning my heart double pumped with joy as I sensed this a harbinger of good things to come & it was. Uplifting



LITTLE GLORY

Visual art used to
put me together. First
by hard looking then
by making my own.
But I grew ambitious
& too critical & the
love went out of it.
I'm always able to
center myself lining
up words if I keep
it simple. There's very
little glory in it &
no money so it's
easy to stay honest
& work from the heart.

— Phil Weidman

North Highlands CA

WEIDMAN BIBLIOGRAPHY IN WORMWOOD (ISSUE: PAGES)

18: 8; 22: 13-14; 24: 2; 26: 2-3; 27/28: 28; 33: 15-22
 (Special section: Two by Eight Equals 6Teen); 35: 12;
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 58: 73-75; 64: 123-124; 68: 115-116; 69: 37 (Wormwood
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 1987); 117: 11-12; 126: cover art, 41-80 (chapbook: A
 Little Edge); 132: 207; 138: 97-144 (chapbook: Backtrack)

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with

Drawings by Rody Stains



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