

Robert G. Sherrin / statement (excerpts), & THREE STORIES

13 May 1980 NYC

I'm here in room 1238 of the West Side Y, Central Park barely visible between two walls, flies on my ceiling, a TV showing hockey over my head.

It seems that I take forever with things, my work particularly. I seem to be concerned more with ideas than I am with writing; I come from a background that trained me well to think but not to act, not to shape ideas into anything more substantial than fantasy. I wrote my first pieces when I was about 12 and they were fanciful, fruitless things. They were to be historical but were sheer speculation. I maintained Hawaii was 15,000 miles from Toronto. I've since learned that nothing is 15,000 miles from anywhere.

So. I've always dealt with ideas. Writing came to me because I was told to convey information. It was easy. I wrote when I wanted to, which was not often. It seemed like bullshit. Motorcycles & sports & finding girls were more important. I'm still not convinced that writing is what I want to do.

Yet the irony is that I think continually about it. I've been condemned because of my distance, the way I easily — and almost vindictively — dissassociate from others. I live between my ears and often refuse to share — or shape — that reality for anyone else.

14 May 80 NYC

I look around me. NYC stinks. Literally, it is a city with garbage bags like strand after strand of smelly pearls round its neck. People go fast. People bitch. The place looks terrible, the contrasts are horrific. In one sense I can applaud this diversity, this perversity and the acceptance of it. But to write about it requires that I go with whatever remains of NYC after the process of distillation: the cop with an axe handle swinging from his hip, the old woman with skinned knee on the Circle Line Ferry, the kids screaming to climb into the fist of the Statue of Liberty where the temperature was 120° F.

I write what I recall and what I recall best are the things that stick with me, shape me, *because* they remain. I remember the near crash on the road in Germany and I combine that with the death of a friend on a motorcycle. I don't expunge or commemorate. Or idolize. I merely set into perspective, so I (and possibly the reader) can investigate occurrences for any insight we might find.

Life isn't a mystery. Life is simply life. Why we think about it, analyse it, demand so much from it: that, to me, is the mystery.

The "boat" stories are dark, only because it was a dark time for me. I think back on it with a little satisfaction. It wasn't pleasant. It was constructive. It remains clear in my mind because it was *so different* than the rest of my life. It threw my "normal" life into relief and made it nearly impossible for me to reintegrate myself into Vancouver/UBC society after 5 mos. on the ship.

What intrigues me about my "ship" experiences is what intrigues me about many things: irony. That is what these stories deal with, the contrast between me and others, even those I love; the distance, the reluctance to close it. I relate it in images because images are what I know best and images *are* our common metaphor, but it is *irony* that pulls me to write about a time in my life when I wasn't happy.

I hated it but I loved it.

I'd do it again.

15 May 80 NYC

The risk I encounter in my work now is me. It's a question of honesty — a dare to myself. How much do I want to know about myself, about my various self-identities, the way I act them out, repress them, avoid some, indulge others? The risks are purely personal. In some countries, of course, the risk is political and it can be so here. Look at bill bissett. But that is small, cold shit compared to the incarceration of writers & artists in the East. I think the risks are in revealing one's thoughts, one's dirty little autobiographies, one's fantasies, sexual, political, emotional. You name it. The reason for this is at least two-fold. We live in a decadent society. Benevolently so. It is a society that permits (i.e. condones) the sale of babies, the enforced poverty of millions, the gross accumulation of wealth, the sale of anything that is profitable. It also permits one to do pretty much as one pleases. It's a rot that's conducive to the arts, in spite of the anal retentiveness of our federal and provincial governments.

Also, we are a society that feeds on gossip. When an artist or writer uses his own life (inner or outer) as a means of revealing our world, it not only provides a sense of gossip but also a sense of accuracy, two elements that are often mutually exclusive. When they're combined the result can be unnerving. I think of *The Immoralist*; I think of H. Miller, Edna O'Brien, *Latakia* by Thomas. All use a personal ground to run society's electricity through. It can please as much as it can terrify.

I translate, or impose, the activity of photography over my writing. It's making the picture I enjoy. I envision things whole. Even book-length fictions are mentally held before & during work. I make no notes, do no checks on the mechanism, the structure, the vehicle. This is not to say my work is instinctive or intuitive. To a degree it must be or I wouldn't do it, but also, it must involve a knowledge or a sense of it and the desire to investigate. I begin, it seems, with the whole and break it into parts as I build it (physically, conceptually) yet in some ways (instinctively and perceptually) I'm someone fascinated with machinery, someone who searches out engines so I see how they work. Oddly enough, they all work in a similar fashion, but the fused piston rings in one may well provide an insight into the strengths or weaknesses of another.

I use syntax as a barometer of sorts, a test, an indication of what I'm doing. I use my ears a lot. I write then I read aloud. Then I write then I read aloud. If I read a book silently I may appreciate its symmetry. If I begin reading it aloud, I know I've discovered something worth having.

I think writers who work 4-8 hours a day are idiots. Or menaces. Or geniuses. Or in love with process. I don't see my work as romantic, nor the temptation to find out whether I have the moxie to do it relentlessly. I equate that too readily with tasks I find despicable. Yet I think about my work constantly. In that sense, I always work.

NORTH BY NORTH BY NORTH

Vukovich threatened me last night. I'd been in the hold. He'd been in the can showering terrified again by the great distance between his birthplace and where he is now. I don't think he was used to being constantly in motion scared of water scared of lifeboats scared of men living in close quarters. His bunk like a berth on a train all dark and shrouded with old bedspreads canopied like the beds of kings shut tight like the dwelling places of peasants.

Vukovich has a bread knife. It was sharp when he stole it from the pantry sharper now that he went ashore yesterday and bought a stone and oil and a big bottle of vodka. He liked me to walk with him through the old parts of Ketchikan on the elevated boardwalks past the shacks that we tell him are the places where whores gather at night.

We don't really know we tie up at 1600 and cast off at 1800 never seen darkness there.

Vukovich touched my shoulder when we walked kept watch was taller than me. You wouldn't like him.

He had a hairy chest tufts on his back smelled like mutton even when damp after a shower I'd notice the scent of wool. He used to talk about priests then he talked about fucking and killing.

