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RICHARD BRAUTIGAN

by Jay Boyer



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Richard Brautigan

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Richard Brautigan

Richard Brautigan

At the age of forty-nine, Richard Brautigan committed suicide in a house he owned in Bolinas, California, a small coastal town some twenty miles north of San Francisco. Files from the Marin County Coroner's office and the office of the Sheriff of Marin County suggest that he stood at the foot of his bed looking out a window and put a handgun to his head, a Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum he'd borrowed from his friend Jimmy Sakata, the sixty-year-old proprietor of Cho-Cho's, a Japanese restaurant in San Francisco that Brautigan was particularly fond of. He shot himself around the first of October 1984. The precise date of his suicide cannot be determined since he was living alone at the time and his body, so badly decomposed that it defied recognition, was not discovered until 25 October 1984.

Why did Brautigan take his own life? He left no note; he'd been in the house in Bolinas by himself for a month or more, and little that was discovered by way of personal effects—about two dollars in change, a bottle of Jack Daniels, some tranquilizers, and so on—was illuminating. But then neither did those nearest to Brautigan seem to be too surprised that he'd done it. His daughter recalled that he'd often threatened suicide before, and it was said that he'd tried to kill himself in 1981 after he and his second wife, Aki, split up. He'd been despondent for some time. His drinking was far out of hand. The failure of his last five novels, culminating in his inability to find a publisher for a novel completed in 1983,

all seemed to have been contributing factors. Simply put, Brautigan's star had fallen.

Once a favorite of the counterculture, his *Trout Fishing in America* alone had sold more than two million copies. In recent years, though, his readership had slipped away. His last published novel, *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away*, sold less than 15,000 copies, and the reviewers in this country ignored the book or dismissed it. And then too there were debts.

He'd never been good with money. Like so many who grow up poor—sometimes desperately so—he could be both a miser and a spendthrift. He'd been known to ask for a receipt when buying a pack of gum; yet his telephone bills sometimes ran two or three thousand dollars—he was known to have read entire books to people long distance. But since 1976 much of the money he'd earned seemed to go for living abroad—for living in Japan in particular, where he could still depend upon being received as a *sensei*, a serious and productive writer.

He'd been living in Japan, in fact, not long before his suicide. He'd returned from Tokyo that spring and then he'd seen friends off and on during the summer. He left people with the impression that he was going to do some "serious" writing that fall in Bolinas, that he was going to shut himself off from enticements and distractions.

What finally changed his plans, then? The drinking? His failing career? A skeleton in his closet? Like so many other things about Brautigan, no one can say for sure. He was a very public figure, and yet he was in large part a mystery. To his critics and fans, to those who knew him best, for that matter, even the main facts of Brautigan's life were elusive.

Brautigan was born on 30 January 1935 in Tacoma, Washington, and he was raised in Washington and the Pacific Northwest. Cir-

cumstances of his birth and memories of his childhood were subjects Brautigan avoided. His father, Bernard Brautigan, left Richard's mother when she was pregnant with him. Brautigan's mother would later abandon Richard and his sister when Richard was nine and come back for them only after he was sure she was gone for good. He knew at least three stepfathers, at least one of whom he said was a drunk who "thrashed" him repeatedly. For the most part Richard seems to have been left on his own to raise his younger sister Barbara while their mother worked.

He began to write in high school, apparently. He worked odd jobs after school, his sister recalled, then spent all night at his writing—even though he'd been told it would never amount to anything. His writing seems to have been at least part of the reason he left home.

In the mid-1950s, just as the Beat Movement was beginning in the Bay Area, he arrived in San Francisco and became friendly with Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, and Philip Whalen, with whom he roomed for a while. Ginsberg's public reading of *Howl* at the Six Gallery in 1955 signalled a new era of American poetry and soon small presses were appearing around the Bay Area and beyond, eager to publish. Brautigan found his way into print as a poet.

Brautigan's earliest work is to be found alongside the work of other young poets in the cheaply run-off booklets we associate with that period. *The Galilee Hitch-Hiker*, published in 1958 by the White Rabbit Press, was as near as he had to a solo debut; but like much of his writing to this time, it was unusual without being distinctive. At best, Brautigan remained on the fringe of the San Francisco literary scene. He supported himself through odd jobs, delivering telegrams for Western Union, for instance, writing new poems each day, sometimes as many as ten or twenty, then hang-

ing out in the evenings with others who were living much as he was. Ginsberg nicknamed him Bunthorne, after the poet in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*, whose discourse, to paraphrase, is only idle chatter but of a transcendental kind, and the nickname took. Even among oddballs Brautigan was something of an oddball. He was thought to be sweet and untutored, very much the *naif*, irresponsible, a featherweight as a poet. He was generally liked, but he was no one you could count on.

Some thought he might change when he met Virginia Adler in 1959 and married her shortly thereafter. She made a home for the two of them, the first real home he'd ever known, supported him through office work, eventually gave him a daughter, Ianthe, Brautigan's only child. But the marriage came to an end in 1963. Probable causes of the breakup include other women, some drinking, his work. Writing and writers seemed to hold more of his attention than a wife and child and family life.

Brautigan began to write prose as well as poetry after his marriage—Ginny would later remark that he had to teach himself to write prose: everything he did seemed to come out as poetry—and from the time of his marriage through its breakup he managed two novels and the start of a third. The first of these, *Trout Fishing in America*, followed by *A Confederate General from Big Sur*, both appearing in print just as the Beat Movement seemed to be vanishing, were to provide him with an entrance into American letters.

Poet, editor of *The Evergreen Review*, and owner of a nonprofit press called the Four Seasons Foundation, Donald Allen was the driving force behind the publication of Brautigan's first two novels. Allen read the manuscripts and urged them on Barney Rossett at Grove Press in New York. Rossett published *A Confederate General* first, explaining that since it was the more conventional

of the two it was more likely to be reviewed; but the reviews were tepid and the sales were disappointing, less than 800 copies in all, and with that, Rossett lost interest.

Brautigan's career as a novelist might have been over before it really began had it not been for Allen and the New York agent Helen Brann. When *Trout Fishing* hadn't been issued by 1967, Allen asked for it back, saying that he'd decided to publish it himself, then fathered it through four printings.

Despite the limitations of being issued by a small press, sales exceeded 30,000 copies as the novel found an audience among college students; but it did not really become a moneymaker until Helen Brann entered the picture. She approached Brautigan, asked to represent him, then took *Trout Fishing in America*, *In Watermelon Sugar*, his third novel, and a collection of poems, *The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster*, to Seymour Lawrence and Delacorte Press, arguing that a new market for paperback originals was opening up that the major houses had missed.

Delacorte provided Brautigan with a wider distribution and more visibility than he'd ever had before, and it wasn't long before Brautigan's books could be found on the shelves of undergraduates in college dorms throughout the country. Few American writers have caught on as quickly as Brautigan did. The childlike voice of Brautigan's prose and poetry seemed for a time to be the voice of an entire generation. It certainly seemed appropriate to the counterculture of the 1960s, as near to a children's crusade as we've had in this century; and within five years Brautigan went from poverty (between 1965 and 1968 he earned a total of less than \$7,000) to being one of the golden boys of younger American writers.

To be a writer in America means not only to write but also to publish and be paid for your work and be read; and in that

sense, at least, Brautigan had become what he'd always dreamt of becoming. But the 1960s were giving way to the 1970s and things in this country were changing, both nationally and closer to home. Brautigan had bought his house in Bolinas at the height of his popularity and he'd become part of the artists' colony that had arisen there, numbering in its heyday nearly thirty publishing poets and a significant number of young novelists, among them Thomas McGuane and William Hjortsberg. By 1972 and 1973, though, Easterners, Midwesterners, everyone from bikers and druggies to corporate executives seemed to be moving into Bolinas, California, and it began to seem time to move on.

McGuane was the first of the group to leave. Following the success of *Rancho Deluxe*, he bought Montana ranchland in an area just north of Yellowstone National Park known as Paradise Valley, and soon Brautigan and his other old friends were buying ranchland themselves. What was it Brautigan sought there? It was a good place to write, for one thing. He vowed to write a novel each year, each novel of a different subgenre, and beginning with *The Hawkline Monster* (1974), which he worked on while staying in a rented cabin, he seemed intent on making good on his word. Too, he sought the community of writers and friends. And his longtime friend David Fechheimer offers us perhaps yet another attraction of the area in his description of the way of life that McGuane and the others tried to cultivate: ". . . a cowboy atmosphere: hard-drinking men and supportive women. It's out there with the boys, fishing every evening in the Yellowstone River, drinking in cowboy bars, shooting up the countryside."

