

#1...

**Blues For Christian Hermann
or "Pass Me That Enchilada"
Report on "River City Reunion"
The Beat Generation Poetry Festival
University of Kansas
Lawrence, Kansas
September 13, 1987
Roy Lisker**

Invariably, the wilderness spawns magnificent and exotic grotesques. With prolonged drought arrive familiar symptoms of euphoria, delusions and hallucinations in which ecstasy and acute suffering are commingled. One can cite the ravishing recitatives of Olivier Messiaen's "Quarter For The End Of Time". These, he claimed, were transcriptions of the sound hallucinations he'd experienced from days of starvation in a German prison camp. Frequently there will be a more direct expression of one's misery through inflation of the culinary imagination. Dreams of fabulous banquets, interminable successions of succulents, sauces and delicacies will gratify the mind while the stomach burns with pain.

Accounts written by former prisoners of war relate how groups of inmates of the camps would gather around a heel of bread to conjure up dinners at 5-star restaurants, feasts at the courts of Persia and Cathay, the gluttonous orgies of ancient Rome, stupendous creations of French *haute cuisine*, all from the pieces of crust and crumbs picked out of this one ragged scrap of dough and handed around with scrupulous care.

Similar phenomena are to be found in the cultural sphere, and for much the same reasons. *Cultural* starvation, extreme and prolonged such as existed at the edge of the American frontier for a few centuries, has been known to translate itself into excesses born of desperation. These have contributed shape the art of this country, giving it a distinctive identity vis-a-vis its

#2...

European roots: notably those characteristics which snobs, critics, professors, aesthetes, snobs and a timid public uncertain of its own judgment have termed "primitive".

Primitive Art - by which one means the paintings of Grandma Moses and *Le Douanier Rousseau* , (not the highly sophisticated classical art of African sculpture) , has been, until quite recently, at the heart of America's contributions to the arts. As a confirming example, one can point to the extent to which American jazz, the only musical language in history with universal appeal, has conquered the world. There exist tiny villages in Uzbekistan proud of their home-grown rock bands!

Wastelands come in for their due. The Missourian T.S. Eliot may speak of the roots that clutch, the cricket giving no relief, the dearth of running water, fear in a handful of dust. Yet cactus and sagebrush are , in their own way, every bit as beautiful, even as "pretty" as the overly mannerist tulip and the rose, (ruined as they are through centuries of genetic selection). It's more than a little wrong-headed to deplore our wastelands without having examined the inventory of their bizarre tormented gems.



A ride along route 70 through western Kansas can uncover many peculiar memorials, eloquent tributes to the heroic efforts of souls struggling in considerable isolation to give expression to their artistic visions. Soon after crossing the Colorado border into Kansas one reaches the town of Oakley. Opinion in Oakley is divided over the role (if any) , played by the redoubtable Annie Oakley in its. What is definitely known is that it was a popular hangout for sharks and dinosaurs in the Tertiary Age before the great extinction. Bones abound in the region, some thousands of which have found their way into the display cases of the Fick Fossil and History Museum , or in reconstructions of their theoretical distribution within the genealogies of vanished beasts.

#3...

What rivets the attention of its visitors are not the menacing bulk of old skeletons, nor the 11,000 shark teeth, but the hundreds of *fossil paintings* , mosaics fashioned by Mrs. Fick by patiently gluing thousands of bone splinters to wood or cloth panels. These tableaux, clearly the labor of love of an unschooled amateur, deploy a subject matter randomly gleaned from the annals history, mythology, religion, political, commentary and sheer imagination.

The absence of formal competence signifies the presence of an artist completely cut off from the centers of culture, from teachers, schools, professional artists or museums. The notion of "technique" could not have been anything more than a vague abstraction. Yet another clutching root under the shadow of the red rock, fear in a handful of dust

Getting back onto the road: from miles away one can already see the 50 meter high towers of the St. Fidelis Cathedral, otherwise known as the Cathedral of the Plains. We travel along the highway another 50 miles then turn off near the town of Hays. Proceeding along another two miles brings one to the hamlet of Victoria. It was so named by English blue bloods of the 19th century, for whom it was a vacation resort for equestrian activities. The cathedral is located in wheat fields on the outskirts of the town.

The builders of this massive imitation-Gothic church had even less to do with British aristocrats than did Annie Oakley with prehistoric dinosaurs. They were all descendants of Russian and German immigrant farmers. Following in the traditions of the Middle Ages they toiled for many decades to erect this solemn and splendid edifice, finding such time as they could from the work of cultivating the fields which surround it.

The building was completed in 1908. Craftsmen were then brought over from Munich for the painting, decoration, and the installation of stained glass windows and panels. Since then it has stood, in a perhaps ludicrous yet

#4...

altogether imposing presence in the silence of cornfields, grasslands, silos, fences, warehouses, roads.