He kept his knife in his bunk slept on his back one hand on his thigh the other above his head, draped over a cord always near the knife that lay like a snake on the roof of his bunk.

Vukovich sleeps
when he sleeps at all
right below me.

He knows you.

He talks about you asks about you wants to hear what you smell like feel like taste like. His is the curiosity of a child. It comes out in quiet bursts in the Cooks' Mess when we huddle over our plates before the last sitting or in the room after breakfast when I lie on the deck and slip my feet under a barbell and begin my situps

two hundred and fifty

I start to count

Vukovich starts to ask starts to query starts to talk

I go: one two three

He goes: she must have soft feet she must taste of salt between her breasts she must smell like parfait. He laughs soft slow soft slow soft thudding of breath.

I count. I go up and down and up and down and I say yes to everything he says then I feel my sweat come out and my hot back hit the cool deck and my hot back hit the cool deck and my hot back hit the cool

where it sounds like fire and the white is like snow and gives like a drift and I fall away and all our little senses are tuned to distant transmitters where our skins are maps where our skins are little rivers and little valleys cooling where our skins are suddenly inside us and no more talk no more motion just the cradle of our rocking and more talk just the breathing preludes and no more thought just the persistence of it like slipping into the small lakes above Skagway so hot so cold they pull you in and cool you off and take you away and we talk no more. We lie in our cool crackling like stilled engines.

And now again my wet back on the cool deck

and Vukovich's feet dangling over his bed the peach in his mouth and fingers wiping his lips and his chest dark with hair and his slippers busted open at the sides, hanging off his toes like gaffed fish coming over the side

and Vukovich with his knife beside him

saying you must be a good one

saying you must practise a lot

Vukovich who waits for me on sailing nights and waits for me to change so he can see the marks on my back and if we're alone and if we're alone

like we always are like you and I always are in your satin sheets
or you father's leather couch or your mile wide wall to wall. All
limbs interlocked because we have only a few hours and then it's
another 8 days and I never know if you'll be there. Sometimes
after I return to the ship and you return to your father's house I
tremble and for a huge stalled moment dream of Jayne Mansfield
and the blonde hair bouncing and those breasts still desperately
jiggling and the wreck slewing away and her eyes not seeing and her
head so soft and so blonde and so undoubtedly dead and that
makes me see you in the Healey rounding the curves or missing a
shift or hitting a wall or being with someone else who wants you
to drive him home afterwards

and then we're back on the floor and then I'm back on the ship
and then Vukovich watches me change and waits until my shirt
comes off when he comes to look at my back

and if we're alone he traces the red with his finger and I know he
is thinking of knives

and I know this as my wet back hits the cool deck
one last time

and I say 250

and Vukovich's foot bounces as he dangles his leg from his bunk.

Last night I was in the hold. Vukovich was in the shower. He
stands with his back to the curtain stands in his old leather slippers
and they turn mushy in the water but he is suspicious of places
where men gather in groups. He is scared of disease. He doesn't sit on
the toilet seats he sits on his hands and shits between them. He
always covers himself but he looks at others he watches for
it wants to know

what?

wants to know if they look the same work the same and want the
same.

Some of us want release

some of us want satisfaction

Vukovich wants out.

So he stays away from most of us is suspicious of men in naked groups afraid of men who touch themselves with their towels and show themselves to each other and talk about it and joke about it and want it all the time and would probably put it in one another just to find

that release

that sad satisfaction

that getting out of oneself that all of us want.

But Vukovich won't talk about it. He speculates as he showers and he showers alone with his back to the curtain and we all shower alone but sometimes there are others in the room or in another stall and the water beats us up and makes us hot and some of us

who are like me

cover our ears and lean into the sound of aircraft and pretend we are not in a shower stall on a passenger steamer always going north.

Some of us

who are like me

weave back and forth in the water that pounds down and we listen for that total silence that means we are truly alone in the company of others and our backs are to the curtain and we move into and out of into and out of the beating of water

and we know who we are

and why we want no one to know

we are just like those who are like me.

So last night Vukovich was in the shower with his knife and he was moving behind the curtain and I was below him in the hold way way down in the V of the ship and I stretched myself on a slanted board and I lay there in my shorts and I took three deep breaths and began to sit up and lie down sit up and lie down sit up and lie down. And Udo worked the weights and he grunted and his pecs puffed out and fell back puffed out and fell back and he said a name every time he moved the weight and he grunted. And eventually he stopped because he couldn't lift the weight anymore and he was wet and his shorts stuck to him. So he lay on the deck and counted for me as I went up and down and thought of

how you put your thumb into the waistband of your Cigarette jeans or your Fiorucci jeans or your D. Hechter's or how you some-

times slide your hands into the front of them with just your thumbs showing and move back and forth on your heels and accuse me of being suspicious accuse me of being possessive accuse me of being intolerable.

And Udo counted and rolled to his side and his gut went in and out as he closed his eyes and counted. His breath was soft and he rocked

back and forth on your heels until I start to imitate you and you start to smile and we both get into your car and drive to your father's house.

He has money so you have money and you do what people are supposed to do with money. You buy things and you use them and then you throw them away. People with money buy things and people without money sell things and people with nothing get bought and sold.

We went to your father's place because he has money and therefore he has all these things: the lean steak in the walk-in cooler and the Jamaican woman who minces it the heavy plates she puts it on and the silver forks we use to lift it to our mouths and the crystal that holds the wine and the speakers that release Steve Reich and the big rooms that are always empty because luxury means having a lot of waste. And your father has a lot of waste and we used it. We rolled in his empty rooms and we went to your room and we danced in the mirrors and we played over and under your satin sheets. They look like water in the sunlight. They sound like fire when we move.

Water sounds like silk pulled over rough wood.

And last night my back was wet and the slanted board was coarse and it soaked me up and Udo counted and counted until he said 180 and I stopped and I was too weak to talk but he reached up and pulled me down and we lay on the cool deck saying nothing. And he was dry but I was wet and water moved all around us. And after a time I got up and he was still naming names then said he needed a shower and I did too so we marked our numbers on the chart and climbed the ladder out of the hold.

