

**Berkeley Fable 1985-87
Roy Lisker**

I.

The story of my 2 adventurous years (1985-87) as a Reader for the University of California at Berkeley Mathematics and Physics Departments is an important one. A Reader is someone hired by the department to grade homework and test papers for specific courses. The job is not as demanding as that of Teaching Assistant (TA) and brings in much-needed income to grad students strapped for cash.

Unlike the account of literary/ political radicalism at Colorado University, Boulder, 1992, which one can read at:

<http://www.fermentmagazine.org/Bio4/Boulder92.html>),

I do not always appear in my best light. People imagine that there's something wrong with a writer who frankly exposes his own failings. Yet not to do so is a crime against truth. Furthermore, the story must be told: its' implications, in all directions, social, historical, political, scientific, educational, even, in some sense epistemological, are more extensive than the CU Boulder narrative.

Harold Raffill, a staff member in his 60's at the UC Berkeley mathematics department, was responsible for assigning jobs as Teaching Assistants and Readers (paper markers) to graduate students. Harold was not mathematically inclined; in fact he'd never liked mathematics. After several years of working in the UC Berkeley math department he'd developed, quite apart from individuals with whom he had a good working relationship, a decided aversion to quite a number of mathematicians as well. Above all, he loathed the atmosphere, what one might call the "ambience" of the department.

His interests were literary. In addition to being very well read, he wrote short stories and novels. At the time I met him he was working for an MA in American Literature at San Francisco State University, which he obtained in 1987.

The ECT treatments he'd undergone for severe depression a decade or so earlier had obviously scarred his brain. These did not handicap his essentially benevolent and intelligent personality, but had left him with

learning disabilities, attention deficit problems and problems of memory loss.

In November of 1985 Harold, his wife Shirley and son, Tom, a graduate student with a talent for difficult languages, invited me to stay with them at their house on Ordway Street. Inside the premises one found an anarchist sprawl dating back several decades, where nothing was ever discarded, lost or found.

Their invitation was extended a few days after I'd been evicted from squatting (incognito) in a tool shed on a property a few blocks away from the UC Berkeley campus. Officially no-one knew that my cot and boxes were there. Unofficially a few friendly students in the building up the lawn from the tool shed did know, but looked the other way. In the city of scholars, truth goes begging.

Eviction is perhaps too strong a word. A storm had thrown down the power line just in front of the shed, and it was only a matter of a day at most that the landlord would discover that someone had been staying there. One way or another we all agreed that I had to leave.

Harold and Shirley put me up on a couch in the large left wing, a room holding a piano and filled with boxes holding books, papers and debris. I had to share my bedroom with 8 cats in widely varying states of health that had the run of the first floor. An acquaintance remarked that I probably owed my rescue from the streets to the fondness of the Raffills for stray cats! I stayed with them until July of 1987 when I moved back to the East Coast.

The central episode of this account is an extended quarrel of several chapters that erupted in the latter part of the Spring term of 1987, between myself, Harold, and both the math and physics departments. The Raffills and I got beyond it. Although leaving under a cloud in July of 1987, I returned to stay with them for several months in 1992 and again in 1996. Harold and Shirley also came to the Hudson Valley in New York State for a visit to the commune where I was living in 1991. It was a true friendship. Both of them have since died, Harold around the turn of the century, Shirley very recently. I still keep in touch with Tom. His

brother, Stuart, is a schizophrenic from birth, living in halfway houses and supportive housing, quite helpless and difficult to deal with.

II.

Since my arrival in San Francisco in September of 1983, my income had largely consisted of what I was able to earn as a street violinist (classical repertoire against Music Minus One tapes) and poet. The newsletter Ferment was launched in Boulder, Colorado in September, 1983: it cost me more money to produce than what it brought in from subscriptions (an odd way of maintaining journalistic integrity!) I often found myself sleeping at the Berkeley Support Services homeless shelter in Albany (pronounced Al'-biny), about 2 miles from the campus near the train tracks. The BSS is a labor of love for those who staff it, but it isn't very healthy, either in terms of the polluted atmosphere or the quality of the food. It was a desperate existence, the kind that only lunatics who take writing seriously ever fall into.