We return to the highway to continue our search for further evidences of the artistic heritage of pioneer Kansas. After another 50 miles we turn north to the tiny town of Lucas, renowned for its "Garden of Eden" . It will turn out to be Mrs. Fick all over again, though immensely amplified through enterprise and sheer imaginative power.

Not all eccentric persons are conceited, not all conceit breeds eccentricity- yet one often finds the two united in a single person. Colonel (so he claimed) S.P. Dinsmoor, a veteran of the Civil War married, at the age of 81, a woman of 20 before retiring to this desolate edge of Kansas. Here he devoted the rest of his life to the agglutination of an American primitive *Merzbau* (*global sculptural environments in the spirit of a work of Kurt Schwitters destroyed by Allied bombing in WWII.*)

The Dinsmoor house is constructed from stone blocks shaped to resemble wooden logs, and indeed at a distance one does have the impression of coming to a log cabin. The entire estate, grounds , fences and railings, and the interior of the house from basement to attic, are overstuffed with innumerable allegorical groups of dreadfully misshapen statues. Their themes are classical, Biblical, historical, political, personal: *The Garden of Eden, The Soldier and the Indian , The Trusts versus Liberty, Joan of Arc ...* In the garden one may visit an American flag composed from concrete blocks.

Some of these monumental pageants of were designed to make money. One example is noteworthy: Dinsmoor gave every window in the house a unique shape, size and location relative to the foundations of the house. His explanation was that since were expected people to pay good money, they ought to get their full money's worth.

#5...

The garden holds a crypt, with windows through which one may see coffins holding what is left of the rotting remains of Colonel Dinsmoor and his wife. An accompanying plaque reads:

" I have a will that none should go in to see me for less than a dollar ... if ... I see the dollar, I will give them a smile."

One dollar was a lot of money in his day. Despite the binding nature of the will, time and necessity have pushed the price up to \$1.50. Perhaps the additional 50 cents covers the increased property taxes.

My tour of the sites of primitive art in western Kansas was accomplished in September of 1983. My tour guide for the occasion was a woman named Adele, a Vedanta devotee who kindly drove me from Boulder, Colorado all the way to St. Louis after our mutual attendance at a Buddhist-Christian interfaith symposium at the Naropa Institute.



A glide-reflection in space-time will advance the narrative exactly 4 years to September 1987. Route 70 is flipped over to put the starting point of the itinerary at St. Louis, Missouri, from which I will be returning in the reverse direction to the city of Lawrence, Kansas. The time is 6 A.M. Saturday, September 13th, 1987. Waiting in the apartment of a friend, Kenn Thomas, in the fashionable West End of St. Louis. (He should not be accused of being a member of the plutocracy; his wife is the building manager) , we waited for Phil Gounis to arrive in the car that would take us to Lawrence.

Both Kenn and Phil were archivists (Kenn still is) at the St. Louis extension of the University of Missouri. Both were fanatic collectors of the artistic artifacts of their own times, maintaining in their homes mammoth accumulations of books, files, records, tapes, videos, clippings, magazines and other items relating to the counter-culture-shaman-guru-prophet-Messiaoids of modern America, those best minds of our times destroyed by madness: *Bob Dylan, Allan Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, Abbie Hoffman, John Cage, William Burroughs, Gordon Alpert (Ram Das) ...*

#6..



Apart from the fact the Lawrence was the only city to declare war on itself in the Civil War, why should we have wanted to go there?

Because of a gathering! (gathering! (gathering!))

of Beatniks! (Beatniks!(Beatniks).

A gathering of beatniks! (gathering of beatniks! (gathering of beatniks!)))

being brought to you LIVE at the University of Kansas ,

(in Lawrence, Kansas) under the management of

Dr. Wedge , (English professor

(at the University of Kansas, (in Lawrence, Kansas)))).

Allan Ginsberg!! Anne Waldman!! Timothy Leary!! Peter Orlovsky!!

William Burroughs!! Michael McClure!! Diane Di Prima!! Jello Biafra!! Jim Carroll!! John Giorno!!

All of us (us who are us, naturally) have read, seen or listened to most of them in years gone by. They're an interesting bunch , though some of them can get tiresome with repetition. It hardly seemed like enough motivation for investing 10 hours, \$30 for gas, bills in restaurants, and from \$12 to \$20 for tickets , just to hear a gang of beat writers whose medium and message have changed but little in 30 years.

The reason that this event was special was not: "*The Beats Are Coming!*", but : "*The Beats Are Coming to LAWRENCE, KANSAS!* "

Lawrence, you may recall, (no one holds it against you if you don't) was the setting chosen by CBS for its gigantic *nukesploitation* flop : *The Day After* . Among all mid-West middle American college towns it is the most middle.

Imagine the possibilities! Peter Orlovsky wanders across the campus of Lawrence U., offering to suck cocks. Timothy Leary is arrested for dropping acid at the busiest intersection in town on Massachusetts Avenue. John Giorno

#7...

shouts his memorable Ode: "Scum and Slime" ! to R.O.T.C. cadets. Ann Waldman and Diana Di Prima wade to give their poetry readings at Liberty Hall, through streets thronged with blond collegiate skirt-and-sweater drum majorettes of sparkling teeth and beribboned irises, who stare at them and stay things like : "They look weird. " or "Where's a cop?"