I was making for the can. I had a towel round my waist. Udo was in his cabin looking at a skin mag with Moon and they nodded to me and called me over and showed me: a blonde woman with big breasts on a couch with a pig. And she looked like she was having an enema but she wasn't and she looked bored and the pig looked bored and the men in the room who looked at Moon's books were quiet. No one said a word. No one was excited. They all looked disappointed. I closed the mag it was called BIZARRE and I gave it back. I wanted a shower. I wanted to be clean.

Udo spoke to Moon

he said it was sick

Moon nodded. It was. He'd been aboard eleven years almost half a million miles always going north.

Udo was coming right after me.

I was in the can. It was quiet. I took off my towel. I looked at my body. It was stained with sweat. I pulled my skin. It was tight. I tapped it. It sounded like a drum. Then I stretched and felt dizzy for a moment but I looked down at my feet in their plastic thongs and I felt better. Then I moved forward and yanked at the curtain and was going to step into the shower when I saw Vukovich. He wheeled. The water wasn't running. There was no sound. There was just the light and the darkness of Vukovich turning and he was still turning and his body twisted and he was stiff with himself. His one hand moved to cover it or pull it down and the other snaked out and whipped back and I stood there seeing but not knowing seeing but not seeing

and then the knife was coming and it flashed loudly. It screamed silver and then there it was moving at my face and I was seeing it but not knowing it and I was hearing Vukovich's voice cutting at me and I was hearing the can door being pushed open and I was pulling back and smelling the fever of the knife as it went near to my face and then it went away from me. But its voice and its smell stayed behind. Then Udo was yanking me away and reaching for Vukovich but Vukovich was screaming and spelling things with his knife

I kill you

he was spelling it out for me: I K I L L Y O U

he was talking to me

I KILL ALL OF YOU

He'll always be talking to me

And then he was in his towel and he was gone and I was sitting on the floor and I was sick to my stomach. Udo removed his towel and cleaned me off stood me in a shower and talked to me from the other side of the curtain.

And the water beat me. And I saw you in the stall in your father's bathroom and you are under the silver water and it hits you and hits you and hits you and hits you until you step out and someone hands you a towel

and someone will always hand you a towel: part of the difference between us.

And I felt the water hit me and I leaned into it and I know you lean into yours and you are alone in your father's house except for the one who hands you a towel and wipes you off and powders your skin and touches you more than I do

and serves you better than I do

and loves you like nobody else

because she really belongs to you since your father told her so.

My father told me to bend my knees when I lift and not always do what others tell me to.

Your father tells others to do exactly what you ask of them.

So I lean into my father's wishes

and you lean into yours.

And I'm under the water knowing Vukovich wants to kill me because I saw him stiff with himself

and I'm under the water that beats me and you're under the water that's being towelled from your body

and you're thinking of yourself

and I'm thinking I'm under water and always heading north with Vukovich in the bunk under mine.

And now today and last night still threatens but after I showered and after Udo told me he'd watch out for me, I dressed and went to the galley to eat eggs and talk to Vukovich but he wasn't there.

So I ate eggs.

I did them for 3 minutes in boiling water
and lopped their tops off with a spoon
and dipped toast into them

left 3 empty shells on the table in the Cooks' Mess.

I went to the fantail but Vukovich wasn't there went to the hot-box but Vukovich wasn't there went to the wops' room but no Vukovich went back to Moon nothing. Udo told me to sleep in a different bunk Moon told me to drink 151 overproof a saloonsman gave me four lines of coke.

Went back to my room. No Vukovich.

I breathed it in and out all night.

no Vukovich no Vukovich no Vukovich no Vukovich.

I dreamed of you while the Night Saloonsman Silvoed the tableware and placed fresh linen on the deuces. I dreamed of you in your father's house telling Marianne that I was not staying for dinner but that I was staying for lunch and that she could have the afternoon off or she'd have to stay on the main floor

Whichever you prefer Marianne

I dreamed you loved me as the Night Saloonsman grilled steaks for himself and his two juniors. I dreamed you waited for me and read books for me and wrote letters for me while the Night Saloonsman talked religion with the night baker and ate his steak rare with lots of onion and HP and piece of pie right from the baker's oven. I dreamed you shorter than you are with hair longer than it is. I dreamed you in your Healey waiting to drive me south at season's end. I dreamed you dreaming me back to you. I dreamed you showered while the Night Saloonsman took the call from Moon and donned his white tunic and buttoned up the brass buttons and went to the galley to prepare 2 tea, toast and marmalade for the bridge. I dreamed you drove too fast while the saloonsman vacuumed and I dreamed the Healey going over and I dreamed me looking at myself on the roadway looking up at a cop and I appeared drunk because my hand was reaching up swaying like a bullrush but half my face was in blood and the cop couldn't answer the cop wouldn't answer and I couldn't ask him and I felt the wet and I lay back on the cool pavement under the flashing lights after midnight

at the corner of Broadway and Macdonald. I dreamed the answer to my question but you didn't. I dreamed the cop and the lights and the wet and the cool as the Night Saloonsman finished up and rang the engineers to go on watch. I dreamed you over and over until the Night Saloonsman came in and rocked me on the shoulder.

0600 he said to me in his soft voice.

And I dreamed you away and rolled over and got up and donned my stripes and saw that Vukovich wasn't there.

I felt tired as if I'd dreamed my sleep away. I pulled on my shoes and headed for the can. The Night Saloonsman was ahead of me.

He was already in the can. He was already in the can and he was turning to me and his eyes were wide. His eyes were wide as mouths. His hands were pulling at the collar of his tunic and his ankles were awash in water and he was moving his feet up and down like a bewildered child trapped in a puddle of mud.

And the water sounded like eggs frying

and the water was the colour of the roses on your satin sheets and for a moment I saw you in bed and then I saw the Night Saloonsman turn to look again and turn to look again and turn to look again and turn to look at me

and he was gagging into his hands

and his voice was like air pulling on an edge of steel. It said nothing but it told all one has to know.

So I stepped into the rosewater and saw you stepping from your shower and the footprint on the brown shag and I heard my feet hit the water and heard someone pushing on the can door behind me. So I touched the Night Saloonsman and nudged him to one side and looked.

