

*Fresh Meat,
Same Old Can:*
**The Best of the
Thaddeus Gazette,
1996-1998**

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Prologue: Thaddeus Gazette #1

An Experiment In Mass Communications (seeing as how I never write anybody in person cos I'm always busy TWEEZING)

Hello,

If you're receiving this, chances are you are unfortunate enough to be in my thoughts, along with several cups of strong Seattle coffee. I'm not sure what I'm up to here, except that a lot of my dear sweet friends (including each and every one of you, surely) wonder what I'm doing from time to time.

This is just another piece of email, nothing special. Don't feel constrained to answer it like a letter unless you really wanna.

I'll probly be doing this once a week or so, just as a finger and brain exercise and to let you all know that I'm still here. If it really annoys you, feel free to write me and tell me to shut up and I'll take you outa the loop.

What Saregama Don't Know

I've been learning the sitar, an instrument I've lusted after since adolescence, but always assumed was too much brainsurgery and rocketscience for poor pitiful me. No false modesty here, neighbors — I read where Ravi Shankar said it took two years just to learn to hold the thing correctly, concluded that anything that took that much of what German chess players call *sitzfleisch* was probly out of my attention-deficient range. Dispite all this, however, here I am sitzing my *fleisch* every morn and eve practicing ughshudder SCALES on the world's only instrument with its own yoga posture. And yes, kids, it IS rocket science. I claim to musician friends to be studying the esoteric mysteries of *saregamapadhanisa* (that's Sanscrit for "do-re-mi...") (I'm NOT kidding!), and there's nothing quite so high-status amongst esoteric and bizarre musicians as being even a beginning student of sitar.

Just having one is bad enough. Ours arrived through the good offices of Cat Fox, our favorite wooden instrument worker here in town. She had it sitting on a side bench with no strings on it one day when we walked in with more money than good sense, and she sold it to us cheap because the owner had died and his widow dint want to be esoteric. Then it sat in a locker for two years because we couldn't afford to get it strung and set up. Finally we witnessed a sterling sitar performance at a church service we played at (some church, eh? Amber Tide and raga on the same bill...) and the buzzer went off in me: it's time.

I'm tempted to do a composition on the instrument called "Don't Tell My Teacher I Played This." I take lessons (when I can afford to, or by barter) from a very gentle, sweet, civilized man who learned in India (he also does repairs, mostly because nobody else around knows how) and is intent on teaching the real turtle and not the mock. So I'm doing scales and exercises and trying very hard to maintain proper hand and body position. At first it was like juggling: get the right hand curved, strum, get the left hand curved, keep the body straight, right arm in position, CURVE THAT LEFT oops dropped again. Now, however, it's starting to pay off — and I'm starting to drift away into dreaming twangy-droney melodies that may be performed right from a technical point of view (at least to the point that my technique has progressed) but which I'm sure don't map to anything remotely significant in the classic sitar repertoire. I'm also sure my teacher would cluck disapprovingly and tell me to get back to my exercises. Yes, Saregama, I obey.

I'm doing my exercises I yam I yam I yam, but I'll probly keep doing the spaceout looneytunes too. I just won't tell teacher.

Playing on the Subway

There is a news group or mail list or some such hoohaw on the Interinept that I subscribe to, called FOLK_MUSIC, out of the mystic east somewheres. There the small but doughty folkie and singer-songwriter community exchanges tips, leads, brags, raves, pans and irregularities. Most of the info is meaningless to rugged westerners such as myself, but there are times when the dialog is relevant, like when they start bubbling about how so-and-so is so great and “can you imagine, last year he was playing in a subway!”

Of course, folks like this only get noticed after they get their Big Record Deal, which is the point where 99.9% of all audio artists begin to exist in this culture. Before their BRD, they are stuck in the limbo of art-without-status.

There are two responses currently in vogue to the difficulties of creating art in our admittedly materialistic culture. One is the Biznis Rictus, a twisted sneer of corrupt cynicism coupled with a bad-breath spiel about the crassness of commerical culture and the necessity of becoming compromised to succeed, along with the obligatory wistful ifonlys about how in a better world artists would be enthroned on ermine pillows and soldiers would sing in subways. The other is the Booster Boys Chorus Line, with all the people who have made it even a little way up the greasy pole towards the porcine prize twittering soulfully about the necessity of learning the business if you want to really get your art to your audience and if you care about yourself at all you owe it to yourself to tighten your belt and smile smile smile and schmooze schmooze schmooze and and and... The BBCL tends to run on and on and on about such things, almost like a hypnotic subject repeating their orders.