By itself Lawrence is worth at least one visit. Taken in combination with the beatnik onslaught, the excursion fully merited the title, "Blues for Christian Herman?"

But who is Christian Herman?

In 1987 (when the original version of this article was produced) , Christian Herman lived in St. Louis where she edited a DaDaktic publication dubbed "Velocity". Its publication record was rather unexceptional: about one issue per decade. She'd planned to come with us but changed her mind. Her ticket was waiting at the box office of Liberty Hall; so that I might imbibe 4 hours of warmed-over Beat Poetry, I became Christian Herman for the occasion.

The Blues are as much for me as they are for her. On the other hand:

What is the thing with this enchilada? .. Read on...

Sitting alone in the back of Phil Gounis's car, I clutched a violin, a tape recorder, and a suitcase holding *Music Minus One* cassette tapes and camera-ready manuscripts of Ferment Press books and old copies of Ferment I intended to flog on the campus of Kansas U. Kenn and Phil were in the front of course, involved in a non-stop conversation that went on for 5 hours as we traveled from the *Gateway To The West* to the *Town Of Quantrell's Raiders* . I was happy to listen as they exchanged the latest in counter-cultural gossip. A sampling:

In an interview for Mother Earth News, Allan Ginsberg lamented that reasons of health obliged him to give up bagels, gefilte fish and matzo ball soup

.

#8...

Bob Dylan had recently enraged the government of Israel - Peres to be exact - by not showing up for an appointment to visit the Wailing Wall.

John Simon had likewise enraged militant blacks everywhere by cutting a record in South Africa.

Then my hosts began working through the complications of a weird contretemps having to do with experiments with psychedelic drugs involving Timothy Leary, the C.I.A. and John Jay Chapman.

Timothy Leary was starting up his own computer software company. Its first project would be a make-your-own movie kit dubbed "Cyberpunk". Its cast of stars included, of all people, Gordon Liddy.

The creator of the "Captain Marvel" comic book series had filed a lawsuit to have his artwork returned .

Somebody had a theory that LSD had been distilled from the fallout from atomic bombs.

Ram Das was carrying on an affair with a "holy woman". She claimed to have received the stigmata in her gums.....

I knew nothing about any of these important developments. Without my annual visits to St. Louis and Kenn Thomas I would be totally uninformed about the counter-culture. The editor of Ferment just goes through the proper channels, brings home the bacon and does his thing , if you dig my meaning. Like, cool.

I know less about the counter-culture than I do about culture. In fact, when I hear the word "counter-culture" I begin target practice with my revolver on tin cans.

Careening into the heart of downtown Lawrence brought us to within a few blocks of the campus. The first of many squat humdrumogenous pedagogical fortresses burgeoned on the horizon:

"My God!", I yelled, " They've finally constructed a university building that looks just like a Holiday Inn !"

#9...

Beyond this defensive wall there stalked an assortment of hallowed halls of Victorian pseudo-Gothic that brought to mind a stage reconstruction of Sarastro's temple in some hokey production of *The Magic Flute* . Our destination was the Jayhawk Bookstore located inside the Student Union. To get to it we had to pass through a glum sequence of antechambers. Small grouplets of students, lost in random walks or slouching on couches, stared at us with inquisitive boredom, an occasional face lighting up with recognition that we were identified as delegates to the River City Reunion beat poetry conference .

Inside the store we learned that the first book-signing event was scheduled to begin in one hour. This gave us time to do some pleasant browsing. Works by beat writers adorned a dozen tables. Lots of Kerouac naturally. A single table had been set aside for writers native to Kansas. Kenn and Phil had brought books with them that they wanted signed. Unfortunately I had to leave them at that point to return to the center of Lawrence and (literally) *scrape* up the money for dinner and the cost of admission to the poetry reading at Liberty Hall that night at 8 . We arranged to meet at the Paradise Cafe for dinner at 6.

There is comfort to be drawn from the recognition that the percentage of residents on this planet who are as crazy as I am is about equal to the ratio of the height of the Empire State Building to the distance to Mars. If anyone out there wishes, after reading this, to live the way I do, welcome aboard the *Narrenschiff*. There's always room for one more. The day was laid out before me as follows:

First a quick run into town to buy a violin string, and a stroll through Lawrence to find good locations for doing street music. Lunch, quick and cheap.

#10...

A visit to one of the 3 outlets of *Kinko's Copies* to print up a few copies of small books on Bach, Handel, Mozart, and Einstein. Campus door-to-door sales to faculty and students.

A race back into town to retrieve violin and tape recorder from Phil's car. Two hours of street music.

Dinner with Kenn and Phil at 6.

At 8 I turn into Christian Hermann and listen to poetry for 4 hours.