There was Vukovich his back to the curtain and the water beating him and his buttocks plugging the drain and the water lapping over his legs to carry the rose colour out of the stall.

And there was Vukovich with the curtain pinned by his shoulders and his face turned up to take the hits of water and the rose colour all over him.

And there he was with his mouth open and his teeth showing.

And there he was with his throat cut and open like a mouth under his mouth. Like the distended gills of a fish coming over the side still in water but no longer something that swims.

So they put him on ice in the hold and no one lifted weights for the rest of the cruise and they took the knife out of his hand and gave it to the cops who came for him when we docked again in Vancouver.

To the cops who looked down at him and said nothing.

And you waited a long time for me while I talked to the cops who asked me things I couldn't answer who made me hot who made me sweat through my shirt and made me sit there on the cold steel chair.

And I thought of you and the marks you'd leave on me that no one would see when I returned to the ship that night.

INSIDE PASSAGE

I'm lying on my bunk curtains pulled canopy close light like those in chest freezers. My spot quiet and clean and insular. I still roll side to side with the swell.

Crazy Al sings in the doorway. The Russians already doing arias in the hold. There's a garbage can full of beer on the floor the tappets clink as we push through Seymour Narrows. Below me are the boilers slow mad soft hammers beating.

Heading home.

Crazy Al listens to no music on his headphones. The wire goes under his shirt and out his fly his hips go back and forth. Joe lives in the bunk below wants to kill the midnight gobbler.

I need to go home.

There were 168 days in this season 1008 servings breakfast lunch dinner. There were 8 days in my week 4 men in my crew a Hobart we fed and cleaned. Slop buckets lots of them.

Never told you about that.

You thought I did something dangerous. You thought I scaled rope ladders or wrestled with machinery worked a dirty sweat in crawl spaces the shafts turning gears grabbing at me screws going round and round out there.

You thought I was a sailor

not head dish washer.

Remember the first day?

I told you I worked the Inside Passage. You liked the sound of that. Said you'd meet me again next week wait at the pier's foot wave when we tied up wave when we cast off rock and roll in between.

It was good when it was good then it was no good at all.

I washed dishes 60 people to a sitting 6 sittings a day one dinner plate one side plate one desert plate one ice cream chalice one coffee cup one bread platter for each passenger for each sitting. And the crew didn't eat off paper.

I fire up the Hobart
scrape leftovers into buckets
pull them to the shute
dump them out.

I wear pinstripes
no pleats or cuffs.

They go soggy in the crotch.

They're starch

put pimples on my back
smell when I put them on
smell when I take them off.

Sloppy stripes

matching tops and bottoms.

I bunk near the waterline. On good days Vukovich and I or Robichaud and I used to watch the trollers go by and on the bad saw them fall in the trough tip over the crest. I sleep above the engines I know that if we go down the bed springs will slice through me when the shafts blow and the pistons go up and up on the power stroke. I work near the waterline work in steam that stinks of food I pick medallions of meat off the plates pop them in my mouth leftovers from the French service in the Dining Saloon. Work from 0600 to 2130 sleep in a room with five others. It's about the size of your walk-in closet where you stood that day mirrored six ways and dropped those delicately faded denims. I have a sink the size of the powder puff on your old bed and a footlocker the size of your jewellery box.

We both liked the same music.

Once

I asked you to take the bus when you came to meet me. You didn't care for that.

I sleep too late you complained

So? then I shrugged I'm good at it practise when your back is turned. When you fell asleep after the first time I shrugged and walked about your room paced it off 13 x 22 size of the Cooks' Mess.

I like to drive you smiled.

I nodded But what if I ask you to ride the bus?

Why though?

Because I feel better that's why.

No you don't. You feel worse because you'd really like them to see
you climb into the Healey with me. But it's my car and I like to
drive it.

So?

I drive. You ride.

That's the way it was wasn't it? All summer long.

You waited at the edge of the lot and we left quickly you always
went through the park to show me how well you rallied. I always
watched the scenery. Strained my neck at Prospect so I could feel
the totem slide away as you geared down into the dip high RPM in
the tunnel of trees.

Did you want to frighten me?

You did.

The car didn't

the speed didn't

your silvered mirrors and diamonds didn't.

You did. The way you went about me. Relentless. You were some
kind of current.

Rip tide or back eddy?

You wanted me because you like me

and I wanted you because I wanted to be liked.

You have money. I don't care anymore where it comes from.

Mine comes from the Shore Steward who hands out the cheques
twice a month when all of us line up in Purser's Square. We all look
clean because we just showered we all smoke because we're nervous
don't want to miss our women don't want to be forgotten. I have to
sign a piece of paper they stamp something in a book they say
N E X T like a barber shop and I step away with a cheque that
can't be cashed if it's over a grand walk down to the freight deck
onto the pier start up the stairs to you.

You wanted to know all about me.

I told you the easy things if I told you anything at all told you about the steady break of water as the bow cuts through it how the wave folds up at the same spot all the time how it sounds more like distant fire than rushing water. I talked about the wake at dusk seen from the fantail white foam like a comb scratch on soft dark scalp. The glow of it. The S U N K I S T crates and seagulls strung out behind us.

I didn't tell you about the can with the five toilets and the shower stalls where Vukovich slid beneath it all the washing machines for our stiff jeans to look good on Vancouver Day. Didn't tell you about hitting the can each morning and staring at the tiles how they interlock no satisfaction. The sound of older men farting sighing grunting steady creak of the ship profanities when someone slips or doesn't show up. Didn't tell you about the boys found in linen lockers or deserted rooms who grew scared or confused just started to weep or shake and suspect their friends just shut themselves away and gave up.

Some go crazy like Al who walks about with the phone jack dangling from his pants hip bouncing off the night-tight companionways between the galley and the crews' quarters.

Some see things at night like Joe who has a length of rebar in his bunk and leaps at anyone who enters our room in darkness who's tried to hurt me twice the steel at my head his eyes wide but the knowledge shielded that damp look of incomprehension.

Some retreat like the Russian who's washed pots for 11 seasons and lives in the brig makes his bunk at the beginning of the season strips it down at the end. Tonight he came for a handful of Intensive Care smiled dirty before he left sings in the hold amongst the pallets of tinned clams and sacks of dirty sheets and blocks of ice.