Now I'm sounding like sour mash myself. In truth, these party lines are both missing the purpose of art, which is the way it integrates into natural human society, the one that pops up before money becomes an issue. Art isn't really a family thing — if junior paints really good it might be cool, but it isn't important to reproduction or food-gathering. It exists in the tribal range of human interaction, where communities and cultures establish their extrafamilial identities and provide the informational intermingling that leads to more efficient reproduction and food gathering. Here Junior can draw pictures of how the Bluglugs down the road make fire and Pop can pick up a trick or two. And if everyone likes the way Miz Bluglug looks in that particular loinwrap and starts wearing theirs that way too, pretty soon you got a solidarity going that can be of significant value when the Morlocks invade from the north.

Evolutionarily, that's what art is for, IMHO. Turning it into a cult of personality or a commodity or a subculture of its own is cute but irrelevant as far as the DNA is concerned. And bitching about the lack of concern for the suffering artist or smily-buttoning about the opportunities in the art biz are as the rustling of dead leaves.

Whence this tirade? Weeellll, we played ourselves a little bitty festival in St Maries Idaho this past weekend. This is a town of 2,000 or so in the mountains of northern ID, where the wilderness has a kind of friendly air to it and the people tend to tolerate one another (except for the crazies, who are tolerated by everyone else but don't have many friends except other crazies). The festival itself has run for five or six years and has had the same people at it most of those years. We got to be the Fresh Wind Outta Seattle, a job we do tolerably well, and they loved us. Yes, we got paid, but no, the money wasn't the point. We were respected, treated very well, taken home and integrated into the family, teased, questioned, laughed at, and in all ways used well. This was a community that knew a cultural resource when they heard it and didn't let it go to waste. And that made us feel very good, in a way that playing for drunks in a bar never does.

Here a flock of Janis Joplin and Kris Kristofferson homunculuses fresh from the laboratories of Smith Klone and French break into a chorus of "...and feelin good was good enuf for MEEEEEEEEEEEE..." Aw. shaddup. Everyone needs a vacation from commerce sometime.

It's no lie that we live in Bucks Country, where everyone is encouraged, nay commanded, to live for Faster Horses, Older Whiskey, Younger [insert your sexual preference here], but particularly and especially and specifically and exclusively MORE MONEY. But without the cultural, communitarian paper the bottom line gets written on, what's the point?

Hey, go have fun — class dismissed.

Back on the Meat Wagon

It's an interesting transition when you go from being a stone vegetarian to an enthusiastic if mildly compromised carnivour (one who eats circus workers?? Where's the dictionary...) meat eater over the course of a few brief months. Such has been our experience since last year, mutating from tenderhearted plant-munchers through shamefaced fish fanciers to full-blown steak-and-potatos-hold-the-potatos extremes.

The reasons were primarily medical: Sandahbeth could no longer stay healthy eating nothing but shrubbery. Her diabetes and connective tissue problems needed protein and complex nutrients beyond the capacity of floral sources. I myself was in relatively cool health, if a tad overweight, but I was also the more pragmatic of the two of us about what I put in my mouth, throat and alimentary canal, to say nothing of the temple of my body. S, torn between what she perceived as the needs of her spirit and what her healers pointed out to her as the needs of her body, resisted the change for as long as she could, until she found herself hunting crabs almost without conscious intervention during dives, until she started having meatosaurian wetdreams of shrimp feasts.

When we gave in, it was to fish — mostly out of horror at the meatpacking industry. Years ago, out on the road, we were treated one night to a demonstration of Hell in an Arizona rest area. It was the dead of summer, a mere 95 degrees at bloody midnight, and across from us in the droning truck zone a trailerful of swine lay in torpid, overcrowded, market-bound misery. At the bottom of the heap, amidst the endproducts of his fellows, one wretched porker lifted his head, gazing blurred and wretched into the darkness. It was well and truly a vision of the Abyss, and the entity behind those half-open eyes was fully aware of his state, of the regard accorded him by those who held power over him, and of his destination.