But Brautigan never quite fit in. Like the others, he collected weapons, a standard Army automatic, a .357 Magnum Ruger Security Six, a .22 Winchester, a .30-.30, and more, but there's doubt that he knew how to strip and clean them.

Brautigan's arsenal could not, however, protect him from his own failings. He was a womanizer, and he had a penchant for Oriental women most of all, so no one was particularly surprised when Brautigan married Akiko during one of his visits to Japan and then brought her back to Montana to live. But Aki would not prove to be the patient and supportive wife Brautigan was looking for—at least not in the sense that he had in mind. As writer Ron Loewinsohn said to Lawrence Wright in "The Life and Death of Richard Brautigan," "He thought he had gotten the archetypal geisha who would walk three feet behind him. But Aki was really very modern and very tough."

Brautigan loved the beauty of the Montana frontier, but save for some skill as a fisherman, he wasn't really much of an outdoorsman, and reportedly he'd flee to Montana from some distant corner of the world only to tell a neighbor after his arrival that he didn't know what he was doing there, that he had to get back to a city.

Wherever he happened to be, he could be very abusive when he was drunk. And in the last years of his life, he drank heavily and often. In various ways and to various degrees, Brautigan succeeded in those years in alienating McGuane and those who had gathered around him. Too often, McGuane said in an article in *Vanity Fair*, Brautigan became impossible to be with, too self-absorbed, too downright offensive. Recalled McGuane, "He went in for 'writer talk,' but he became a monologist about it. There was a kind of naiveté to his egocentricity because it was so unacceptable by normal social standards. He'd become so maniacally egocentric that it was clear he had no sense of how he was affecting his audience. It became progressively crazier and more self-centered. . . ."

Such observations about Brautigan by those who knew him best

are frequent—the community that he sought but never quite found, the drinking that seemed to draw Brautigan away from the world and into himself, the monologues in place of conversations, his reclusiveness, his paranoia, his anxiety about his paranoia, his craziness in general, his progressive egocentricity . . . perhaps his egocentricity most of all. And it's surely no coincidence that these concerns are to be found as well in Brautigan's novels.

BRAUTIGAN AS A WESTERN WRITER

That Brautigan's long hair, broad-brimmed hat, hobnail boots, wire-rim glasses, and other features and attire should call to mind cowboys and the nineteenth-century Northwest is fitting, for Brautigan thought of himself as a Northwesterner both in heritage and spirit, and many of the values he liked are associated with these Northwestern roots. His books suggest a writer uncomfortable in a world of taxes and courts of law—one preferring instead a panorama of wide-open spaces. There's a kinship with the land to be found in his writing; and though Brautigan spent much of his life in cities, there seems to be a distrust on principle of big-city life.

Too, his wandering from one part of the globe to another suggests a Westerner's fondness for travel in general and moving-on in particular. He simply has no way of committing himself to what civilized living entails. Decisions made by a committee, petty mercantilism, and the rest of an urban social system demand more from him than they offer in return.

There's a price to be paid by the cowboy, of course. His relationships with women are sure to be intermittent and one-sided—one of the reasons he can pick up and move on is because he tries to live unencumbered. And he's apt to be denied the company of others as well. He's never really part of a group. The best he can do is to join with others with whom he has values in

common. And too, there are limits to where he can go. Civilization is always encroaching—it cannot be stopped—and the Western figure finds himself becoming an anachronism. But then that's what it means to be a Westerner. It's part of our mythology.

And it was to this mythology of the American West rather than to the realities of nineteenth-century frontier life that Brautigan was drawn. The antiquated air he cultivated—he refused to learn to drive a car, for instance—had more to do with the mythology of being a Northwesterner than with any real desire to return to a nineteenth-century rural way of life. Neighbors in Montana report that the practicalities of frontier living were foreign to Brautigan. He was lost when faced with the day-to-day chores of working a ranch. Nor is there much about his writing, save, perhaps, a distant relationship to the visions of Whitman and Thoreau, that looks to the work of the nineteenth century. As a novelist, Brautigan was very much a post-modernist, in fact. His approach to fiction was to react against the established forms and create stories in which the process of writing the story, and what that process might reveal about how we organize human experience and come to terms with it, were to be as telling as the story itself.

This is not to say that Brautigan was born in the wrong century; nor is it simple nostalgia that's at issue here. Rather it's to discover in Brautigan's life something fundamental to the body of work he produced. For one of the most interesting things about this body of work is how as a post-modernist writer Brautigan postulates a regional mythology. The myths of the American West seem an unlikely source for a post-modernist's views, all things considered. Individualism, self-sufficiency, and the like seem to be concerns out of step with contemporary American life. How, for example, does one become reconciled to a desire—perhaps even a need—to move on, to stay one step ahead of civilized life, when civilized

life is already upon us and there is no frontier left to light out to?

The answer for Brautigan, at least in the beginning, was to be found in the mind. Born in innocence, the human imagination seemed to be the last uncorrupted frontier, one that offered not simply a momentary escape from modern living, but the capacity to transcend it. This view of the mind is most obviously the case in the first novel Brautigan wrote, *Trout Fishing in America*, but even as early as this there's a note or two of foreboding. Is it possible that a life of the mind can lead to being out of touch, to losing one's grasp of simple realities?

These are only notes, to be sure; and too they are only sounded occasionally in the novel. *Trout Fishing* was written between 1960 and 1961 by a very young man in the era of John F. Kennedy and Camelot when new frontiers seemed to be ours for the making, and Brautigan's novel reflects that national spirit. Less of that spirit is to be found in his second novel, though, and less of it still in his third and fourth. Vietnam would soon divide this nation profoundly. Dropping out, turning off, disengagement itself would begin to seem to many coming of age in the 1960s to be acts of conscientious objection; and Brautigan's work seemed to acknowledge this and affirm the decision. But perhaps less is affirmed in these novels than Brautigan's audience initially perceived.

Flight from civilization comes at a price. One has only to consider the cowboy to see the price that such flight can exact; and too, the things which the counterculture seemed to stand for—drugs, the experiences of the mind, doing your own thing—were so clearly solitary callings. Was it possible that the flower children weren't political figures at all, but rather misfits? And if that were so, what hope for community could they reasonably maintain?

We find such concerns in *A Confederate General from Big Sur* and *In Watermelon Sugar*. Lost to madness or mindbending drugs

or emotional isolation, Brautigan's characters are more notable for their solitude than for anything else. And this is true once again of the narrator of *The Abortion* (1971). But there's a shift in tone and conception here from the work that came before it. *The Abortion* marked the first time Brautigan had turned toward conventional forms of fiction—in this case, the plotline of classical romance—to explore human experience; and this approach is evident as well in the novels he wrote between 1973 and 1977: *The Hawkline Monster* (1974), *Willard and His Bowling Trophies* (1975), *Sombrero Fallout* (1976), and *Dreaming of Babylon* (1977), all of which toy with conventions of the subgenres of prose fiction as the creative mind struggles to make sense of the world.

These are minor works, for the most part novels poorly received by critics. But one shouldn't dismiss them too quickly. What we find in them is an increasing awareness of the imagination and its powers. It's almost as if Brautigan were re-evaluating the premise he'd employed so plentifully in *Trout Fishing in America*, for here the imagination begins to seem more the enemy of modern man than his salvation. There's a growing suspicion that the solitary pleasures of the mind are apt to lead us to egocentrism—and perhaps even worse.

This end is certainly where such solitude leads in the last novels, *The Tokyo-Montana Express* (1980) and *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away* (1982). Presented to us as largely autobiographical works, ones which correspond in obvious ways to parts of what we know about Brautigan's life, these novels offer us speakers who border on being obsessed with themselves to the exclusion of everything else. And insofar as that's the case, the situation they face is still darker than that posed in the previous works. For what they're about here is trying to make sense of their own lives, trying to find order and coherence when there are too many

possibilities to choose from, too many contradictions in their pasts to allow a consoling resolution. This is particularly true in *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away*, in which the memory of one day in the speaker's childhood seems to corrupt everything else he can recall. Haunted by the events of a day in which he killed his friend in a hunting accident, the speaker finds in each of these events countless meanings and likely scenarios. But which ones are the right ones? Are they proof of his innocence, or proof of his guilt? There's no way to tell. And yet the mind will not release him until the matter's resolved.