Needless to say, life has yet to go according to schedule. In the best of circumstances life proceeds according to a schedule of which we're unaware. Most often, life neither proceeds according to schedule, nor do we know what it is or isn't.

Purchasing a new violin A- string was the least of my problems: 3 music stores stood next to one another on the same block. My walkaroundtown was also speedily accomplished. "downtown" in Lawrence consists of 12 blocks along a single street, Massachusetts Ave. The entrance to the University of Kansas is on 13th, the auditorium of Liberty Hall down at 5th.

And Mass Ave holds few surprises: a tree-lined succession of shops typical of most prosperous suburban college towns. It holds no good venues for street music or similar crafts : no shopping centers, malls, busy intersections, piazzas, crowded bus stops. The best I could hope would be some shaded corner storefront in the shade, its entrance facing away from the street.

I ate lunch in the Paradise Cafe, a counter-cultural health food store with good cooks, tiny portions and outrageous prices. We will be returning to the Paradise later that night. And there was a branch of *Kinko's Copies* on Vermont Ave., just 3 blocks away.

For a brief moment it seemed as if the gods had smiled (or at least S.P. Dinsmoor had smiled) upon me. Ah! Foolish stripling! Has a long and dismal interaction with the personnel of *Kinko's Copies* , in concessions straddling

#11...

the nation from Berkeley to Philadelphia, from Santa Cruz to Cincinnati, (from San Diego out to Maine!) taught you nothing? How many hours have you wasted in waiting as each employee in turn made the discovery of his (her) ignorance of how to use the electric stapler? Has it ever once happened that you've handed a properly formatted camera-ready one-to-two-sided manuscript for a booklet over the counter, and received a correctly paginated copy in less than 4 fuck-ups?

Reflect upon the many times in which these same personnel have rejected manuscripts that had been copied successfully at *PIP*, *Copyrite*, *Gnomon*, *CopyCat*, *Minuteman*, *Speedy Copy* and most other copy shops, with the solemn rebuke (delivered with the weighty authority of less than 2 hours training in pushing two buttons) that: *You've collated it incorrectly*.

In the distinguished tradition of concession chains everywhere, the managers of *Kinko's Copies* have gleefully sacrificed the angels of quality to the devils of speed. At least ninety percent of the workload on a typical day consists of large bulk orders of a single one-sided page: for example, 2000 copies of a one-page ad announcing the opening of a new pizza parlour down the street.

For such work one doesn't need to learn how to push more than two buttons: the first registers the number 2000, the second starts the machine. The training of Kinko personnel doesn't go beyond the acquisition of this skill.

Beyond that, even a single complication, like making a reduction, feeding colored papers or card stock, working the staple machines, making back-to-back copies, demand the services of a specialist. It is rarely possible to find someone who knows how to do all of them. (I actually met one in Philadelphia).

Kinko's Copies concessions can draw obscene profits on volume alone. Therefore their managers don't give a damn. The mean employment timespan can't be more than a month and may be closer to two weeks. Many of their copy

#12...

clerks are students in the college towns where they tend to be located. While reflecting that such work is far below their intellectual station, they cheerfully botch any job requiring even a moment's attention.

The two young women at the first Kinko's shop I visited in Lawrence took an entire hour to reproduce a single 20-page (corresponding to a 40-page booklet in the finished product) back-to-back camera-ready manuscript. They worked together as a team: whenever one of them made a mistake they threw away the whole order and started over again from the beginning. Although the Molochian machine confronting them held 30 or more buttons and dials for doing every sort of back-to-back or collated manuscript, each of my pages was fed into the machine with embarrassing care.

By 1:30 PM I had exactly one copy of a book of essays on Bach, Handel and Mozart. How foolishly I'd assumed that all 3 books would be done by 1 o'clock! One of the young ladies behind the counter examined my second manuscript: *In Memoriam Einstein*, an account of the Einstein Centennial Symposium at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 1979.

"I can't print this."

"Why not?"

"It says copyright on the first page. You have to get permission from Mr. Roy Lisker. Is he around?"

"I'm Roy Lisker. These are my books."

"Oh, all right then. Show me your ID card."

"I haven't got any ID on me. All these manuscripts, including the one you just copied, have my name on them. Everything in my backpack has my name on it."

"Then I can't print it. If you weren't Roy Lisker, I'm sure he would appreciate the protection I'm giving him."

"But I am Roy Lisker."

"I believe you. But you must show me some proof you're you."

#13...

On the wall to her left was hung a large poster holding a larger-than-life image of George Washington. His stubby forefinger was pointed directly at me, and his mouth was turned up in a snarl:

*ATTENTION: IF YOU REPRODUCE COPYRIGHTED
MATERIAL, YOU MAY BE BREAKING FEDERAL LAW!*

Because of the hour wasted on the product of the booklet on Bach, Handel and Mozart, and the half hour wasted on debating the legality of printing my 80 report on the Einstein Symposium it was now 2 PM. I left the store and ran to another Kinko's located on the university campus. There another young woman got the Einstein book right after only two tries, not bad for Kinko's. By 3 PM, at a cost of \$7, (very high at the time for a college town) the merchandise was ready, though selling was out of the question. Somehow I had to find a way to wing it on the fiddle playing.