Once I'd moved in with the Raffills, Harold created a job for me in the Berkeley mathematics department. From February, 1985 to May, 1987 I marked homework and test papers for over half a dozen subjects being offered there. Among them were: Number Theory (taught by Sherman-Lehman); Logic (Vaught); Differential Topology (Hirsch); Additive Set Theory (Addison); Differential Equations (Chambre); Topology (Dubins); Differential Geometry (Feldman), and a few others that I don't recall; something like 10 altogether.

For the Christmas holidays and Winter Break of 1985-86 I rented a room in small hotel in Union Square, San Francisco. Here I set up a very fruitful series of planning sessions for the coming year. The more notable results of this retreat included:

(a) Writing up and sending off an abstract of a paper (Causal Algebras, written in October 1983) to the organizers of the 11th General Relativity and Gravitation Conference in Stockholm, Sweden starting July 6, 1986. I'd mistakenly believed that the fact that they'd solicited an abstract for

my paper to include in their proceedings meant that I'd been invited as a delegate.

(b) Tapes of poetry performances on KPFA and other radio stations were sent to poets and musicians, including John Cage and others.

(c) A series of satiric parodies on the marketing of modern art was planned, and appeared in Ferment in May and June, 1985 under the title "Barbarians in the Salon":

www.fermentmagazine.org/Stories/barbpreface.html

(d) To cover daily expenses I played the violin on the streets surrounding Macy's. The returns were poor but brought in enough for meals in local restaurants. This experience went into a series of "Cynical Xmas Stories" appearing in December issues of Ferment for several years.

(e) Plans for producing the booklets of "Ferment Press" were developed.

During the winter break I also went over to the Physics Department and landed another Reader job for the course on Classical Mechanics given by David Lockhart Judd (deceased 1998). Physics, in full possession of 2 buildings, LeConte and Birge (a single building connected by corridors), was more generous than Mathematics, which could claim only a few floors in Evans: Judd set me up in an office on the top floor of the building. A spacious room, it was shared with two graduate students who were rarely there. The chairman of the department at that time was Howard Shugart.

Returning to the Raffills in the first week of January 86, I began following through on plans that would take me to Europe in June to attend the GRG11 conference in Stockholm, Sweden on July 6. The famous mathematician Rene Thom had sent me a letter praising my paper "Causal Algebras"; it would turn out to be very valuable in getting me admitted to the conference.

Desirous of avoiding the risk associated with carrying my violin around Europe (worth about \$2500) Harold and I went to a violin rental

store on University Avenue where I rented a clod-hopper of a violin for street performances in Europe. Harold co-signed the contract, in which I agreed to pay the full cost of the violin (\$350, highway robbery) if it were lost or damaged.

Now an “official member of the Berkeley Community (*which touts itself as the “Marketplace of Ideas”*) made me the beneficiary of many perks: reduced admission to theatres, concerts and cinemas, discounts on a wide variety of goods and services, use of the practice rooms in the music department, and use of the campus travel services center in Sproul Plaza. There I bought a Eurorail pass, valuable for one month after its first use. Some photographers from Paris I’d met when they were passing through Berkeley offered to put me up in June.

Arrival in Paris around June 10th. A few days I met with Rene Thom at the Ecole Polytechnique. Before going in to attend his lecture, Thom invited me to lunch with him and some colleagues in Bures-sur-Yvette, home for the French Institute for Advanced Studies. Over a glass of wine in a nearby café, Thom discussed my article with me; he also cited it in

his talk. More details are available in the account in Ferment:

www.fermentmagazine.org/Bio/thom.html

Before heading up to Sweden I took my violin on a whirlwind tour through Sens, Dijon, Lyons, Valence, Avignon and Cannes. Returning to Paris at the end of June, the Eurorail pass was used for the first time on July 2nd to board a train at the Gare de l'Est for Cologne, Copenhagen and Stockholm.