This focus on the mind's irresolvable tensions brings us back toward where we began, in some sense; for we're reminded of the earlier novels—of *Trout Fishing in America* most of all—and of all the possibilities of the mind. And that in itself is telling. Contrary to much of what's been written about Richard Brautigan, he was not an author who knew what he was doing for a novel or two and then lost sight of it. As we'll see, his writing forms a body of work, one with consistencies and developments—both in terms of style and thematic concerns.

BRAUTIGAN'S STYLE: THE POEMS AND SHORT STORIES

Brautigan is most likely to be remembered for his novels, his first three novels in particular—*Trout Fishing in America* most of all, perhaps, but also *A Confederate General from Big Sur* and *In Watermelon Sugar*, books published between 1964 and 1968. Yet those coming to Brautigan's work for the first time might do well to begin with his poems and short fiction, for Brautigan's control of voice and tone, his skill with simile and metaphor, the rendering of experience in fragments—in short, the elements we've come to associate with Brautigan's novels—are also to be found in his poetry and short stories, which offer a viable point from which

to begin a study of his career.

There's nothing difficult about a Brautigan poem. A reader does not have to go back to it again and again to make it out. The speaker, too, seems easy to understand. The voice invites a sense of intimacy: This is the voice I use only with you.

The poems do not rely upon voice alone for their appeal, however. There's often a sense of development, of a mind at work. Notice in this section of "Private Eye Lettuce" how we're drawn from the crates of lettuce to a smaller area, then one smaller still; notice what we're to make of the image to be discovered there.

Three crates of Private Eye Lettuce,
the name and drawing of a detective
with magnifying glass on the sides
of the crates of lettuce,
form a great cross in man's imagination
and his desire to name
the objects of the world. (*Pill 5*)

This need to name things, to assign a meaning, to find the words that will allow us to codify the world and make sense of it, is one of the most consistent concerns in Brautigan's poems—as in this poem from his last collection, *June 30th, June 30th*.

I'm here in a bar filled with
young conservative snobbish
American men,
drinking and trying to pick up
Japanese women
who want to sleep with the likes
of these men.
It is very hard to find any poetry
here
as this poem bears witness. (*June 49*)

Yet the early poems are distinctly different from the last ones he wrote. Brautigan's last poems are much more prosaic: the line breaks in the poem above, for instance, do little of benefit, and little would be lost by printing it as a paragraph. Too, his faith in the possibilities of what language could do seems to have flagged. One must wonder what happened to the fanciful mind that could create similes and metaphors such as those to be found in this opening section from "1942," collected in his first major book of poems, *The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster*, and before that in a chapbook, *The Octopus*.

Piano tree, play
in the dark concert halls
of my uncle,
twenty-six years old, dead
and homeward bound
on a ship from Sitka,
his coffin travels
like the fingers
of Beethoven
over a glass
of wine. (*Pill* 83)

It's tempting when excerpting his work in this way to see the gradual decline of a promising poet; but too often Brautigan's poems lack a center of gravity to be taken very seriously as individual works, and the same might be said about his short stories—if stories is what they are. Better to call them vignettes, or sketches, or extended prose poems, perhaps, for they often have no logical sense of sequence that we can ground in our own experience, no inherent sense of beginning and middle and end. What they offer instead is a voice, a speaker, then a fragment of a story in progress.

Critic Philip Stevick has noted that things seem to be arranged

“serially” in Brautigan’s short stories rather than arranged through conventional cause-and-effect relationships, and Stevick’s notion can be useful in examining Brautigan’s fiction. In “The World War I Los Angeles Airplane,” for example, having just told his wife that her father is dead, the speaker lists in serial order what her father’s death will mean to them. There are thirty-three passages, each assigned its own number, and, at a glance, the principle of organization seems to be chronological—the first passages deal with the circumstances of her father’s death, and the thirty-third with the speaker breaking the news to his wife. But we soon realize this isn’t the case at all. The passages in between are arranged, apparently, simply in the order in which they occur to the narrator.

TROUT FISHING IN AMERICA (1967)

Rendering experience in self-contained little sections, and relying upon the cumulative power of these sections for dramatic effect, would be a technique Brautigan would become identified with, but one he used to greatest advantage in his first novel, *Trout Fishing in America*. Like his stories and poems, each of these sections relies upon voice and tone and the appeal of the speaker for its charm. And there’s often a “serial” quality to be found here as well. The degree to which we can appreciate what’s going on has to do with how willing we are to allow the speaker his unique path of logic. For instance, “Knock On Wood (Part One),” the second section of the fifty that make up the novel, begins in this way.

As a child when did I first hear about trout fishing in America? From whom? I guess it was a stepfather of mine. Summer of 1942.

The old drunk told me about trout fishing. When he could talk, he had a way of describing trout as if they were a

precious and intelligent metal.

Silver is not a good adjective to describe what I felt when he told me about trout fishing.

I'd like to get it right.

Maybe trout steel. Steel made from trout. The clear snow-filled river acting as foundry and heat.

Imagine Pittsburgh.

A steel that comes from trout, used to make buildings, trains and tunnels.

The Andrew Carnegie of Trout! (*Trout* 3)

There is a sense throughout the novel of a mind-in-progress, a mind that would like to, as the speaker says here, *get it right*, and too a reminder that no matter how casual and familiar the writing may seem, communicating with people is no simple matter. The world is always elusive—*When did I first hear about it? From whom?*—and accounting for it is always a tentative business, as in the speaker's caveat above, *I guess it was*. Then too, what's real often has little to do with what's actual. The time and place (recalled here only in the broadest terms, *Summer of 1942*), as well as the people involved (*a stepfather*, apparently one among several, one described here no more completely than *the old drunk*), are of less importance than what the mind of the speaker can do with the material.

The last line of this section, *The Andrew Carnegie of Trout!*, is meaningless in and of itself; but that's not true once we're aware of the process of the mind which works its way toward this conclusion. Trout, to the speaker's stepfather, are currency, of value only in terms of what they can buy. But that bit of profanity can be reworked until it takes on almost magical qualities. A precious metal leads the speaker to think in terms of silver, to reject silver as the word he would choose, to move from silver to steel, from

steel to the city that boasts of itself as the steel center of the world, to move from the industrial wastelands of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to the making of a civilized America, and from that to Pittsburgh's Andrew Carnegie—acquisition personified.

None of this imaginative word association dilutes the fact that the speaker's stepfather was "an old drunk," nor that his notion of trout is ill-conceived and distasteful; nor does it deny that Andrew Carnegie may have been one of the great robber barons of his time. What it does instead is to suggest a thaumatropic and idyllic vision which can emerge when the mind is given a chance, an ordering—or perhaps re-ordering—of the cold hard facts, when cold hard facts are understood to be of less importance than the person who would wrestle with them.

Trout Fishing in America, Brautigan said, was "a vision of America," and that seems to be as good a way of putting it as any, for he was holding out the possibility of transcending the world before us. Transcending the day-to-day realities of modern life through the use of imagination seems to be the structuring principle of the novel, in fact. As the novel gradually develops through its individual passages, simple comparisons seem to become metaphors, and these metaphors finally take on a life of their own. As many critics have noted, it's as if the speaker's imagination becomes more powerful and more transcendent as the novel progresses.

But it's a mistake to become too trusting of the speaker's gentle voice and manner and his pastoral vision in general. Let's look at two of the most often quoted—and most often compared—sections of the novel, the first, "Knock On Wood (Part Two)," an early one, and the other, "The Cleveland Wrecking Yard," from among the final sections.

One spring afternoon as a child in the strange town of

Portland, I walked down to a different street corner, and saw a row of old houses, huddled together like seals on a rock.

Then there was a long field that came sloping down off a hill. The field was covered with green grass and bushes. On top of the hill there was a grove of tall, dark trees. At a distance I saw a waterfall come pouring down off the hill. It was long and white and I could almost feel its cold spray.