PART II

Yet another one of those Beat Poet extravaganzas !! Once again the same line of brand-name detergents shipped express to generic supermarkets! How many more decades will this ghoulish mash of nihilistic hedonism, Zen-Tantric pseudo-Orientalism, mind-depleting drugs and pederasty oppress the American soul? How much longer will it captivate the mytho-poetic consciousness of a drunk empire?

*Onward The Plastic Renaissance! America's Flayed Imagination! Torn
,Like Raw Beef Livers , to Shreds By The Claws Of The Ravenous Vultures Of
Media Blitz ! Dispersed Like Chaff Through Mammoth Mountains Of Mental
Mush , Jingles And Jingoism, Moldy Politics, Religious Dogmatae , Cracker
Barrel Cant, Psychiatric Superstition and Paradigmatic Anorexia
(Self-induced cultural starvation caused by the scholastic worship of a barren
handful of classical paradigms.).....*

#14...

To this ongoing nightmare the Beats have provided the palliatives of sado-masochistic nonsense, destroying mind, body, soul and nuts through the pursuit of dementing thrills, thereby hoping to find, in the bliss of babbling self-immolation, the Buddhist Nirvana.

Unfortunately what one usually ends up with is a panel discussion by dirty old men telling each other pornographic anecdotes that lost their savor after high school - or was it junior high? The emphasis is masculine to the point of being totalitarian. If there is one cadre of modern letters upon which the feminist revolution has not made even the slightest impact, it is in beatnik poetry.

Since most of the male beatniks, being homosexuals, (and since most of them are male) , womankind has some difficulty in finding recognition in their writings. When it does make its appearance in them it tends to be employed, like the cars stolen by Neal Cassady, as just another vehicle for transporting the reader to some cosmo-galactic auto-destruct thrill, like LSD, or fist-fights in bars, or jumping off the Brooklyn Bridge (*this really happened*).

Despite the stated intention of enriching the starved soul of the West through the popularization of ancient techniques of Mahayana meditation, the mantras that the beats have been giving us are little more than dreary recyclings of monodromic tits-and-ass refrains of the Enlightened Media: Hollywood, Playboy, Hustler, talk shows, stand-up comics ...

Having disgorged my disgruntled critique a question naturally suggests itself : if all of the above is true, that is to say, if Roy Lisker who writes this tabloid, believes its true, (why else would he write it?), then how is it that he finds himself ending up in one beatnik event after another, in full possession of the knowledge that no divine light will surge o'er these gatherings of *illuminati*, and that their version of Buddhism is more embarrassing to Buddhists than Shriners to Islam, Hari Krishnas to Hindus, Jews for Jesus to Jews, or Reverend Falwell to Christianity?

#15...

Yet he has discovered rare items of interest in their poetry, however device-ridden and stale it may be, despite the fact that its only technical advance over the heroic couplet has been the laundry list. As in:

MOLOCH! Who dada, dada, dada, dada, dada, dada, da...

MOLOCH! Who dada, dada, dada, dada, da...

MOLOCH! Who ...

Or:

BIRDBRAIN! : DidleyDidleyDidleyDidleyDidley

BIRDBRAIN! : DidleyDidleyDidleyDid...

BIRDBRAIN! : Didl ...

While at the same time he, Roy Lisker, all battered bleak of brain in the drear light of zoo, has labored these 30 years to bring forth a brood of sturdy children out of the womb of our mother language; does not believe in desecrating the higher truths of the world's religions by using them as rationales for his own brand of foolishness; does not believe that the experiments of teen-age boys in locker rooms are the grounds for a higher morality; yet who has developed a radical lifestyle that makes their much vaunted nomadism, their *Dharma-bumhood* look like the trite Madison Avenue publicity seeking it really is

What we're really trying to say is that while the beats were chucking their psychic vomit over the stage lights at Liberty Hall, somehow kidding themselves that the starry-eyed youths of the Great American Wasteland were eagerly absorbing this wisdom like disciples at the feet of venerated sages, Roy Lisker was forced to raise the admission to listen to their sermons by standing out in the streets of Lawrence, Kansas and playing the fucken fiddle!!

The corner on Massachusetts Avenue where I lay my opened violin case on the ground, inserted a Music Minus One cassette into the tape recorder and began playing, was only a few blocks away from the campus. It was 4 PM, rather late in the day. Soon afterwards a trio of teenage girls strolled by,

#16...

smirking . As they walked out of range one of them turned around to face me and cried : "*That's illegal in this town, Mister !* " There doesn't seem to be very much that you can do in Lawrence, Kansas, without some decent hard-working tax-paying citizen coming up to you and reminding you that there's a law against it.