Fish, on the other hand, are free — as free as any living thing not caged or collared. And in the ocean, as our friend R Chumleigh says, being eaten is such an inevitability that, like it or not, nobody is really surprised at being caught.

Ah, but as Chumleigh also says, there's nothing more pathetic than a fallen purist — they always end up going to extremes. First it was fish, then a taste of thanksgiving turkey, then a hunk of chicken at a barbeque. Next thing you know, S was going on a high-protein/low-carbohydrate regime, losing weight and lowering her insulin dependency at the same time. Now we're feasting on beef and ol' Tragicpuss's tenderloin and hindquarters.

Funny thing is, tho, that it's working — S is losing and I got rid of ten pounds that had crept into my gut and refused to leave for two aerobic-intensive, situp-encrusted years. I fit (albeit tightly) (but isn't that the point?) back into the black leather pants S gave me twelve or so Christmas' back, not nearly entirely for altruistic reasons. (I've always said that black leather pants are an extremely ergonomic garment — you put them on, and your spouse takes them off...)

It's enough to make me surmise that the spread of human metabolism includes both high and low protein subtypes, and that the wrong diet — whatever that might be for the individual — is unhealthy. In the past I've theorized that eating meat made people more aggressive and eating vegetables made them more placid, but there's obviously a lot more to this than a simple tiger/rabbit dicotomy (a dicotomy I share, being born on the cusp of the Chinese new year between — oh gawd — a Tigar and a Rabbit year.)

But the whole esthetic of eating the flesh of Brother Pig and Sister Cow probably lies in the respect of the creature. The Northwest indians say that the salmon that you catch are the ones that volunteer to give their bodies to your sustenance, and that proper gratitude is only right and reasonable. Still, I'd feel a lot better about it if I knew that Brother Pig lived the life of Wilbur before they whacked him and turned him into chops and sausage. Better or not, tho, flesh is back in our diet, and it doesn't look like it's leaving soon.

But I still won't eat at McDonald's.

Sitar and Didj

Two instruments of archaic improvisation face each other across the narrow front of our living space. On the left (as you enter), the much maligned and highly celebrated didjeridu, an instrument of almost cosmic simplicity: a column of air with a mouthpiece at one end. Mine is made of the stalk of a century plant from the green desert country near Tucson AZ, but it could just as easily be one of the gum tree logs hollowed out by termites fancied by the inventors of the instrument, the Aborigines of Australia, although the net sound might be slightly different. The Abos trace the didj back as far as their lore goes, and while some sources date it from about a thousand years back, there are 67,000 year old cave paintings depicting people (men, probably) playing long skinny objects with a very specific look to them. Either that or they had a thing for outsized smoking pipes.

The didjeridu is the cornerpost (sorry, I couldn't resist) of a free and easy musical tradition whose strength and endurance seems to lie almost as much in its adaptability as in its organization. Aboriginal dancing, singing and playing (while you can address the various aspects separately, there's no real point to it from the Aboriginal view) draws as much from improvisation and partying as from tradition or structured "songs" or "dances," and it absorbs with relish every other style it runs across, from fishing and sacred songs from New Guinea to rock n roll from the States, grinding it in its friendly maw and regurgitating more Aboriginal partying. It's jujitsu music, conquering by giving in.

To the other side of the entrance, enthroned on an orthopedic pillow and directly beneath the small fishtank, is the regal and very exclusive sitar, an instrument so refined as to be virtually unknown in the States, though possessed of a long and noble history in India, dating back to its development in the 15th century. It amazes me, given the sudden explosion of popularity the sitar enjoyed in the 60's, how little literature exists on either the instrument or the tradition that plays it. Sandahbeth, stalwart helpmate that she is, spent hours on the local library online files locating copies of sitar books that were a) in existence b) in print c) in a library — any library and d) weren't lost, stolen, misplaced, checked out or on reserve. The most recent one just showed up the other day from the University of Chicago library.