Some of us go inward like me and count the days make calendars out of everything: so many plates to a day so many sittings to a week so many logged off islands to a passage so many times that tall tree south of Rupert slips past at the same moment every eighth day before they tie us up and we linger in the cabin because we know we must go away not return til spring. I count chalices as I load them into the Hobart count inserts as I pull them out the other end. I count dinner plates as I flip them like flat sauna

stones and to avoid the heat carry them away with the heels of my hands. I count saloonsmen who come and go count the lounge-
porters found in a passenger's room and fired count the customs
checks when the officers board us haul us out of bed look at our
sloping faces our shiny photos. They laugh at us talk about wet-
backs southern accents in a northern. Look us over like you do a
cabbie who dares to be first off a light.

I like you but I never told you told you nothing. You just
assumed I did. You thought I said I loved you but I didn't say
anything. I talked about Skagway that the quietest thing in that town
was the old cathouse fallen by the tracks full of my footprints. I
wanted you to see that all sailors don't tie splices or climb masts
that the north is not always the aurora.

I want simple things like solitude and silver certificates by the
score

but must do complicated things
like wash dishes and talk with you
to get them.

We should be able to make our points without talking but you
can't listen to me that way.

I didn't say I loved you I said I needed you.

Crazy Al's been singing for half an hour the wops are playing
checkers Joe's fallen asleep with his shoes on his chest keeps
them handy to run from the midnight gobbler.

Tonight's the last night of the last trip.

In a while we'll gather the whole crew in the Stewards' Mess
under the fantail. There'll be pizza the Chief'll make a speech full
of profanities so we'll know he's one of us the barmen will bring us
bottles there'll be music. Girls will appear from the passenger's end
give kisses to those who are retiring: the fishcook is through the
night baker has found religion. Then there'll be more singing some
in Italian some in Spanish some in French even English. Then
the fist fights'll start and the slow ones will have swollen faces and
the quick ones broken knuckles sly ones will drink from deserted
bottles and 3 or 4 will take the girls to safety in the suite booked
always to Mr. Constant so the Chief has a place to party every
cruise.

Joe will go a little mad will stumble from the Mess into the Dining Saloon. Night lunch will just have ended. He'll take a fire axe slam it into the walnut and plate glass until the Chief leads a charge to subdue him. Then Joe will bring up and pass out.

Last week our last week you said I was the best you always did.

I laughed said you knew how to lie.

You cried but I took it as make believe stepped over to your mirrored room me all around me me above me and behind me. I looked thinner five months in a galley and I'd lost weight. My hair was lank and matted stubbled like that of a new recruit freshly sheared prisoner. My shoulders were bony my knees blunt fragile hinges. I squatted looked around at me.

You think you're so fucking smart you were yelling at me again.

I nodded smiled at my multiple selves I sparkled like a lost diamond.

Your voice was electric with anger You think you're the only one who thinks?

I nodded again I did sparkle like light seen through the grate of a gutter trap. I reached out as if I had adhesive or magnets on my fingers I jerked back: the mirrors were cold as CO² the sensation a hot one burned by dry ice.

I don't want you in my room!

When I realized you were getting out of bed I swivelled and pulled the door to. I didn't want to hear you anymore. I locked it I stretched out I looked up and saw me looking up felt like a small craft in rainbow fog too many directions from which to take a bearing thought of latitudes and minutes of the compass put my fingers to my eyes forced them shut nothing more.

Stillness in the heart of inertia.

I woke up a while later opened the door and crawled out. The bed was made my clothes were on the floor. You'd left busfare on the night table.

At Rupert the phone in the pub didn't work. Juneau put me through after half an hour but the time was wrong you were out

to dinner. Skagway was lost to me. I sat in the upper floor of the
cathouse watched the torn curtains move walked back along the
tracks listened to the slap of glacial water sun brittle as a host.
Wrangell was dark only beehive burners glowing drinks on the
house. I was happy headed south. Then Rupert again and rain. I
ran my finger round the circle of numbers and caught you in the
bath.

I'm wet your voice so far away I held my breath to hear you.

I'll dry you off in two days.

The line spat and cackled at us.

I think I heard a sigh That doesn't sound like you you said.

Maybe it isn't.

How would I know?

You wouldn't but I'll show you.

I'm shivering I have to go.

I tried once more in Alert Bay no answer so I went for a walk.
They pass on so young there: graves of babies graves of brothers
who died together whole families laid out like paving stones.

They put Joe and Crazy Al in the brig. The Russian slept in the
hold. They never did find the midnight gobbler. I did the last sitting
of breakfast and had a shower stripped my bunk packed my clock
away. I can carry everything I need in a bag the size of your purse
carry everything I want in a container no larger than one you make
by cupping your hands can say it all in the volume of a deep breath.

Can do all that.

There's a cleft at the end of the pier a V of space. I saw a seagull
eat a pigeon there on the first day of the season. I was on the fore-
peak eating a piece of fruit while the gull shook the pigeon then
set down to its meal. A rubby stood at the upper wharf railing and
called to me

Looks tasty to me buddy boy.

I nodded tossed him an apple. He threw it at the seagull the
pigeon fell in the water the man cursed and walked away.

I didn't know you then never knew I would now who knows
Do you?

I look up from where I stand. There's no waving no voices it's
cold here in mid-October. It's the start of the winter season when
people with money take the first cruise south.

THIS BOY IN HIS NARROW BED

Perhaps it was you?

Perhaps it was only me looking back from my ledge of sleep.

Me always even when not alone even when in a room of five others even when with you me always me in my narrow bed.

My life's like that don't you see?

As a child I had a rocket radio alligator clips pinched my bed frame tune in Coeur d'Alene dreams of Patti Page or the dinosaurs of plasticine the screams so late at night my father stumbling on the stairs.

Somehow even then I was dreaming you pulling you in from distances so great they were unknown.

Somehow even now as the Cates men move in even as their tugs nudge us from pierside I look away from you and try to think you into a shape that keeps for 8 days.

Won't work.

Even as I look away even as I look at the bosun yelling MOVE IT even as I glance back to see your hand moving in the sun even as I see Robichaud heading for the stairwell even as I bring you into line even as I do all that

I feel my stomach shift

and my knees creak

and my patience dwindle

and my image of you billow like sheets or a belly of water and I lose it.