Yet, as the concert developed I found myself forced to revise all my facile generalizations, resulting in a stern lecture to myself later that afternoon on the folly of jumping to conclusions. In a single hour's playing I pulled in \$30, a princely sum in this business.

A retired music teacher walked by. By the sad way in which she shook her head I knew that she was grieving my faulty intonation.

Moving on she dropped a dollar in the violin case.

A college kid from Oklahoma introduced himself as a college kid from Oklahoma and dropped another dollar in the case.

A U. Kansas Prof. out on a stroll with his domestic mate (wife or otherwise) deposited a five dollar bill in the same place.

A tall, bearded young man, his limbs badly dislocated from cerebral palsy, appeared from a distance to my left. Staggering down the street he stopped before me long enough to explain that "the city fathers weren't in favor of what I was doing". They wouldn't harass me, he re-assured me, unless I made a public disturbance. Then he threw in some change and moved on.

And, soon afterwards, a police car appeared. The dour cop within took my measurements in his gaze, then drove on.

Even the teen-ager who'd snarled at me that I was breaking the law returned to drop a dollar in the violin case!

What is one to make of all this? \$30 for one hour of unexceptional violin playing (mediocre in technique though imbued with musical awareness at the highest levels of sophistication!) on the streets of a strange town is a royal sum. Even in places like Berkeley, California, the most advanced city in

#17...

the world, I'd never experienced anything like it. Had I truly been inducted into the pantheon of Mrs. Fick, S.P. Dinsmoor, the builders of the Cathedral in the Plains and other wonder-workers in the Kansas wilderness who'd cultivated their maverick gardens to feed the starving multitudes?

A Beat Poem Inspired By The Above Events

Dropped! One Dollar! In my violin case! By a retired music teacher sadly shaking her head at my poor intonation.

Dropped! One Dollar! In my violin case! By a college kid from Oklahoma who introduced himself as a college kid from Oklahoma.

Dropped! One Five Dollar Bill! (This really happened) . In my violin case! By a U. Kansas Professor out on a stroll with his wife (paramour, maitresse , incubus or whatever she was) .

Dropped! Spare change! In my violin case! By a handicapped and bearded youth who swiveled and staggered down Massachusetts Avenue, dreaming dreams of oblivion in a rain of enchiladas.

Dropped! One dollar! In my violin case! By a young lady who had , in the company of her companions , previously smirked, then shouted: "That's illegal in this town, Mister!"

Dropped! Criminal charges! By a police officer who drove by , gave me the once-over, then departed.

Dropped! One acid cube! By Timothy Leary, on the slopes of the campus of Kansas U., time out of mind and plastic Mary on the dashboard.

Dropped! One piece of underwear, exposing the pubic beard of a flashing poet , ripe and moist for beatnik Nirvana.

Dropped! One Mahayana Sutra (I forget which one) , on the bumper bumper bumper of a Volvo Volvo Volvo, racing from Boulder Colorado to Lawrence, Kansas, on a trip in which I had a vision and he had a vision and you had a vision... and Blake will be cremated on the Autobahn!



#18...

This rambling narrative of the events of September 14, 1987 has arrived at a bifurcation node, a non-degenerate stable singularity, whose paradigmatic exemplum is the classic Maxwell potential well, or some other contemporary resuscitation of the medieval dilemma of Buridan's Ass. To wit: shall it proceed immediately to the hi-jinks and splendour of the Beatnik Poetry Reading, or should it stick to its narrow chronological course and explicate the enchilada?

There is much to be said in favor of chronological order, which exercises such constraining power in daily life that one would hope that a reasonably savvy writer would uncouple its manacles. All the same, it should not be forgotten that there is much to be gained by holding off on the parable of the enchilada to the very end.

There is no climax like an anti-climax: the apotheosis of surprise in the defeat of expectations! Life, as the beat sages have taught us, is a shaggy-dog story with neither point, moral or termination. We pass our days waiting for death, tension and expectation building up within us right to the breaking point, and beyond. Then, when it does come ... well, there's just nothing there.

Onward to the Beat Poetry Reading

We were only able to attend the last day of the five day River City Reunion conference. All of the readings had been sold out three weeks in advance. Had Kenn not reserved our tickets and Christian Hermann not changed her mind and dropped out, we couldn't have gotten in. Arriving outside Liberty Hall at 7 PM, we discovered that the entire counter-cultural intelligentsia of the Middle West had converged on Lawrence for this final gala reading, in much the way that entire galaxies may be sucked up into the interior of a Black Hole ¹. The crowd was such that we couldn't see the facade of Liberty Hall, which was all to the good since when we did finally take a look at it, it turned out to be an exceptionally commonplace building, not a

¹Scientific American, October 1987, page 30

#19...

hall exactly, nor arousing any sentiment of liberty, basically a drab red brick building with glass doors, a few potted plants, and ticket office poised on hastily deposited plancks (sic!) . At the far corner of the building stood an improvised kiosk for the vending of comix, video-cassettes and rock music disx.