The bulk of the serious stuff played on the sitar is North Indian classical music, the various styles of performance of the ragas. Extremely specific in certain dimensions, raga also incorporates elements of free improvisation, a combination which leads to great potential for expression on the part of the performer, comparable to American jazz. Perhaps a better comparison, tho, is with the blues: a form with a seemingly straitlaced foundation and strictly observed rules, embedded within a cultural and societal frame-

work, and most specifically, imbued with a high regard for the individual performer and their expression of a range of techniques and moods. The fact that jazz and blues started life as cross-cultural expression by an oppressed underclass, while raga has always been an aristocratic form, frequenting the courts of pre-Raj India, is really beside the point. Other similarities include an emphasis on learning a body of characteristic phrases, reference to vocal technique, use of quartertones and bent notes, and a preference for a teacher-to-student style of instruction.

I wrote before about my sitar teacher. In my readings about North Indian music, I find frequent exhortations, particularly from the literature of the Ali Akbar Khan College, to find a teacher (the AKKC folks say “guru”) and stick with them if you expect to learn anything. Learn the traditions at the master’s feet, they say. My teacher didn’t exactly pooh-poo this idea, but he seemed uncomfortable with the traditional role of sitar teacher as substitute god, as I would suspect any Westerner would (barring the egomaniacs).

The man I learned the most from about didj, on the other hand, would embrace the notion of guruhood headlong if the student suggested it and run their fanny all over the landscape to cure them of the dependency. Tan (“Shawn” spelled funny) Cahil is a jolly academic superhippie, sixty five, tall and skinny with a long flowing white beard and a kettledrum voice, habitually barefoot, who lives out on Vashon Island with nine cats and a greenhouse that looks for all the world like an illustration of a wizard’s cottage from an 19th century fairytale book. In a former career as a PhD anthropologist during the ‘60’s, before he took up impersonating Gandalf, Tan spent four years living with and recording Aboriginals in Arnheim Land, a peninsula in North Australia where several Aboriginal traditions camped, mingled, smoked, traded, jammed and stole licks from each other. Apparently Tan fit right in with the native camps, participating in the daily life of the Abos and dancing along at night.

One of the strictures I place on myself as an artist is to eschew swiping from cultures with which I have had no meaningful contact. If I don’t know the why of an instrument or a style, the how is of no service. So it took Tan bringing me his recordings of the Aboriginals from the 60’s, seeking a cassette manufacturer, for me to feel all right about playing what was essentially a trombone with no slide. He retains a certain cast of the Ancient Ancestor and an instinctive connection with the magical realism of the primal Australians, and delights in sharing his insights into their world, which he feels has seeds of a salvation for overly-civilized Westerners. I have no difficulty connecting with their culture through him.

Across the front of the RV they face each other — the refined and the primitive, the restrained and the utterly uninhibited. Yet both are improvisational instruments, judged in their playing supremely by the skill of the performer. Is there hope that they may participate in some common project, some intersection or union of their divergent and convergent natures? Can the glory that was India and the joyful caterwauling that is forever Australia join forces and create something new?

I dunno — maybe I’ll just throw em both off the Empire State Building and see which one lands first.

The Side of the Civic

No excuses. No abstract theorizing about what went wrong, no mealy-mouthed it-could-happen-to-you sidestepping, no self-righteous thundering blamegames. I flat out missed the red light. I hit that Civic smack in the side. Ten years of good driving record out the window. I hung on to the wheel but S hit the windshield. She got a beeyooteful Klingon transplant on her forehead that the CAT scan assured us was all appearance (like

all Klingons, come to think of it) and developing black eyes as the Great Lump drains out. From the emergency room we made a beeline to our pet chiropractor, who bent us both back straight again. Other driver hurt a little, not much.

It's been awhile since I've had a real ding of an accident, and I suppose there's this to be said for age and experience: it allows me to GET OVER IT quicker than I could before. I can remember back the last time I pulled a lulu, the stages I went through: initial shock, rage at my stupidity, grief at the consequences, defiance of the rage and grief, general malaise, constantly reassessing the monetary damage, a grim determination never EVER to do it again and driving like a Spartan for about a month, slowly slipping back into more comfortable modes as the shock wore off.