There must be a creek there, I thought, and it probably has trout in it.

Trout.

At last an opportunity to go trout fishing, to catch my first trout, to behold Pittsburgh.

It was growing dark. I didn't have time to go and look at the creek. I walked home past the glass whiskers of the houses, reflecting the downward rushing waterfalls of night. (4) But when he returned to fish the trout stream, equipped with fish hook made from a bent nail and white bread from which to make dough balls for bait, the stream was not the same.

But as I got closer to the creek I could see that something was wrong. The creek did not act right. There was a strangeness to it. There was a thing about its motion that was wrong. Finally I got close enough to see what the trouble was.

The waterfall was just a flight of white wooden stairs leading up to a house in the trees.

I stood there for a long time, looking up and looking down, following the stairs with my eyes, having trouble believing.

Then I knocked on my creek and heard the sound of wood.

I ended up by being my own trout and eating the slice of bread myself. (5)

In the later passage, "The Cleveland Wrecking Yard," the speaker goes to a junkyard and discovers that a trout stream—with insects and animals and foliage available at an extra charge—is being sold off as scrap. The similarities between the two passages are obvious. In both we're dealing with a trout stream situated in a city, in both we're dealing with streams which do not physically exist, and in both the climax of the scene takes place when the speaker puts his hand to the stream and tests it against his own existence. But the climaxes are also distinctly different—as the lines from the end of "The Cleveland Wrecking Yard" clearly witness.

O I had never in my life seen anything like that trout stream. It was stacked in piles of various lengths: ten, fifteen, twenty feet, etc. There was one pile of hundred foot lengths . . . I went up close and looked at the lengths of stream. I could see some trout in them . . . It looked like a fine stream. I put my hand in the water. It was cold and felt good. (*Trout* 106-07)

The central difference here has to do with the way the speaker's vision functions. In the earlier section, the vision of the child transcends the world before him, if only for a few hours, as a stairway becomes what he would wish it to be, a trout stream, one in which he can catch the trout that his father has told him about earlier. This is a child's magic, pure Piaget. But it's not any more than that. The powers of the child's imagination transport him temporarily beyond the limits of Portland and his blue-collar life—that's all. Finally that magical thought is testable against a world of very real dimensions: touch the stream and it turns back into stairs; hear your mother call, and it's time to go home.

That isn't true in the second passage. Here the speaker's vision doesn't just transcend reality. What begins as one more playful

examination of the potential of America (trout fishing in America) being tested against its modern condition (a wrecking yard) assumes literal—and troubling—dimensions: conjure a trout stream in your mind, and there will be water that's cold to the touch.

Rather than reality determining the metaphor, then, here the metaphor determines the speaker's reality. And what we seem to be witnessing may well be less significant as a demonstration of the powers of the imagination, albeit they're impressive throughout the novel, than it is as a warning that the speaker is in danger of losing touch, both literally and figuratively, with the world all around him.

A CONFEDERATE GENERAL FROM BIG SUR (1964)

A Confederate General from Big Sur is usually compared unfavorably with *Trout Fishing*, for it lacks the wit and charm of the first novel Brautigan wrote, as well as its gentle demeanor; but when judged on its own terms, it seems to be a rather honorable early publication. Fundamentally it's a travesty of the "road" novels familiar from the Beats. Unable to cope with big city life in San Francisco, Jesse, the novel's narrator, follows the charismatic Lee Mellon to Big Sur where the two share a number of adventures, gradually bringing new characters into their lives as their twosome becomes a group. There's a fugitive from an asylum, Johnston Wade; a beautiful call girl from Los Angeles, Elizabeth, who's also a doting mother to four children; and several other women, all of whom seem drawn into the aura Mellon exudes. None of these characters is as fully drawn as Lee Mellon, though, for the novel is primarily concerned with him, and it's through Jesse's account of Lee that the novel finds much of its comedy.

According to Jesse, Mellon envisions the Pacific Coast as the last place where a man can still be all that he can become. But

a reader soon realizes that just the opposite is the case. Mellon's a bum, a bully, a heavy drinker, a freeloader, perhaps even a bit of a maniac. If anything, he envisions California as the last place where you can be less than you are and still get by.

Mellon claims to be a Southerner, but he has no Southern accent and his double-pronged explanation as to how he lost it—he read Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Kant while he was still a youngster; he slept with two black girls—is so ridiculous that it's laughable, as he surely knows. But then Mellon is offering neither a tidbit of his biography to Jesse, nor an explanation; rather he's making a demand that he be accepted on his own terms. This is true throughout the novel. He adopts roles and poses throughout and it's clear that he is looking for someone who will accept these changes as quickly as he can make them.

Only occasionally do we catch a glimpse of who Mellon really is beneath the disguises he adopts. One of the first comes when a check at a San Francisco library reveals no Confederate General named Augustus Mellon, a figure Lee has claimed to be a direct descendant of. The glimpses we get of the real Lee Mellon suggest that he's pathetic and demented, and in this particular case, on the brink of tears: "Promise me till your dying day," says Mellon to Jesse, "you'll believe that a Mellon was a Confederate general. It's the truth. That God-damn book lies! There was a Confederate general in my family!" But more revealing even than Mellon's plea here is Jesse's reaction to it: "I promise," answers Jesse, ". . . and it was a promise that I kept" (*General* 31). Evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, Jesse is willing to accept Mellon in any role in which he casts himself. They're the perfect pair.

Prior to the account of moving in with Mellon at Big Sur, Jesse's narrative is fairly straightforward. He performs his role as narrator-observer much as Nick Carraway does with Jay Gatsby in F. Scott

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Unless Jesse otherwise identifies his source, his accounts of what Mellon does and says, for instance, are accounts of only those situations he'd have witnessed himself. But that becomes less true as the novel continues.

Let's compare two sections, the first written shortly after he's arrived at Mellon's place at the ocean, and the second, after he's lived there for a time. In the first, Jesse waits by the side of the road while Mellon, down to his last five bullets, is hunting for their breakfast.

Two cars came by. One of the cars had some young people in it. The girl was attractive. I imagined that they had left Monterey at daybreak after having eaten a great big breakfast at the Greyhound bus depot. But that did not quite make sense.

Why would they want to eat breakfast at the Greyhound bus depot? The more I thought about it, the more it seemed unlikely. There were other places to eat breakfast in Monterey. Perhaps some of them were fancier. Just because I had eaten breakfast one morning at the Greyhound bus depot in Monterey did not necessarily mean that everybody in the world ate there. (*General* 66)

In the next section, Lee and Jesse drive to the house of one of Lee's girlfriends, Elizabeth, only to discover that she's nowhere to be found.

A rooster was strutting around making a bunch of noise. Nobody was home. Lee Mellon looked at the rooster. He decided to steal it, and then he decided to leave her some money for it along with a note on the kitchen table telling her that he had bought the chicken, and then he decided to hell with it. Let her keep the chicken. That was big of him. And all the time that this was going on, it was going on only in his mind, for he did not say a word. (*General* 86)

In the first passage above, what seems to begin as an account of what Jesse sees becomes instead a revelation about Jesse's powers of imagination and analysis. He's poor and people in the car are not; he's hungry because he has no money to buy food; they have money so they must have already eaten, and so on. The connection between Monterey and the Greyhound bus depot makes sense only once it's been grounded in the personal experience of our narrator.

And in the second passage, the need to focus on Jesse's mind in order to make sense of the narrative is more true still. Whose mind is really at work here? To what degree are these really Mellon's thoughts, and to what degree are they Jesse's alone?

As the novel continues, Jesse becomes less of a conduit of information, or even an interpreter of it, than the center of the information itself. This is particularly the case in the final third of the novel after the introduction of "Roy Earle," a name given to financial magnate Johnston Wade, a badly deranged refugee from a mental institution who has turned to Mellon for help. Jesse has persisted in portraying Mellon as a literary figure to this point in the novel, identifying him with Thomas Wolfe, Jack London, and other authors. But that's no longer possible. Now he identifies him with the madman who's entered their lives. Like Earle, Mellon lives in his own private mental universe, and what Jesse remarks about Roy—"There was nothing of us in his coming and going. He was just another specter, chained to a log, fleeing alligators at Big Sur" (*General* 142)—might just as well have been said about Lee. Lee Mellon has no allegiance to the women he sleeps with or to Jesse; he feels no bond to any man or woman, and when he's "pole-axed on dope," which is much of the time, Mellon is all but unaware of any presence but his own.