*Balsamic Night Waxed And Waned,
Barmy As All Get -Out !*

We stationed ourselves at the far end of a line stretching over a block down the length of Massachusetts Avenue. In vans parked alongside the curbs video crews squatted, nurturing their equipment. Desolate individuals sitting on stoops and fire hydrants held aloft crudely lettered signs, pleading for tickets.

Beside the line not far from the entrance stood a standard-model Jesus-freak. Happiness surged from every corner of his face as he waved a Bible and jumped for joy. Coming into hearing range we realized that he was singing "*I'm looking over a 4-leaf clover* ": a hard-edged proof of happiness if there ever was one.

The time had come for us to confront the ticket sellers. No glints of suspicion escaped from their half-opened eyes when I stated that I was Christian Hermann. After turning over to them 40% of my day's earnings, (never doubting that it would be donated to the Endowment Fund of the Beatnik Poet Rest Home) , I and my friends were granted ingress to the auditorium of Liberty Hall.

We discovered that the functional areas of the interior of Liberty Hall, (auditorium, balcony and stage) were basically those of a small movie house in some inner city neighborhood. Even as one enters one begins to savor the familiar aromas of popcorn and Coca-Cola, with stickiness of chewed chewinggum underfoot, lots of dark and dismal regions, the blaze of a single spotlight focusing on a garish velvet red curtain, shrouding the muskiness of an inky stage.

#20...

The atrocious music that bellowed from the loudspeakers was considerably worse than anything I'd anticipated. We had no option but to endure it as we sat and waited for over an hour for the curtain to rise. This did not bode well for the poetry reading . What theater manager in his right mind would dream of numbing the outer and inner ears of audiences awaiting a program of recitations from John Keats, W.B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas or Robert Frost?

Granted: the Beats are decidedly more bellicose. Yet they do write some real poetry once in awhile . It was a considerable disservice to them that the receptivity of their audience should be soured in this fashion before they made their appearance. It's the price we all pay for living in a culture that no longer makes any clear distinction between shit and food.

When, after waiting for an hour, nothing continued to happen, the audience started clapping in unison. This worked: the lights dimmed and the curtains lifted to reveal a gloomy space covered with odd pieces of equipment, speakers, electric guitars, snare drums, mikes

We pause momentarily to allow me to tortilla the enchilada story between sections of this beatnik poetry reading review. I'll keep it brief, a few paragraphs so you won't think I invented this enchilada stuff just to grab your attention .

The Tale of the Enchilada

Before coming to the reading Kenn, Phil and I had taken dinner in the Paradise Cafe. Among the items listed on the menu was a dish holding one enchilada and some bean sprouts. That's what I ordered. In due time the waiter returned with a plate holding 3 sections of something that looked like an enchilada. The bill handed to me at the end of the meal charged me for 3 enchiladas.

Responding to my complaints the waiter asserted that he'd only brought me what I'd ordered : one enchilada *platter* . Enchilada platters were listed in

#21...

another part of the menu. They hold 3 enchiladas. As we got up to leave Kenn and Phil urged me to repeat my complaint to the girl at the cash register. Our dialogue went somewhat like this:

" I ordered one enchilada, not three!"

" But you ate all three!"

" I'm not going to pay this."

" Oh yes you are!"

" See for yourself! I only ordered one enchilada."

That's when the young woman picked up the menu and pointed at the tiny tiny print above the enchilada section. By squinting closely one could discern the informative message: *For People Under 12* .

Of course I delivered my customary response on such occasions . After paying the bill, I started to walk away, only to turn around and shout, loud enough for the whole restaurant to hear : *This is a rip-off joint* !!

Wrapped in our cloaks of invincible hubris, the 3 city slickers made their way out the door.

As the curtains were lifting Kenn hefted a TV camera onto his shoulder and focused it on the action. Sometime during the first half hour Timothy Leary entered the auditorium and took a seat just behind Kenn. In the interludes between readings Kenn swiveled his camera around to take footage of Leary who, delirious with ersatz bliss, was shouting war-whoops above the applause.

The first performer was the poet/song-writer *Jim Carroll* . He wore black, all black, nothing but black, suggesting that perhaps this was not an accident but derived from a deliberate intent of costuming. Around his neck hanged a big scintillating cross. Jim macraméed a drunk weave about the stage as he unraveled tales of spooky underground horror movie crypt lore. The rock music carried more than its weight of the action, which happens often

#22...

enough when a poet leans too heavily on the music to make the words "more accessible".