This time, the most consequential problem was the shock. Once I stopped shaking my head and dully mumbling "What happened?" (you ran a red, dummy), the rest of the process pretty well short-circuited itself. No Ionian driving habits — machs nichts, dude, you haven't had an accident in ten years, what makes you think you're gonna go on a binge? No disproportionate self-loathing — why bother? It happened. It happens. Clean up the mess. Fill out the forms, call the insurance company, get rid of the hulk. Keep up. Deal with it. A bit grim for a day or two, a bit sad, a bit slow. But as my sister says, "The best cure for tears is sweat." So I did a few chores around the farm, fixed a guitar or two. And, ultimately, I'll live. Just another Halloween, kid. Happy New Year.

Now, when something weird happens totally out of the blue (and believe me, this was the old one-second switcheroo, lah dee dah dee WHAM), S and I have a tendency to ascribe arcane Meanings to it. We search for signs everywhere, modern primitives that we are. What in the world is happening here? Did somebody put a hex out? Were we thinking bad thoughts? Was our hoombah energy directed incorrectly? Did we need a different car? A different home? Should we give what we have to the poor? Join a monastery? What Does It All Mean?

After a considerable amount of thought, tho, I have located at least one uniquely qualified message out of the whole embarrassing business: Look where you're going. And, I suppose, Know when to stop. Words to live by.

Puttin on the Dog

Two articles I saw recently in my endless grocery store magazine rack smoozing reminded me of a theory I have about the alienation of modern life. It shouldn't be too surprising that I have such a theory; I have a theory about practically everything. I don't vouch for their rigor, I just have them, like warts.

The articles concerned the training of guide dogs for disabled people — blind, deaf, parapalegic, and the like. Guide and helper dogs do more than just get their people around open manholes; anymore, they're trained to be hersuit butlers and extra hands, a job which they apparently do with the same enthusiasm they generally reserve for dismembering shoes. Such instruction is necessarily intensive and well-nigh nonstop. Hence, a vast shortfall of trainers exists, creating a five to ten year wait for your personal canine assistant. But in two different circumstances, a partial solution was found for this shortage.

In the first case, teenagers identified as "at risk" (ie, screwups with a lot of brains and energy, foul homelives and too much time on their hands) were put into a program where they trained the dogs for their first six months (the dogs', that is). In the second, the same role was played by hardtime convicts in a state penitentiary. All these folks were given puppies to turn into reasonable candidates for helper dogs, to be passed on for suitable advanced training by the professionals.

Obviously, very suitable public spirited work. But what both articles emphasised was the changes in the trainers wrought by the trainees. Both groups, the students and the convicts, showed a marked improvement in their social skills, higher self-esteem and all the goodies that go along with a raised emotional IQ. They spoke of the degree to which responsibility to their charges, along with the dogs' unconditional devotion and companionship, changed their attitudes towards themselves and others, apparently in a very positive way.

So what? Every boy needs a dog? Well, my theory went like this: At the point that humans stopped working with animals on a regular basis, we lost a connection with the natural world that kept us emotionally open to one another. The farther from the rest of the kingdom we got, the more isolated from each other we became. This happened, I speculated, right about the time we went from horse-drawn to steam and gas powered vehicles.

Yeah, comes the response, but we still have pets, don't we? Don't they count? And here's where the articles come in: we don't work with pets. Plow mules, cart oxen, milk cows, and riding horses are all serving a purpose with us. We cooperate to achieve a task, which may or may not directly benefit the animal but which it must have a stake in to care about, be it a nose bag or a carrot or the joys of a decent rubdown and a murmured "Good girl." Devotion of cowboys to their horses is an obvious (and legendary) example of this partnership. The partnership is less apparent in animal husbandry, where this week's Wilbur is next week's bacon, but even the coldest farm butcher can't help but feel a little gratitude to the friend he's eating for breakfast.

Pets, on the other hand, may or may not serve a purpose in our lives other than snuggle toys. It is worth venturing a guess that the more you and your pet are a team, the less alienated you are from fellow humans. I'm informed by a friend who knows that horsey people who ride, feed and groom their own mounts are very open and friendly to people as well. A corollary might be that those curmudgeons who sneer the most heartily at Fluffy and Fido are themselves the most disgusted with their fellow man, and perhaps more inclined to the politics of exclusion, privilege and oppression, which I contend find their roots in just such misanthropy. As a support to this thesis, I point to the origins of this kind of attitude within two groups: the very rich, who never went near animals unless they were dead on a plate or the preindustrial equivalent of a taxi, and the technophiles who were more comfortable with the inanimate than the animate and strove to do away with animals altogether.