But then to a lesser degree the same thing might be said about Jesse. In the final pages of the novel, for instance, Jesse and his

girlfriend walk on the beach after they've "smoked five or six chunks of dope" (*General* 153), but they're not really walking together. Jesse cannot locate himself in space or time. He'd like to describe the ocean to us, but he can't; he can't tell his own voice from Elaine's, and he can't distinguish between his speaking voice and the voice he hears in his mind. He cannot make out what Elaine is trying to do as she undresses, nor can he even be sure that the woman before him is Elaine at all. And finally he can't even be sure that the male body he sees when he looks at himself is his own.

IN WATERMELON SUGAR (1968)

It's reasonable that *A Confederate General from Big Sur* has no ending, or rather that Jesse should offer several endings and let us decide for ourselves. Jesse's such a solitary being by this point in the narrative that he's losing the capacity to chronicle anything beyond himself. And some of this same sense of solitude and of incapacity is to be found as well in Brautigan's third novel, *In Watermelon Sugar*. The novel is set in the future in a commune which evolved after an industrialized America was destroyed, one where everything is made of pine and stone and the ubiquitous "watermelon sugar," and it's this commune that the book is about.

But what we learn from the narrator is piecemeal. Although the commune is nearly 200 years old, there are no longer books to which he can refer, nor any other historical sources he can rely upon. The best he can do is to provide a general sketch of its background, then turn to his own life—his childhood, his loss of innocence at the age of twelve when the commune was invaded by tigers and his parents were killed, his adolescence, and events more immediate too: how inBOIL and his gang killed themselves in the last few months in protest of the commune's existence, for

example, or how the speaker left his lover Margaret in favor of Pauline, or how Pauline recently hung herself.

iDEATH, the commune's name, would imply that personal interest and personal visions have been eliminated in favor of those of the group, but there's little to support that in what the speaker has to offer us. Quite the opposite, in fact. "I-ness" seems to be all too important here. Consider the book the narrator is writing. He tells us that he's unsure of how to tell the story he has underway, and he explains that books are a thing of the past in iDEATH, resigned to an area beyond the commune known as the Forgotten Works like everything else from an Industrial Age. But a similar obscurity seems to be true about language itself.

We're told repeatedly about watermelon sugar, watermelontroutoil, and other watermelon terms, but we never learn what these things are. We know only that something, somewhere, has been invested with meaning by the speaker. Precisely what that meaning is, though, remains unclear.

The narrator lives in a cabin by himself. He is cut off from the others of iDEATH both physically and emotionally; and once we see that, we must wonder how much of his judgment we can trust. As in this description of his walk toward iDEATH for dinner, we're likely to learn more about the speaker than about the world that exists beyond him.

There were lights on down at iDEATH. I watched them as I came down the hill out of the woods. They looked warm, calling and cheery.

Just before I arrived at iDEATH, it changed. iDEATH's like that: always changing. It's for the best. I walked up the stairs to the front porch and opened the door and went in. (*Sugar* 16)

iDEATH isn't changing here; the narrator is. Pauline, a woman

he finds himself attracted to at this point in the novel, is going to be cooking dinner, and the thought of spending time in her company, along with the thought of eating the dinner she's fixed, for she's said to be the best cook in the group, is pleasing to him. But as he approaches the porch, he realizes that Margaret may be there as well. After seven years, he's tired of Margaret. His dread of spending the evening with her equals his anticipation of seeing Pauline. And this situation is further complicated by the fact that Margaret and Pauline are longstanding friends. What has changed here, in other words, are the narrator's expectations for the evening ahead. The evening he'd looked forward to as he came down the hill now promises to be not pleasant but filled with tensions.

More troubling than this perspective, though, is the tone through which events are described in the novel. Virtually everything the speaker recounts is rendered in the same unruffled prose, the same gentle tone of voice. His prose responds to a description of eating meatloaf no more or less dramatically than it responds to seeing Margaret hanging by the neck; it responds no differently to inBOIL and his followers mutilating themselves digit by digit than it does to making love to Pauline. It is as if everything here has been reduced to the same emotional pitch—as well it might be, for nothing seems to have an emotional hold on the narrator.

THE ABORTION: AN HISTORICAL ROMANCE 1966 (1971)

A reader can't help but notice the number of "I"s in *In Watermelon Sugar*, the number of personal pronouns. What we're left with, apparently, is an experience of the world more self-centered than communal—a situation Brautigan seems to try to resolve in his fourth novel, *The Abortion*.

The Abortion is subtitled "An Historical Romance 1966," and it

is historical, at least in a sense, for it deals with a man who has dropped out of society—read *historical time*—and then tries to re-enter it. The reason for his re-entry has to do with Vida Kramer, a beautiful girl who comes to the library where he lives and works. Vida is significant here, for most of all the novel is a romance and it looks toward the sort of five-step development we've come to expect from romantic tales since the time of the Ancients.

I. Boy Meets Girl

II. Boy Falls in Love with Girl

III. Their Relationship is Threatened

IV. Boy and Girl Learn to Fend for Themselves
and Overcome That Threat

V. As Man and Woman, the Two Live Happily Ever After

The Abortion is the most conventional of the four novels discussed thus far, the novel that's most obviously a novel, but it's also the least charming to read line by line and the least adventurous stylistically. Had Brautigan worked himself into a corner? Relying on a life of the imagination had begun for him as a slightly tricky business, but one that *Trout Fishing in America* showed he could handle. Could the same thing be said about *A Confederate General* and *In Watermelon Sugar*? Didn't they point toward solipsism? Self-absorption at the very least? It's almost as if Brautigan was trying to refute his earlier novels by writing *The Abortion*—in terms of content, theme, even style.

The library where we first meet the speaker is not unlike iDEATH, after all—it's a solitary world (he lives and works there alone, cataloging books that can find no other home), one he has not ventured beyond for years. The library is another of Brautigan's worlds of lonely pleasures, and Vida's entrance into it—she's written a book about the terrors of being physically beautiful—is at

first confusing to the narrator, and then as he falls more deeply in love with her, disruptive. Her pregnancy by him and their need to seek an abortion mean he must leave the library and go across the border into Mexico with her, an act which will cost him his job and banish him from the library forever.

Accompanying Vida to Tijuana and helping her negotiate an abortion puts him back into the world he's shrunk away from. It helps him to learn once again to be a functioning human being. But that may not be entirely for the best. In the final section of the novel, for instance, we learn that he has no job to speak of, no real friends, no real place in society.

It's been Vida, not the speaker, who has taken charge of their lives and kept them together, and it's appropriate that in the final passages of the book she should be the focus. Yet the tone of his last comments is worrisome: "Vida's off doing something or other" (*Abortion* 226), he says. At the same time, he says nothing about what their initial attraction to one another will lead to. The reader must guess, in other words, about the sort of issues that classical romance plotting seldom leaves unresolved.

THE HAWKLINE MONSTER: A GOTHIC WESTERN (1974)

But then *The Abortion* is hardly a classical romance. Rather it seems to have been the beginning of an attempt by Brautigan to find traditional patterns of order and coherence in most unusual situations. This search is also evident in *The Hawkline Monster*. The novel is subtitled "A Gothic Western," and a reader has only to consider the plotline to see why. Two gunfighters, Greer and Cameron, are hired by the Hawkline sisters to rid their mansion of a specter that's been terrifying them. But the gothic goings-on in the book owe more to the horror movies of Hollywood's Universal Studios than they do to the novels of Ann Radcliffe and Mary

Wollstonecraft Shelley, just as the Western landscape we encounter seems to have more to do with *The Wild Bunch* or *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* than with Zane Grey or Owen Wister.

The action of the novel begins shortly after the turn of the century. Greer and Cameron have been sent to Hawaii to kill a man and in the opening pages they're waiting outside his house in ambush. That they've outlived their time becomes clear as they wait. There's no travelling farther west for them. Sailing to Hawaii is tantamount to being so far west that they've actually arrived east again. Nor is there any chance of staying one step ahead of the twentieth century. Everywhere they turn now there seem to be communities and settlers and domesticated life.