Following him appeared *John Giorno* . Shaved skull, jaundiced skin drawn taut as a terrorist's face mask. Giorno unleashed a spell-binding poetic diatribe bitter with pissed-off misanthropy. Loads of obscenity, most of it gratuitous. To listen to him talk , Giorno hates everybody and everything, but himself most of all, the whole equation cancelling out to universal love, of a sort . He is addicted to repeating a certain phrase over and over again, which works once in awhile, though I suggest he experiment a bit with repeating his phrases in reverse order, which is what I do

Diana Di Prima . To the extent that she writes poetry meant to be listened to as poetry, she must be deemed something of an anomaly. Her numerous sins against orthodoxy arise from her way of selecting words for their tone, beauty, aptness, color: crimes against Beatnikism if there ever were any.

Trees, grass, sun and moon, love - who needs this crap when its obvious that what the world needs is more poetry about assholes? To make matters worse she read several poems of political commitment: Vietnam , Nicaragua , feminism, civil rights. Hey, that ain't art-for-art's-sake! How could it be any good, when I'd attended classes in college that told me that political poetry had to be lousy? The enjoyment I'd experienced from listening to her reading merely proves that I don't know a thing about art.

Intermission : popcorn and soda water. A crowd was gathered outside the building, people who'd come all the way from Alberta, Canada and been late, and were now trying to sneak through the glass doors. Groovy counter-cultural security guards let a few in then turned the rest away. The TV crews were frenetically running around, acting as if they own everything: *We're important! We're the media!* One eager pen-pusher, steno tablet at the ready,

#23...

turned to Kenn and myself and asked: "What're you, a pair of burnt-out old hippies? "

Time to return to our seats.

Ann Waldman . Just terrible. Bad material badly done. None of her experiments ever seem to work, and one wonders why. Perhaps one ought to learn from her failures, much as scientists learn from failed experiments. Her problem seems to be that she throws - and I mean *throws* - herself completely into her act: she appears unable to establish any distance between person and persona. The result is always some sort of hysterical display: we watch her going to pieces while at the same time nothing is coming across.

Everything comes off as derivative, as if she'd done no work on her initial inspiration after its emergence. And there is the ever-dependable laundry-list:

DAD'DAD'DAD'DAD ' : EMPTY SPACE !

DAD'DAD'DAD'DAD ' : EMPTY SPACE !

DAD'DAD'DAD'DAD

When Allan Ginsberg adopts this mode of expression, it works - sometimes . With her it doesn't work at all. She too calls upon background music , though no connection is ever established between the words and the music. Her worst piece, (the worst of the evening) was a polemic against Reagan's Central American policies rambled against the banging away of a rock band. As Ann stomped her feet arbitrarily and with no relationship to the musical beat, she roared:

" CON! CON! CONTRADIC'TION!

CON! CON! CONTRADIC'TION!

CON! CON! CONTRADIC'TION! "

No doubt she should have left politics to Diane DiPrima.

William Burroughs. Grandmaster of warped morality and mordant cynicism. Crime versus the Law, in multiple inversions. Eventually the very

#24...

word "law" comes to mean *hypocrisy*, while the word "criminal" becomes tinged over with the auras of sainthood. Burroughs of course, far more than a Beat writer, is a master. In addition to which he is a superb raconteur and accomplished narrator of his own writings. He hadn't brought us anything new to recite at this event, everything was a re-run.

Allan Ginsberg : HOWL FOR CARL SOLOMON ! God what a performance! The best I've ever heard him do. Despite the "howlers" to be found in the many stagnate and sterile imitations of this rapturous ode it remains one of the great poems in English of the 20th century. Of all the works presented at this reading, it alone had genius. Alas, it was written over 30 years before ... which just goes to show...

After 600 (or thereabouts) performances it hardly comes as a surprise that Allan Ginsberg can communicate the fiery brilliance of *Howl* with unsurpassable command. Furthermore the reading of it was done in such a fashion as to give the impression that he'd written it just the day before and was sharing it with us for the first time. Rich, alive, breath-taking.

The remaining poems recited by Ginsberg were further specimens of the derivative dreck he's been churning out ever since he got religion (*Translation,; Chungpa-Trungpa's brand of "crazy wisdom" at the Naropa Institute*). Such as a trite little ditty about the futility of desire. He obviously didn't believe in any of it, so how could he hope to convince us?

Allan rounded off the evening with a snappy "Meditation Song" accompanied by guitar, a charming snippet of Tantric Gospel sing-song, fathoms below the irrepressible *Howl*.

Conclusion

Blues For Christian Hermann

My woman don't love me no more
My woman don't love me no more.
Cause my woman don't love me no more
Think I's gonna creep all over the floor.

#25...

That college ain't no Holiday Inn
That college ain't no Holiday Inn
Cause that college ain't no Holiday Inn
Ain't gonna let no beatnik gurus in.

That ain't your copyright
I just know that ain't your copyright!
Cause that ain't your copyright
You ain't gonna get no Kinko's copy tonight!

Hey mister: that's illegal in this town!
I said: that's illegal in this town
Cause that ain't legal in this town
They're gonna lock you up, inna city pound!

You ate them enchiladas, honey
Yes, you ate them enchiladas, honey
Cause you ate them enchiladas, honey
I'm gonna take all your money!

#26...