Arrival in Stockholm 5 AM, July 5th. A note advertising a summer hostel operating in a dance academy was posted on a bulletin board in the train station; I stayed there about two nights. That afternoon I went to the Følketshus, the conference hall where the GRG11 would take place, to meet with one of its organizers, K. Rosquist . Rosquist, who was just doing his job, explained that although the GRG11 had solicited the abstract of my paper for inclusion in their proceedings, this meant nothing: I would have to pay about \$300 to participate in the conference and there was no arrangement for me to give a talk.

I showed him the letter of recommendation from Thom, the preamble to raising the volume as I delivered an impassioned plea, bemoaning the effort and money it had cost me to *come all the way from California under the impression that I would be admitted to the conference!* Rosquist didn't know how to deal with this, so he turned me over to the principle organizer Dr. B. Laurent.

Laurent sized up the situation at a glance; luckily, he was sympathetic to gypsy philosophers like myself. He invited me to breakfast the next morning; there he would let me know if I'd received a "scholarship" for the conference. Over breakfast I asked him about the scholarship; we both laughed!

After he'd inquired about my housing arrangements we worked on the matter of the best way of presenting my article to the delegates at the GRG11. Of course I wasn't one of the invited speakers. Another possibility, which we both rejected, was the 15-minute slot format, in which graduate students rush onto the stage, mumble the abstract of their research and either be cut off or run back down. We concluded that

the best vehicle for my ideas was a poster session. The GRG11 would supply the large pieces of stiff cardboard and all the stationary artifacts.

Pasting together a poster session from the contents of 4 copies of my article took up most of the rest of the day. Arrows, with commentary written in red ink, ran between the various sections. The article in its entirety dangled from the top of one of the boards on a copper wire. The result was very successful: The pages of *Causal Algebras* were perused by a number of people; and valuable contacts established.

One of them was with Dolf van Rede, professor in Electrical Engineering at the Eindhoven University of Technology in Eindhoven, world headquarters for the Phillips Corporation. When not attending the talks at the conference, he, myself and another newly acquired friend, Elizabeth Spens, walked together around Stockholm. They covered my meals; Elizabeth found me a place to stay in the living room of a friend. To make spending money I gave violin concerts in the Stockholm subways (Gangtunnels) and in the public square below the concert hall.

It was at the GRG11 that I got my first (nauseating) taste of String Theory from a talk by Michael Green. Roger Penrose sold me a text on twistor theory.

Elizabeth took me to the Strindberg Museum, drove me around the famous “modified ellipse” cloverleaf designed by Piet Hein, and introduced me to Stockholm’s Bohemian universe. She, her brother and I had dinner in the Mossebacke Gardens. Dolf and Elizabeth and I also visited the Old City where I gave an impromptu concert at the memorial statue of the composer Tor Aulin.

The delegates to the conference received an invitation to a banquet in the Stockholm City Hall; afterwards we were given a tour through the rooms where the Nobel Prize ceremonies are held. A detailed, albeit surrealist account of the GRG11 conference can be read on Ferment Magazine at <http://www.fermentmagazine.org/Bio/grg.html>

Before he left, Dolf invited me to visit him and his wife in Neunen, Holland before returning to the US. The Eurorail pass was still good, so I traveled to Copenhagen, Hamburg, and Heidelberg. On the way to

Eindhoven I stopped over at a clinic in Freiburg to visit the son of some friends from Philadelphia. Dolf met me at the Eindhoven train station and drove me out to Neunen.

My money was just about used up. After I'd spent 3 fruitless days giving violin concerts in downtown Eindhoven, Dolf surprised me by presenting me with a plane ticket to Newark, flying out of Brussels on People's Express!

From Newark I went to the Hudson Valley, and from thence to Philadelphia, St Louis, Denver and Boulder, CO. These journeys took 4 days and I got very little sleep. One can easily construct some idea of the state of exhaustion I was in: in 6 months I'd gone from: sleeping in sheds, parks; homeless shelters; marking papers in both the math and physics departments at UC Berkeley; putting out a monthly newsletter Ferment; raising subscriptions up and down California; hitch-hiking through France giving street concerts; likewise (with Eurorail pass) in Germany, Denmark and Sweden; delivering a paper at a major conference in theoretical physics; then traveling back to the US via

Eindhoven, Brussels and Newark, combining buses with street music in the Hudson Valley, Philadelphia, St Louis and Boulder.