Greer and Cameron are professional killers. They once shot a deputy sheriff in Idaho ten times and stopped shooting him only when he agreed to die. Killing men for a living seemed in those days to be a suitable way of life. But that time is gone now. The frontier has been settled; law and order has replaced the law of the Old West; and as they watch the man and his family, they recognize that what they've been sent to do, what they once might have done without a second thought, would now be unthinkable loathsome. Too, this recognition forecasts the difficulties they're going to have later once they've been hired by the Hawklime sisters.

Magic and mystery, dark and labyrinth-like passages, a mad scientist, the scientist's monster that gets out of his control, these and other elements of the horror story Greer and Cameron discover in the world of the Hawklime sisters. But this is no ordinary monster; nor is it the sort of antagonist the two are used to facing. It has the power to make them see things that aren't really there; it makes normal conversation all but impossible; it changes "objects and thoughts into whatever form" amuses it (*Hawklime* 189)—which is to say, it has powers much like those of the human imagination.

*WILLARD AND HIS BOWLING TROPHIES:
A PERVERSE MYSTERY (1975)*

That Greer and Cameron eventually overcome such forces for the Hawklane sisters is perhaps of less interest than what the situation tells us about Brautigan's thematic concerns. The Hawklane mansion and the monster it contains appear to Cameron and Greer to be something out of a dream, and this bow to Freud and the human unconscious points us toward an issue Brautigan will pursue in his next three novels: the power of the mind to disrupt our lives and lead us in directions that are not in our interest. This issue is certainly apparent in *Willard and His Bowling Trophies*, which looks once again to conventional subgenres, employing the dressings of the erotic novel and wedding them to the plotline of the thriller. Such a wedding might seem to be ill-made, but as Brautigan handles the material, both subgenres concern a desire or obsession that reduces people to other than reasonable behavior, and isolates them from one another in ways they seem unable to avoid.

The Logan brothers might be called the villains of the novel, for they're villainous in any number of ways; yet conventional notions of heroes and villains seem out of place here. It's their search that's more to the point. The theft of the Logan brothers' bowling trophies, evidence of their single achievement in the world, sets off a search which reduces them to committing progressively violent acts until we recognize, well before they do, that they have crossed some intangible line between animal and human behavior, that they are no longer as interested in reclaiming what's theirs as they are in acting out their darkest desires on the world. "The bastards who stole our bowling trophies," one of the brothers finally realizes, "they don't deserve to live. Look what they've done to us. They've made us into animals. We're just animals now. Fucking animals" (*Willard* 121).

This same sort of descent of the evolutionary ladder is to be found in those sections dealing with Bob and Constance, two lovers deeply and unhappily engaged in sadomasochistic love-making. Like the Logans, Bob must finally face the facts of what his desires and fantasies have reduced him to, and also that he is helpless before them. In one scene, for instance, which takes place after he's brought himself to sexual climax and has untied and ungagged Constance, he's confronted with evidence he cannot quite accommodate: "He took the ropes and put them in a hall closet on a shelf. Actually, he was hiding them under a blanket that was on the shelf. He was ashamed of them but he could not stop himself from using them on her. He wished that things could be different but they weren't" (*Willard* 87).

Instead of being paraphernalia representing bonds of human desire that tether Constance to Bob, the ropes and gags in the novel suggest instead the lovers' ultimate isolation from one another, and refer as well to the Logan brothers once again. One is lost to his beer drinking, another to his comic books, another to his schemes and psychosis. For a common purpose is not enough to give any of Brautigan's characters a sense of community. They're at once set apart from the world at large and separated from the others with whom we find them, lost, perhaps irreconcilably, to their own private visions and needs.

SOMBRERO FALLOUT: A JAPANESE NOVEL (1976)

Sombrero Fallout is made up of two stories intercut with one another. The first story takes a well-worn plot of science fiction—a flying saucer from outerspace comes to earth and sends a community into panic—and treats it in a comic fashion. Here a sombrero falling from the sky sets off chases and shenanigans recalling Mack Sennett and farces familiar from silent movie comedies. The

second story emerges as the writer of the first story thinks about his ex-lover, Yukiko, who has recently moved out of his apartment and gone back to her own. Sometimes looking to the facts, sometimes taking the facts of their relationship together and building fantasies from them, and sometimes relying on his imagination alone, he labors to understand what caused them to break up and what held them together in the first place.

Sombrero Fallout contains some of the most lovely writing Brautigan had managed since *Trout Fishing in America*, and some of the most skillful manipulation of texture and tone. The broad, mindless comedy to be found in the story of the falling sombrero, for instance, seems to give rise naturally to sensitive interior monologues and passages of delicate description. An example of the latter is to be found in this section, as the speaker imagines Yukiko sleeping in her Commonwealth Avenue apartment and dreaming of Japan while her cat stirs nearby.

Yukiko turned over. She was becoming restless in her sleep. Her dream of Kyoto was falling apart at the edges. The dream depended on the purring of the cat for existence and now that the cat had stopped purring her dream was falling apart.

Her mind tried to create a synthetic purring but it was unable to. The dream needed the cat's purring to go on existing. Then the dream started to break up like a severe earthquake. Great chunks of it shook down. The warm autumn rain turned into ruins and the cemetery folded up like a disheveled card table and her feeling of peace and contentment turned into nothing.

The cat stood up in bed, stretched and then jumped down onto the floor. It walked very slowly to the kitchen, stopping on its way to stretch again.

By the time the cat reached the bowl of water beside the refrigerator in the kitchen, Kyoto was over. (Sombbrero 103-04)

Little in the first story is comic. The slapstick is tired and the jokes are obvious. And once its plot is underway, there's hardly a development that comes as a surprise. But its predictability serves rather well as a counterpoint. Try as he will to fit his relationship with Yukiko into a conventional scheme, into familiar cause and effect relationships, into all the standard patterns, the writer finds that the situation defies his ability. The best he can do is to offer memories, fragments of memories, filter them through his imagination once in a while, and try to put them together. In the first story the writer is Godlike: things happen as he wants, for no better reason than that he wants them to. Not here, though. His obsession with Yukiko has powers more awesome than his own.

DREAMING OF BABYLON: A PRIVATE EYE NOVEL 1942 (1977)

The narrator of *Sombbrero Fallout* is a professional writer, we're to understand, and probably a hack; he's so familiar with science fiction plotting, for instance, that the story of the sombrero seems to be writing itself. The narrator of *Dreaming of Babylon*, C. Card, is a writer, too, but not a very good one; certainly not a very practiced writer, not if we're to judge by this novel. In fact he is no better at writing a detective novel in the hardboiled tradition than he is at being a hardboiled detective. Just as he misses obvious clues and can't keep track of those he uncovers—he's been hired by a rich woman to steal a corpse from the morgue—neither can he keep track of his own narrative development, as a passage such as this one reveals: "Peg-leg walked me out to the front door. He moved quickly and gracefully for a man with a peg-leg. Did I mention that before? I don't think I did. I should have. It's kind of interesting: a man with a peg-leg taking care of dead

people" (*Dreaming* 40).

The title of the novel refers to the only arena in which the narrator can gain control of a situation and then triumph. As in the old weekly movie serials familiar from Saturday matinees, events from his own life are reworked as daydreams of "Babylon"—ones in which he is always the hero, and in which the end of one adventure seems to trip the beginning of the next.

Card's a loser on all fronts but this one. He can't afford a car, and a cab is as much a luxury as a secretary or a hot meal or a new pair of shoes. He gets respect from no one; he's so far in debt to virtually everyone that he can't raise the money he needs to buy bullets for his gun; and he is under the thumb of his nagging mother, who demands that he call her each week and then berates him when he does for the way he's chosen to make a living. There's a lot of comic ground to be plowed here, and Brautigan does well by it. The descriptions of Card taking a bus from place to place, his rehearsals of the conversations he's going to have with his mother, his failed attempts to come up with the money he needs to survive are among the funniest sequences Brautigan had ever written. But the novel is not only funny. Like the narrator of *Sombrero Fallout*, Card is a painfully lonely character, and not an entirely admirable one.