Even as I wave back and strain to see you and wonder again always wondering what you look like I lose you and turn away and move quickly to go below.

And move swiftly down the stairwell putting my hands on the rails and kicking my feet up and sliding on my palms to the deck below. And now it's the sound of the crew and the sun angling through the holes and the big coins of light everywhere and my head like it is when Robichaud cuts the coke on the dark plastic of his stereo lid and he leans and rolls the note and draws the line and passes the bill to me and says only 13 more trips

only 11 more

only 9

only only only

We apply that word to so many infinities.

only 8 days til you welcome me into the Healey

only you

only me

Now only the voices of men arguing over bunks and the taut faces of the new ones and the hard chuckles of the new ones and the way they sit on footlockers and wait for it all to begin.

And now the screws slowly turning and the slap of water and the air trunk door slamming and the stereos at work and the bottles out and those that aren't drunk from shore leave are drunk from the start of another trip. And I go to my room and there's our newboy with his cigarette and his shaking hands and a pile of stripes beside him and he knows my name and asks me what to do and I tell him not to bend over in the washroom

and that's that

and that's that

Is that how you put it? How can you wave to me when you say that? How can you meet me week after week? What do we do when there isn't that gap to make us want to want?

I pull my curtains the newboy shifts on his footlocker. I'll give him Vukovich's bunk and the newboy can strip the sheets and the canopies and I won't tell him anything

I won't tell him a fucking thing

You understand that surely

I put my head on my pillow and I glove my face with my hand and I hear the Cates bumping on the hull and the newboy striking a match and now I see that the sunlight moves on the ceiling and my blue curtains burn with their own colour and I'm so tired of not

talking to you not explaining myself to you and you are sure I know what's going to happen but I fear that I'll understand that only a long time after it's passed.

And I put my head on my pillow and I burrow into it cross my legs at the ankles and I tense my muscles and stiffen my stomach and close my eyes and my narrow bed is pulled by Cates out into the harbour of Vancouver

for the 12th time this year

only 9 more to go

I hear Robichaud singing as I close my sea green eyes.

Everything falls into place or out of it I work the galley hard been stealing shrimp and crab and beef tenderloin and now I'm determined to steal a knife a good one Solingen and make the cooks go loud and threatening and make the Chef call a meeting and the Chief sit at the back and I'll throw the steel into Wrangell Narrows a straight hard fish going down.

And Robichaud will know it's me and he'll call to me. And Udo will know and he'll nod to me and tell me to be careful and he'll flex his arms and run his shoulder into the bulkhead to demonstrate the strength of the powers I challenge.

But I challenge no one not really it's only my anger dreaming
It dreams you

I keep my head on the pillow even when I'm in the galley even as I ram fistfulls of crab into the plastic in my pocket even as I go topside during a break and drop it off the forepeak white meat like gobs of water falling back into the swell.

I keep my head on the pillow and you are waiting but the face is gone and all I see is the hand on the gear shift and the feet on the pedals and the hand looking back and the Healey cutting left.

I keep my head on the pillow and see your fingers playing with a cigarette and tapping the ash away and asking me again

Why don't you just quit?

Why don't you quit trying to make me quit?

And Robichaud comes into the room and the newboy looks up and Robichaud looks down and tells him to move his fuckin ass and there is silence then I lean over my bunk and tell the newboy that it's better if he leaves he does but very slowly because he doesn't understand that men in tight numbers detest groups larger than three and will see the proof on Rupert night when the movie is shown on the freight deck everyone is happy and drunk or stoned and the wops sell popcorn and hot dogs then the talk starts and somewhere in the dark a fist moves others join it until someone always called a faggot

is face up or face down or coiled like a sick child on the deck the Chief stands and tells us all to calm down or he'll cut the power so the boys go quiet and we watch the film but there is no substance anymore just the bitterness of not caring whether the guy is dead or hurt badly

nobody cares.

Sometimes violence

brutal violence

sometimes tearing skin from the face kicking bruises into the buttocks snapping off teeth at the gumline

sometimes violence

our goodbyes and hellos are compressed by sailing schedules into a club we wield for only 8 or 9 hours

sometimes all our violence

is the only language we have

And Robichaud comes into my bunk and he's in his tank top and saloon pants and I'm in my tank top and galley stripes and he's carrying his little makeup case and photo album he leans back against the bulkhead and sighs

Only 9 more

He doesn't smile but stares into my curtain and maybe he thinks of Vukovich or the night saloonsman who took a trip off and me who didn't

WHO COULDN'T

Christ what would we have done after a few days of running through your father's house how soon would we have soured on ordering food from his Jamaican lady and occupying his vacant lots of leather couches and Chinese rugs?

And Robichaud's foot kicks out and the toe of his slipper punches my curtain and he boots and boots and boots and boots and his back is pressed to the bulkhead and his hands dig into my bunk and his neck is paralleled with jugulars and muscle and strain and he kicks and the curtain gives and he kicks and the curtain gives and then he stops and heaves his breath out

and starts to laugh

and his head bumps my boot rack

and his shoulders bounce

and his face goes red

and I feel myself smile

and then he is finished

so he looks at me and nods and his grin is wide and he flexes his leg.

Only 9 more his voice so soft I can barely hear it but I sense it clearly like one does a touch before its touching I watch his face.

And I see your face turn and your hand moves up to my cheek and you ask me where I've been while you were tending to what you thought were my needs.

And now Robichaud is turning and his voice is coming over his shoulder like clouds backpedalling over a hill and his voice is still soft

Only 9 more

Then even softer: those fuckers won't get me.

And his hair is black and short and his shoulders are brown and he opens his photo album shows me pictures of women and he has memorized their names and their shapes and their scents and he has uselessly perfected them There are scores of them all 5 x 7's pasted into a red plastic album and he talks of them as one would of lost pets

as one would of a favourite auto stolen

as one would of a prior sensation

and he loves them all from a distance, in their tiny likenesses.

Then he pushes his makeup case to me and I flip it open and take the blade from the mirror and move it into the solid pack of coke and start cutting lines.