This retrospective is intended as:

(1) A sincere account of my febrile state, the result of my t
dedication to the revitalization the decadent culture of the West; and

(2) A miserably self-serving rationale for my decision to sell the
violin to a pawn broker in Denver, because I simply could not play
another note, I was broke, and had no way to get back to Berkeley.

In fact there was no dishonesty in this. I knew that a good job was
still being held for me in Berkeley for the Fall term. The cost of replacing
the violin would be \$350 (far more than it was worth); I simply added the
expense to the travel costs of a 2 month sojourn to Europe.

The dishonesty came later, when I dumped half the bill into the lap
of Harold Raffill without even telling him that the debt was pending.

Even this can be excused, if not condoned, by the fact that I had kept up
the payments, covering \$200 of the debt; that the jobs at Berkeley (a
shade the wrong side of legality at the best of times) vanished as quickly

as they'd arisen. When this happened I had only a few days in which to pack my things and return to the Hudson Valley, where a position was waiting for me on the staff of a conference center, Boughton Place, in Highland, New York. As stated above, we got past this. Now for the details:

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Part 2

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After more than a year's experience as a paper marker, I had gained confidence in being able to grade homework and tests in just about any course in Mathematics that was not too advanced, including all undergraduate subjects and several graduate ones . In Physics my background was not so extensive. When I offered to grade papers for Stanley Mandelstam's course on Quantum Field Theory it became apparent very quickly that Quantum Theory is not the same as Quantum

Field Theory, about which I knew nothing. This, and many other (negative!) holes in my background have since been filled (a pun for the knowing!)) .

This does not mean that I'd studied all of the subjects I was grading. What it means is that my background in basic mathematics was sufficiently strong that I could learn most subjects from a combination of the material in the textbook and the solutions, proofs and answers in the homework papers of the good students. As for classical mechanics, I first studied this subject in 1955, and have continually renewed acquaintance with it, most recently in 2009 through the magnificent text of Cornelius Lanczos ("The Variational Principles of Classical Mechanics").

A challenge to my working methods arose however in the Spring term of 1987. Harold had passed me the job of marking a course being given by Paul Chambre covering the application of Lie Algebras to the solution of Differential Equations. The subject is unusual in being both *practical* (Differential Equations) and *advanced* (Lie Groups and

Algebras). This makes it different from much of mathematics, which is not practical when it is advanced (The Poincaré Conjecture) or not very advanced when it is practical (Differential Equations).

Anyway the subject Chamber was teaching is known as Prolongation Theory. I would eventually learn all about it in 1992 through studying a book by Peter Olver: "Applications of Lie Groups to Differential Equations".

The paper-marking methods I'd developed up to then did not work in this case. Paul Chamber didn't use a textbook, and the solutions to the problems in the homework gave me no guide for knowing what was and was not correct; from the materials at my disposal I could not learn the essentials of the subject. Inexorably, the unmarked papers accumulated on my desk for a month or so; eventually the day arrived when my ego would be succumb to the elemental truth that I didn't know the subject, couldn't learn it on short notice, and would have to give the papers back to Harold so that he could quickly find a graduate student able to mark them.

This would have happened, had not another factor of a totally different character intervened that would ultimately bring my employment to an end. That factor was the mutual antagonism between myself and the chairman of the Mathematics Department, John W.

Anderson. (I'm thinking at this point that people who know both myself and Anderson would throw up their hands in exasperation and cry:

"God, Roy: what else could you expect?")

Anderson didn't like non-standard human beings; apparently he nourished a private animosity towards me in particular. From a friend on the math department office staff, a grad student from the Philippines, I learned that Anderson had (like Javert in *Les Miserables*) made the goal of getting me out of the department into a personal holy cause. He also told me about Anderson's hostility towards Affirmative Action or any other program designed to help minorities to get degrees in mathematics.