Card has allegiance to no one, no code of honor or ethics to speak of; nor does he have the wherewithal to negotiate any but the most simple and straightforward situations. He's much more at home in his fantasy world than in the world he must face everyday. At one point he proclaims that "The world sure is a strange place. No wonder I spend so much time dreaming of Babylon. It's safer" (*Dreaming* 123). Safer it may seem; but that the corpse he seeks winds up in his own refrigerator, and that his enemies have made him the pigeon while he's been lost to his fantasies,

might well serve Card as a warning.

THE TOKYO-MONTANA EXPRESS (1980)

In *Dreaming of Babylon*, Card recalls missing his stop one day while riding a bus. He was lost in his daydreams.

Once I went all the way to the end of the line dreaming of Babylon and I didn't have enough money to get back and the driver wouldn't let me ride for free, even after I had explained to him that I didn't have any money and told a lie to him, that I'd fallen asleep.

"I hear stories like this all the time," he said, with a remarkable lack of concern for my plight. "You can't ride my bus with stories for a fare. I want a nickel. If you don't have a nickel, get off my bus. I don't make the rules. It costs a nickel to ride." (*Dreaming*, 139-40)

In Brautigan's next novel, *The Tokyo-Montana Express*, we learn once again that there's a price to be paid for insulating yourself from the world. *The Tokyo-Montana Express* looks much at first like *Trout Fishing in America*, for it's made up of one hundred and thirty-one sections, many with titles like "Autumn Trout Gathering" or "Shrine of Carp," or titles intended to charm the reader, like "Marching in the Opposite Direction of a Pizza." And many of these are in a prose so finely wrought that individual sections approach prose poems. Like *Trout Fishing* too, settings and characters recur, motifs such as movies and cooking and fishing are developed, and metaphors and images are repeated in a way that is often reassuring. Yet *The Tokyo-Montana Express* remains a much more private book than *Trout Fishing*. Most of the sections consist of fragments of an event that have come to the speaker's mind from out of his past, either in this country or the Orient. Few of these are fully rendered. Instead, we're apt to find a few

passages about something he's done or seen, then a passage or two of the speaker's reactions—but what these events mean to him, or why they've been included, is seldom very clear. Often it's left up to the reader to separate the facts of a scene from what the speaker brings to it, and then to look to the disparity between the two in order to draw our own conclusions.

In "The Great Golden Telescope," for instance, a reunion of old friends makes the speaker confront himself when a stranger intrudes upon the gathering. In the early passages, the situation seems to be something from a song by Jackson Browne.

The food is delicious.

We sit around on the floor eating it.

We all look like hippies.

On my way to the house, riding on the back of a truck, some spring snow fell. It was a slight flurry that didn't stick, and a short while later I watched a beautiful sunset from outside the house and I played with two kittens and a tomcat and marvelled at how big New Mexico is. (*Tokyo* 123)

But the mood is interrupted by an aging flower child who smelled the food cooking as she drove by in her Volkswagen bus and who has invited herself to dinner. She's overweight, the speaker tells us, generally unkempt, too old to be dressed the way she is, but what bothers him most, we surmise, is that she won't stop talking. She dominates the conversation with pipedreams of how the group will buy a mountain together and make clothes from seaweed that they'll sell to celebrities, Frank Zappa and Dennis Hopper and others of their fame. She's an embarrassment to them all, and finally to herself as well: " 'Do you know what?' she says suddenly . . . , 'I think I've been in a Volkswagen bus too long' " (*Tokyo* 125).

But she's an embarrassment most of all to the speaker, for in

his own way he too has been in a Volkswagen bus too long. She is more pathetic than he is only by degree, more out of step with the times only by a step or two, and her wild schemes have consumed her there at dinner only slightly more than the speaker has been obsessed with his vision of foothills and snowfalls and the happy communal life he recalls from the 1960s.

What we discover as we make our way through the book is that of the 131 sections which comprise it, more than a hundred deal in one way or another with being detached from the world, or being isolated against it by one's own private version of reality. And we discover something else as well.

One of the most troubling aspects of what the speaker has chosen to include in this book is that people seem to have meaning for him only insofar as he can identify with them. We're reminded of the gold doubloon tacked to the mainmast of the Pequod in Melville's *Moby-Dick*: each man looked into the doubloon, we're told, and became his own allegorist. And there's something of that here. People, settings, events, whatever—they have no value for the speaker except insofar as he can recognize himself. Consider the way the speaker handles this account of a man taking snapshots of women on the streets of Japan in "Harem."

He is almost invisible wandering around Tokyo, taking photographs of beautiful women. He is so nondescript looking in his appearance and presence that it is not possible to describe him. He is one of those people that even when you are looking at him you are forgetting him so that the second he is out of your sight he is totally forgotten.

The beautiful women are never aware that he is taking their photograph or if they are aware of it they instantly forget it.

He has thousands of photographs of beautiful women. He

develops them in his own darkroom and makes life-size prints. He has the prints hanging like clothes in his closet on thousands of hangers.

Whenever he feels lonely he just takes one of them out.
(Tokyo 66-67)

Clearly what has actually taken place here is of less interest than what the speaker brings to it. Words don't work, we're told, *it is not possible to describe him*, so the speaker turns instead to the longings in himself that the man has awakened. But what at first appears to be a figure of speech at the end of the first paragraph—*He is one of those people that even when you are looking at him you are forgetting him*—takes on a new dimension as we proceed to the second: *The beautiful women are never aware*. . . . And this then gives rise to the speaker's own private vision of the man and his snapshots and the women whom he photographs. He is removed from them; they come alive for him only through his imagination; his imagination responds to his longings and desires in a way in which the world will not; and relying so much on his imagination isolates him further at the same time the imagination comforts him.

This line of development is something like the pattern we first discovered while examining a passage from *Trout Fishing in America*, in which a bit of figurative language gradually took on a life of its own and seemed to eclipse the rest of the scene. But the speaker's sense of self-absorption and detachment are much more profound here in *The Tokyo-Montana Express*, and they're more profound still in Brautigan's tenth and final published novel, *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away*.

SO THE WIND WON'T BLOW IT ALL AWAY (1982)

So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away, like *The Tokyo-Montana*

Express, invites us to read it as a somewhat autobiographical work. Born in the same year as Brautigan, the speaker is a novelist whose childhood is much like what we know about Brautigan's and who looks much as Brautigan looked in his high school year-book. The speaker recounts one incident of one day, Saturday, 17 February 1948, in a small western Oregon town. This was a shooting accident that would change his life forever. Twelve years old at the time, the speaker and his friend David went target shooting in an abandoned apple orchard. David and the speaker separated; crouched in the bushes, David shot at a pheasant and missed it; the speaker fired at the pheasant as it fled David's aim, missed it as well, but his bullet went into the bushes and took David's life.

Beginning his account on 1 August 1979—the same time when Brautigan was writing *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away*—the speaker, with the benefit of hindsight, tries to find meaning and reason in the incident by interweaving it first with an account of his earlier childhood, and second, with one evening from the summer of 1947 when his childhood, his innocence, and his imagination were still in full flower. He was waiting that evening in 1947 for a man and woman who would arrive at a pond near his house in a pickup loaded with furniture. Piece by piece they'd remove a couch, an easy chair, end tables, a wood-burning stove, electric lights converted to kerosene, and other furnishings of a house and set them up on the edge of a pond. Then, after cooking their dinner and eating it wordlessly, they'd fish side by side into the night, as much the picture of domesticity as if they were in their own living room listening to the radio or reading the evening news.

The speaker recalls watching them in silence from the bushes. To him, the scene "looked like a fairy tale functioning happily in the post-World War II gothic of America before television crippled the imagination of America and turned people indoors and

away from living out their own fantasies with dignity" (*Wind* 130).

This passage seems to predicate a familiar longing from Brautigan's earliest work—that the imagination should make of the world what it will be. But it would be a mistake to read this novel as a story about imagination in quite this sense. Of more concern, perhaps, is the imagination on another plane—to what degree are we at its mercy?

David is everything the speaker is not: intelligent, neat, moneyed, popular, good at sports, talented in obvious ways. The speaker seems to sense that David is using him, that David keeps their friendship a secret from their classmates because he is slightly ashamed of being seen with him. As they ride toward the apple orchard, for instance, it is the speaker rather than David whose attention is caught by one of the children from the rundown houses along a backroad.