Five grams he says and smiles.

He'll do it all in six days.

And later

and later much much later

when the newboy is thrashing about in Vukovich's narrow bed and I lie above him with my eyes open. I know what the newboy dreams. He dreams the dinner plates and side plates and cups upside down in the rack and the rattle and the dank and the steam and the rattle and the yells and the crashes and the silver-rattle and the pot rattle and the trash rattle and the scrap splash and the slop slash and the work rattle and the work rattle and the work rattle and the work rattle

The newboy sleeps the sleep of nosleep.

And I don't sleep because I have slept and here in my narrow bed it is better to stay awake I have slept and I know the dreams by heart the screams so loud no one hears and the sitting up in bed and the sitting up in bed and the sitting up in bed and the hate of being awake and suddenly knowing I've spent half the night trying to avoid sleep.

So I do not sleep. So I lie in my narrow bunk and slip out of my stripes and I spread my legs and I light a smoke and at first I listen to the water going past and it sounds like wind rubbing bushes or soft hands on rough fabric then I hear the thud ping thud ping thud ping thud ping underneath where the engineers move round the twin diesels And then I think and because my head is numb and my sinuses drain bile I cannot think of anything but you.

How you are possibly at home but probably not how you are moving about the city with the top down and they all look at you and you look at all of them and there is a greater distance between you and them than between you and me I know all that But it doesn't make this easier.

You drive all the time. You have plastic to pay for the fuel and a shop that services the car and you sit and smoke while they drain the oil and check the timing and do the plugs and set the carbs and they all look at you through the service door and they trace the lines of your legs and breasts All your hidden places fill their eyes.

And you smoke them away and you lean back and wait until you can be in motion again. You are like me in so many ways you want either to be moving or at rest.

But the difference: Now even when I lie down to sleep I am in motion always always always.

Even though you are further from them than I am from you I'm distrustful.

This kind of cyclical existence makes me suspicious of me. I want only what I want and not what you may desire to give me. This washing of dishes and dumping of slops and taking of drugs is really a taking of my own life

And so I smoke you away
draw you in
let it go

And think of Robichaud in the hotbox the room with no windows where the heat collects and the crew gathers to watch private films the pneumatic men and women of Super 8

And think of Robichaud who keeps his compact with him all day long and ducks into linen lockers or washrooms or a quiet windfree spot and takes a sniff and pulls a photo from his back pocket He laughs at himself He points to his head and says: scratch and sniff.

His nose is always running
His eyes are always wide

He sits alone in his bunk and stares at his photographs and keeps his compact close and sleeps as little as possible Dreams in that way.

He dreams of his women all those process colours combined and the backgrounds dark and all their faces turned to the camera and their expressions calm. They are little icons I suppose little miracles of theft that allow Robichaud to avoid the older women who want him or the lure of the easy way out. The women he's known so slightly so vaguely now fixed and kept like a saint's relic. Did they ever exist outside the camera? But it keeps him to himself helps him to avoid entanglement so he won't end up like us: weeping men found on air trunk stairs or those who play crib all night or sing all day long or lie in their narrow bunks and grow sullen.

The ship renders all of us manic
Robichaud and his coke
me and my silence
the newboy and his panic
you and your constant motion
YOU SEE it traps you while it traps me.

Robichaud

He winked at me today. He winked at me when he came into the galley to clear his tray. He winked at me as I swept the scraps of lamb and veg the bits of ash the potato turds from his plates. He winked at me as I slid the stuff into a bucket.

Meet me in the hotbox
and he winked again.

I went there. I went there because he wanted me to and I wanted to know what made him want me there in the middle of the first sitting of dinner and he was pacing. He wheeled to face me handed me the compact. I cracked it open took my blows then he handed me the photo.

She was beautiful
just like you you could have been twins.

I looked at her and I looked at you and looked at her and looked at you and Robichaud was laughing loudly spinning about eyes splashing light.

He knew what I was thinking

He grabbed for the compact and dropped to a stool took the blade and began to cut.

This calls for lines not fingerpuffs. He was panting his words.

I looked at him and looked at you and I think I didn't know the difference and didn't understand the photograph didn't realize that it was only a likeness only a resemblance didn't realize it could lie in its emulsions and underexposure And it looked like you and I held it out and stared at it because it looked like you but you are different maybe it was the way her hands went up and her wide eyes and you looked like you were laughing and shrugging questioning the abrupt pleasure of life

which is something you never do

so I knew it wasn't you but I didn't realize the difference.

I stared until Robichaud handed me the compact and the bill. He took the photo from me looked at it studied it.

Claimed it with his eyes.

Ain't she a bitch was how he put it. Ain't she a bitch?

Had met her at the Rupert Hotel would meet her there again on the southern leg. Just stared at her while I did my lines and watched him watch her. I thought of you felt a little sick.

Why wasn't it a photo of you?

Why aren't you like that?

Why aren't you?

I left Robichaud in the hotbox and went back to the galley for second sitting. I felt sick until I had my evening shower.

And then back to my bed and the cigarettes and my decision not to think of you anymore.

LIVE YOUR OWN LIFE WILL YOU?

Swim in your pool and pull your top off and dive from the board at noon and do a dead man's float and stretch out in the sun and remove your bottoms and fall asleep until Marianne comes out to cover you in a sheet. Her black hands tuck the white around your pale skin to protect it from the sun.

What makes you so sure of me?

What makes me so afraid of you?

And always the need to sleep countered by the desire to stay awake to stretch out in my narrow bed and see the girl at Clapperton St. who gave kisses and allowed my hands to roam but refused to accept me in her games of spin the bottle in the old tent in the gulley or the boy with the big head who trapped me in front of the library and jumped on my chest until my mother tackled him hit him cried over him as she struck with an open hand and I gagged on the boardwalk welts on my back where his pounding weight had pressed me into the wood.

And what does it mean when I see you and want to slap you or take the Healey and drive it into a tree or refuse to bathe in your father's tub? What does it mean when you accuse me of being a child but turn away when I pull the satin over us or try not to enjoy it then cry at the end because it was good and wince when I touch you afterwards before we fall asleep?