Anderson's hostility to me was reciprocated, with this important difference: that mine was shared by almost everyone else who had anything to do with the department. John W. Anderson was ponderous

and over-bearing, rarely listened what people said to him - something of a bully, as it would turn out. The basic problem seems to have been that his excessive suspiciousness made him easy to take advantage of, a natural object for practical jokes, something of a figure of fun.

I fell into this trap you see, and it cost me dearly. Anderson had been putting pressure on Harold to hire more graduate students before bringing in Readers from the outside. I'd actually worked for Anderson in 1986, grading papers for his course in Additive Set Theory. Everything I know about this subject was learned from grading his papers.

It is not a difficult subject, rather it is one of those branches of mathematics which elicit the response "So What?" from me. This is highly subjective. In fact, virtually every mathematician has a private list of areas of mathematics which elicit the response "So what?" . A mathematician who thinks "So what?" about the Poincare Conjecture, may risk his career (his very life!) in defense of the importance for the survival of mankind of Fermat's Last Theorem. So I hardly hold it

against Anderson that a subject of the highest importance to him, *Additive Set Theory*, should be on my "So What?" list.

At my first and only real meeting with him about this job, he assured me that if I had any difficulties with the subject I should see him. I made the mistake of trying this once. The withering glare of suspicion that emerged out from under his dark brows made it clear to me that I'd best pretend that I was an expert in the field if I wanted to hold onto my job. There is no doubt that Anderson was challenged in simple human relations.

However it was the confluence of his bad side with my bad side that produced the catastrophe. Even as I was delaying the moment when I would have to let Harold know that I couldn't mark the homework from *Chambre's* course, Anderson was delaying the official authorization which would allow me to draw an income from doing so. However it was understood that this was just a formality, and that once I started returning the graded papers I would be paid. In fact, Anderson sent me a note asking when the papers would be ready.

What I did instead was to return a note stating that I couldn't work on Chambre's papers until I'd received official confirmation that I was being employed to do so. My intent – and I confess it was a bad one – was to embarrass Anderson while getting off the hook of being unable to do the work itself.

My behavior showed a signal lack of common sense, because Anderson's immediate reaction was to storm into Harold's office and wipe the floor with him. He let Harold know in no uncertain terms, that he had to *immediately* stop employing *anyone* who was not a grad student in good standing *in the department*. I could keep my other jobs until the end of the term; then I had to go – *or else!* Harold was given a lecture about his lack of thoroughness. It was part of his job, he learned, to put notices in the mailboxes of grad students, to call them up, to get them to make appointments to see him in his office, to urge the Reader and TA jobs on them. Harold was instructed to be relentless in seeing to it that nothing was to be farmed out to anyone outside the department, even students enrolled in other departments at UCB! Anderson let

Harold know that his job was on the line. He did concede that I'd done a satisfactory job when working for him the year before!

One has to understand that I've been essentially at war with conventional university mathematics departments since the disasters at the University of Pennsylvania in the 50's (The subject of my novel, *Getting That Meal Ticket*, which can be read at [www.fermentmagazine.org/Meal Ticket/Meal.doc](http://www.fermentmagazine.org/Meal%20Ticket/Meal.doc) and [www.fermentmagazine.org/Meal Ticket/ticket.html](http://www.fermentmagazine.org/Meal%20Ticket/ticket.html))

and that such wars are particularly savage when dealing with petty tyrants who are chairmen of such departments. I will not dwell on the saga of deceit and dirty tricks of my dealing with Paul Zuckermann at SUNY New Paltz in 1981; let sleeping dogs lie.

But the end result of all this was that my childish whim had lead to a potential financial catastrophe for my chief benefactor in Berkeley , someone who furthermore was in whole-hearted agreement with my criticisms of universities and mathematics departments, yet who, like all of us, needed to hold down a steady job to survive!

Okay: I was not asked to leave the Raffill household, though Harold did indicate that he needed the room where I was staying by the end of July. Clearly what happened had influenced his decision, but he probably would have told me the same thing in any case. It was a matter of finishing up the term. There would be no more paper marking jobs coming out of Mathematics.