A kid about ten years old saw us coming and yelled at us when we pedaled by. "You sons-of-bitches all have bicycles!" he said. "I'll have a bicycle some day!"

Soon we had left his voice behind like a voice from a dream dreamt down the road, but I looked back into the dream and I could still see him yelling, but I couldn't hear a word. He was just another kid driven crazy by poverty and his drunken father beating him up all the time and telling him that he'd never amount to anything, that he would end up just like his father, which he would. (*Wind* 109-10)

The boy's oath stems from a life like that of the speaker's, not from one like David's; and one has to wonder how much of the bitterness and frustration the speaker hears in these words he recognizes in himself. As close as he can come to confronting this issue head-on is to wonder why he chose to buy bullets for his rifle in the first place. He had only enough money for a hamburger

and a coke or for a box of shells; he had to make a choice. But why choose the former? Was it, he wonders, simply a matter of chance? Was it simply one of "life's mysteries which will always remain unsolved" (*Wind* 104)?

Perhaps. But there are passages in the novel which make one wonder how fully satisfactory this answer can be. Why did the speaker choose hollow point bullets, for instance, if all he'd intended to do was a little target shooting? Or this: "It was a tremendous lot of fun to watch the effect of a bullet hitting a rotten apple. They just simply exploded and the bullet continued on viciously scratching white grooves in the still-living branches of the apple trees. We both had boxes of hollow points and they could really show an apple who was boss" (*Wind* 112-13).

The speaker does not account for why neither David nor he thought there might be danger in separating, in being out of one another's sight. Was it the carelessness of children? He says he fired at the pheasant without thinking, that it was nothing more than a reflex after hearing David's shot, that he didn't have time to think of where David might be shooting from. Again, he recognizes, the response must be: Perhaps.

That the speaker should broach such questions and then leave them unanswered is manifestly the point here. For he is haunted by his memories, as any of us surely would be, and haunted too by his potential for guilt. Forget that he was acquitted by the authorities, that the shooting was determined to have been an accident. These are nothing but legalities. His imagination has formed scenarios in which he's been tried and convicted. It's telling that the speaker is so quick to announce early-on that he is going to stick to the facts, to a literal, truthful account, insofar as he can. And telling too that he reminds us of his resolve as the narrative develops. For the facts here are often more comforting than the

possibilities his imagination offers.

What's at issue in this novel is not the loss of imagination, nor the loss of one child's innocence, but rather the loss of an imagination born from innocence, one which can shape and mold an unspeakable world into magical forms. All the speaker can muster now are the autobiographical facts—those and an imagination that push him toward madness.

I have replayed that day over and over again in my mind like the editing of a movie where I am the producer, the director, the editor, scriptwriter, actors, music, and everything.

I have a gigantic motion picture studio in my mind where I have been working constantly on this movie since February 17th, 1949. I have been working on the same movie for 31 years. I believe that this is a record. I don't think I will ever finish it.

I have, more or less, about 3,983,421 hours of film.

But it's too late now. (*Wind* 74)

BRAUTIGAN AND THE CRITICS

The first question posed by university scholars was whether work with such a popular following had any literary merit as well, and the early returns seemed to suggest that it did. Antecedents for Brautigan's experimental structure and style were found in the work of writers as notable as Herman Melville and William Faulkner and Jack Kerouac, and then too his prose was of interest. Brautigan's ear for the rhythms and sounds of the spoken word was considerable, it was decided, and for a time it seemed possible that Brautigan was earning a place for himself in American letters, if not as a stylist, then at least as the latest in a long line of American romancers.

But so much attention was being paid to the formal qualities

of Brautigan's fiction that no one seems to have thought to look closely at the content. Its concerns, insofar as there seemed to be anything worth remarking about Brautigan's concerns, were accepted at face value. Brautigan was identified with the ideals of his audience. Or at least this was the case until the early 1970s. Take John Clayton's "Richard Brautigan: The Politics of Woodstock," which appeared in a 1971 edition of *New American Review*. What Clayton and others began to discover was that Brautigan's writing didn't call for social change, much less taking to the streets, as much as it argued against such things. Was it possible, they asked, that Brautigan had missed the political boat?

This question stirred renewed interest in Brautigan's work. Neil Schmitz, Patricia Hernlund, and other intelligent critics found that his narrators were often untrustworthy, that his texts were often ironic, that his pastoral vision wasn't really pastoral at all. Clayton had been wrong: it wasn't Brautigan who'd missed the boat; he was just a much more sophisticated writer than his initial audience had recognized.

The works at issue to this point had been Brautigan's first four novels, arguably the best fiction of Brautigan's career, so the novels of the 1970s, beginning with *The Hawkline Monster*, may well have left him without a critical camp. He was no longer responding to social change, but then neither could his writing be defended on traditional literary grounds. The best the American critics could find to say, and then only for a novel or two, was that these seemed to be finger exercises, these latest books, ones that might lead Brautigan to more serious accomplishments.

At roughly the same time Brautigan's work was beginning to be dismissed or ignored by American critics, it found a strong following among Europeans, one which continues today, particularly among the French. In part, surely, this has to do with cultural

perspective. One wants to keep in mind that the French have honored Jerry Lewis as the foremost director of American comedy films, and similarly, they may have found in Brautigan's novels virtues which we've been unable to perceive. In larger part, though, the French estimate of his work may have had to do with trends in European scholarship. Structuralism, deconstructionism, and other new approaches popular in European literary circles for the last fifteen years are well suited to Brautigan's fiction, better suited to his work perhaps than to that of many of his peers. In any case, Brautigan's work received little more than fleeting attention from American scholars through the 1970s.

In 1983, just as Brautigan seemed certain to slip from view, two book-length studies of his work were published in this country. Issued as part of the Twayne's United States Authors Series, *Richard Brautigan*, by Edward Halsey Foster, made a persuasive case for some serious reconsideration, arguing that Brautigan's writing offered a bridge between the Beats and the next generation of American authors. Marc Chenetier's *Richard Brautigan*, published in Methuen's *Contemporary Writers Series*, called for a reconsideration as well, but of a slightly different sort. According to Chenetier, the American critics' dismissal of Brautigan and his work has had less to do with the quality of his writing than with the nature of the scholarship applied to it. Brautigan's work falls outside the scope of traditional American scholarship, argued Chenetier—if anything, Brautigan's *oeuvre* seeks to liberate fiction from precisely those premises upon which traditional methodology is based. Neither Foster nor Chenetier presents Brautigan as a major literary figure. But they do cogently remind us that there's a difference between being a minor writer and an insignificant one, a writer not worth one's serious attention.

As a post-modern writer, Brautigan's contribution seems slight.

He possessed neither the intellect nor the facility with narrative of a Barth or a Pynchon. Nor is there much about his work that has prompted critics to embrace him as a regional or *Western writer*. In fact, in a conventional understanding of that phrase, Brautigan might have to be excluded altogether. Post-modernism seems to be so completely at odds with what Western American writing's about. The protagonists of our Westerns have sought most of all an uncorrupted frontier, for instance, one where individualism is likely to be honored, and an honorable way of life maintained. Of what concern is that to the post-modernists? Isolation, incapacity, the solitariness of the human experience, characters unable to negotiate their way through the world by a set of socially acceptable standards, yet unable to devise a private set of standards that might accommodate their behaviors, these have seemed to be the chief concerns of post-modernists.

But Brautigan's work may give us cause to rethink assumptions about the disparity between the two sensibilities. Looking toward who we are and who we might like once again to become, Brautigan's novels suggest cultural myths and personal realities that can inform one another, if they're given a chance. America is often "only a place in the mind" he wrote in *Trout Fishing in America*, and that expresses about as well as anyone might the key to the connection between post-modern and traditional Western views. For what Brautigan's novels do is to bring the territorial impulse of the Western, with all that suggests, to the experiential dilemmas of twentieth-century life. Was it possible that the human mind was the last virgin territory available? Could we find there the last remnant of the nineteenth-century dream of self-determination? For a time it seemed we might, but only for a time. The human mind turned out to be a dangerous going.

Brautigan's greatest contribution to American letters may lie neither

in post-modernism nor in Westernism, in other words, but rather in pointing us toward a juncture where the two might yet meet.

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