And you
cruising the city

You have the money to do these things but never enough time to enjoy it. You have a duty to spend recklessly and I think you resent it. I think you resent me having a job where I save everything I earn and come off a season with 10 G's in my account year after year. Now you accuse me of loving money too much but in fact I despise it can think of nothing to do with it.

Actually: what I want to do is give all my money to you to spend.

Would you do it?

Would you accept it?

You'd be insulted.

You have your own money to spend.

I should take care of my own.

I put the cigarette out. I think of Robichaud's picture. I pull the sheet over my shoulder and kill the light.

She was in the corner by herself. Robichaud spotted her pointed gestured to me to follow.

I didn't want to be there

I didn't want to look at her

or talk to her

or have her look at me

You know what I mean you know precisely what I mean. You once said: You are afraid of me and you are right to be.

That was that.

There she was smoking legs crossed eyes lifting. She saw us, dragged on her smoke put it out reached up to accept Robichaud's kiss.

He told her who I was. We shook hands. I felt sick. Beer was ordered. We had only two hours so we chugged a few to get started.

You like Dubonnet. You like Campari. You like ouzo and chichi's and banana daiquiris and your father drinks Chivas Regal and in the photos of your mother I recall there being a bottle of Boodles. You sip whatever you drink but you make it disappear quickly. My Brador equalled three of your camparis and then we'd be in the parking lot and I'd take your wrist as we neared the Healey.

NO Let go.

Let me.

NO I SAID NO.

You'd yank away remember? not with fear or revulsion but with the powerful assurance of someone raised without restraints. You are good with people who know their place you are kind and warm and modest but you recoil from those who assume an equality exists. Don't we all? Aren't we all just a little too unique to be siblings?

Fuck you our steady undercurrent. And you are like that you are like that when we are with women who dress as well as you or who travel as freely or carry their cash in brown envelopes, the denominations neatly clipped together. You yank back. You sit straight and you order another drink and you don't twist your hair or hoist your cigarette. You stare and go quiet and after a while you are drunk and hot and agitated and silent

Then the glass comes down
a little too hard
and the chair is moved
a little too abruptly
and you're on your feet
a little too quickly
and your voice comes out
a little too loud
a little too hard
and the words are brutal in
their articulate contempt.
Don't you see?
It's so easy not to like you.

And there she is putting her glass on the terrycloth and there is
Robichaud pushing her another leaning toward her talking about
Skagway and his eyes are everywhere and his hands are on her
forearm and her arms are touching his and her face is angled
towards him and her lips are parted and her eyes are blue and her
cigarette burns in the ashtay

And I pick it up and take a pull.

Then they notice me and Robichaud passes me a beer and gives me
a wink and the talk turns to summer vacations and how long will
she be here and when will she leave and where will she go and
Robichaud is finished in October and free for five months
and their whole life is suddenly shaped
and over with.

You said you'd meet me every week. So far you've missed one and
after spending a day in The Orange then the Europa then the
Dominion and watching guys pop and guys get their faces punched
and guys show fake ID for offsale I came back to the pier and
phoned your father's place. And this time he answered and he was
drunk and that made it possible for us to talk and after telling me
you'd been out of town all week his final words were

She is never here even when she is.

and he burped

and apologized for his lack of discretion

said he didn't feel too chipper

and gently just like your father very gently

put the phone down.

And I knew we'd planned too well and you didn't like the scheme
of things even if you couldn't say it or know it on the surface of
your thinking.

All our talk of motoring south at season's end
well

it's just the way we fill the silence between arguments and love
making.

It's a fiction we create and it'll be finished

I suspect

before we are ready to make it fact.

And so we drank. And she talked and she spoke softly and
smiled and winked and laughed told jokes on herself. And
Robichaud watched her lips move and her teeth go up and down
and her eyes flit and her hands fly. He ate it all up. Consumed her
like oysters cooked in wine slowly not knowing it was merely food
not knowing it was just another hunger.

And then he rose and said he had to piss.

And she laughed.

And he laughed.

And I laughed too.

Then he was gone and I looked at her and she looked at me
and I said that she reminded me of you that it amazed me but her
hair was the same colour and I could smell it even across the table
it reminded me of the odour of blackberries and it had flecks of red
in it that she had a soft voice that it was beautiful because it
floated and I went on and on and on and on and I was really
talking to you but she took my hand and smiled

and I stopped talking

and she leaned

and so did I

and we kissed each other

and

naturally

Robichaud saw it all.

But he didn't say anything. He came back to us quietly and she turned to him and took his hand and made a bathroom joke but she was the only one to smile. Robichaud looked down and I went red

not because I'd tried to outflank him

not because I was humiliated

but because I'd said to her

what I'd never be able to say to you

and she knew it

and you didn't.

We were pretty quiet then it was time to go and we rose together but she made me know that she wanted some time with Robichaud so I went ahead and looked back from the CN overpass. They were locked together against a tree and I had to smile and I had to laugh because she looked just like you

and he didn't look anything like me

and I laughed again because I realized that

I'm the appetite

that eats me.

We barely made the ship. Robichaud was running and yelling and I was trying to keep up and we stumbled up the plank and the sun was warm and some passengers applauded our arrival and we went to my room and Robichaud was still yelling

Only 9 more

Only 9 more

Only 9 more

til the wops pounded on the bulkhead and told us to shut the fuck up. So I stretched out on my narrow bed and Robichaud stretched out below me on the newboy's and we felt the ship slip away from its berth and then there was nothing to laugh about and I wanted to say something to Robichaud

to explain you to him

or to me?

but he took out his compact and tapped it on the frame of my bunk and I leaned over to take it and I leaned over to look at him but his arm was draped over his face and I think he was crying.

I felt suddenly far far away from everything. I wanted to touch him but I couldn't and I wanted to touch you but I couldn't do that either so instead I sniffed a few. He looked up. His tears were like aggies and they rolled and dropped to the white sheet under him and his hand shook as he took the coke

and then his eyes went tight

and I think he finally understood.

His voice was softly lying

already gone used up

when he said

Those fuckers'll never get me.

I fell back on my narrow bed and locked my ankles and waited for the numbness to spread

and listened for you

and listened for me

and listened for Robichaud

but heard only the soft cool

soft cool soft cool

soft pull of water all around me.