We now turn to the quite different, though somewhat analogous situation in the Physics Department. I'd picked up a job as a Reader from David Judd, an authority on fusion physics, who needed someone to grade papers in Classical Mechanics. The chairman of this department at the time was Howard Shugart. I would not characterize Shugart with any of the adjectives I've reserved for Anderson. In fact, I would say that he was personable, easy to get along with, a good negotiator and essentially friendly. His problem was, as I saw it, that, like its linguistic correlatives, his "universe" was contained in his "university". As I wrote in a Ferment article at about that time, "The universe he finds in the laboratory looks like a laboratory".

He knew that the office I was using on the top of the Physics buildings was also being used for the production of my newsletter, Ferment and the books of Ferment Press. That alone was enough to lead Shugart to conclude that I was a complete crank, the kind of fearsome person that infests the nightmares of physics departments. At the end of the term, when the job was over and I had to pack up and leave, he told others that "he" would, at last, be moving "his junk" out of the department. He had no personal malice against me, rather he had the kind of compassion that the good-hearted person shows to the incompetent, handicapped and diseased.

Judd, the person who'd hired me to grade Classical Mechanics, didn't feel that way. In fact, he hinted that he might be able to find me a bit of office space even after the term and my job were over. He let me know that I could continue to hold onto the office until the Monday after some weekend in July. On the other hand, Shugart wanted me out by 12 noon of the Friday before that weekend.

To my mind the issue was not all that important; the office wasn't needed for anyone else and I didn't think that a mere extension of a weekend would matter that much. It did: Shugart wanted my "Ferment Press trash" out right away. When he learned that I'd not moved out by noon on Friday, he sent the campus cops to arrest me for trespassing. As stated above, Shugart was not malevolent in the way Anderson was; he just didn't want cranks around his department.

A number of unusual things happened at this point: the campus cops, one very burly man, and a woman who'd always been rather friendly to me as she passed me giving violin concerts in Sproul Plaza, took me down to Physics headquarters to let the staff know that I was being taken into custody. It turned out that a grad student worked in the office, who had overheard Judd give me permission to retain the office until the following Monday. He told this to the police.

The burly cop wanted to pull me in anyway, but the student and policewoman prevailed on him to allow me to make a phone call to Judd to clear up the matter.

Judd of course knew that Shugart had told me I had to be out by Friday afternoon: once again I was merely indulging in my hobby of twitting administrations. After talking to me he spoke to the cops, and to the security officer assigned to the physics department. An agreement was reached that I could pack up my things in boxes and leave them in one of the attics of the physics buildings to be picked up the next day.

Saturday morning I returned to campus to collect my books and papers. Soon after I'd left Ordway Street, Judd made a phone call there to ask when I would be coming by to get them. The phone was answered by Harold Raffil. He was not in a good mood.

Harold cursed him out right and left, informing him that the physicists at Berkeley got rich through the blood money they earned from designing the atomic bomb and other weapons, that I was their victim, that the universities had ruined Roy's life, that Judd and company were, in fact, just the latest in a long line of villains determine to wreck any hope for original minds like myself to get anywhere in the university system!

I learned all about this later from Harold. He was quite apologetic about the tirade and felt somewhat ashamed that he'd lost his temper . Of course, getting a bit of office space from the Physics Department was now out of the question.

A phone call to Boughton Place, a commune near New Paltz, NY I'd lived in around 1981 was enough to secure a room and staff position in September. A dozen cardboard boxes were mailed parcel post and I set off (by bus through Monterey, Santa Cruz, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles and Santa Fe) for Boulder, Colorado, where I spent the month of August. In September I traveled to St Louis, Missouri to attend a "Beat Poetry Festival" in Lawrence, Kansas

<http://www.fermentmagazine.org/essays/beatnik.html>)

, then the Rainbow Gathering in Mark Twain National Forest, and a conference on Chaos and Fractals at the University of Cincinnati

<http://www.fermentmagazine.org/essays/cincinnati.pdf>).

The unhappy situation with regards to the remaining unpaid debt for the violin has been mentioned; it did not in the long run interfere

with my friendship with the Raffills, who'd rescued me from the streets and the scorn of the big, bad university.

There are many conclusions to be drawn from this extraordinary account; rather than do so myself, I invite everyone to draw their own.

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