On NPR, I once heard a thought-piece by a man who raises sheep dogs (sheep-herding dogs, that is, not the ones that look like sheep) in the south. A particular favorite dog of his had died, and he went to the local church, which served as combination social center, chamber of commerce and fraternity house, to offer a prayer for the animal. The preacher, true to his creed, had little comfort to offer the man: by most Protestant standards, animals have no souls to pray for, don't go to Heaven and serve only as footstools for our mighty aspirations. The man accepted this attitude from the preacher, seeing him as a good but ignorant man. But he added, "All people who know animals, particularly those of us who work with and train animals, know that if people have souls, animals have souls."

And that, as Zappa's four-footed boogiemeister would say, is the crux of the biscuit.

The Snore

Between performing, driving S to the doctor, patching leaks in our jolly gignobile, scouting for a new home, performing superhuman feats of DTP daring do in the service of Amber Tide and Bard's Cathedral, and fulfilling a commission to record a guitar sound-

burst to herald a new product by a local gamemaker (look mom, I'm a multimedia artist!), I've been almost too busy to scratch, let alone write. The sum total of my creative output this week came at three ayem, awakened by a bloated bladder and — well, this is the poem that appeared in my mind:

My wife snores.
Does yours?

Yes, yes I agree, right up there with “Higgamous Hoggamus woman is monagamous...” and other great nocturnal insights of our time. But you have to believe there is deep revealing truth in this seemingly simple, almost haiku-like couplet. For one thing, Sandahbeth doesn't just snore. No. That would hardly be appropriate for a world-class vocalist such as herself. The varieties of nightnoises uttered by this my loving spouse can vary with the power and subtlety of great orchestral music, from a gentle kitten-like purr to a hearty sostenudo to a richter 7 rumble capable of setting off car alarms in a three block radius. Were this not enough, she also engages in dream sequences involving cries, moans, incoherent songs (double forte), and on at least one memorable occasion, a full-scale yodel intended to frighten friendly cedar logs out of the bed. She insisted that this was the case.

And all this, the one woman Spike Jones, without ever waking herself up.

Impressive? You ought to hear ME.

Now I am at times a very finicky snoozer. I've been known to pitch screaming fits because a fly developed an inexplicable and highly maladaptive attraction to my face while I was napping. It's a good thing the race of Fly is so prolific; I could have easily committed genocide then and there. But a truth of my construction is that when I need to sleep, I do. My body will simply shut me down in mid rampage like a twoyearold dropping in their tracks. Sandahbeth frequently engages me in complex conversations on long night drives, not to sharpen my concentration but to monitor it. When I start answering questions on the development of Relativity or some other cherished subject with statements like “ The second power of the quadralight marble henhouse painted with raisins, isn't it?,” she knows it's time for a coffee break. I know it's time for a coffee break when I start seeing dinosaurs crossing the road.

So at three ayem or whenever I'm lying awake listening to the Sandahbeth Symphony, instead of expressing myself with thrashing pillow or harsh words, I wait. I contemplate the night. I count my blessings. I compose myself. I remind myself of the time I took a half-hour snooze while my younger brother and two friends engaged in a three-trap-set jam session in the next room. I compose dumb rhymes. And eventually, almost always before daylight, I go back to sleepyland.

And if I don't, I can always get up and play trombone.

Thanksgiving

Well, it's been one of those inspiring and educational weeks when you don't get what you want. First the car we bought on blind idiot faith blows a head gasket, squirting all over the place like a Venician fountain in a rich noble's courtyard. Probably cost more to fix than we paid for the car, oh welly well. Unless, of course, I get DOWN AND DIRTY and do it myself. Then the whoopee computer I ordered from far and away and awaited with twembling anticipation like Sid the Toy Torturer on the lookout for The Big One turns out to be wrong for the job I wanted it to do, just like that a bubble bursts, foey. And then the little black ants sneaking around our fabulous new home turn out to be woodbutcher second cousins to termites, and the only cure is to gas the joint thoroughly for a hundred bucks and a ton of stink and double foey. This is boring.

Actually, this is normal. I've been living pretty darned high on the piggy the last month or two and perhaps a little dose of reality is just what I need. After all, everybody has to cope with car problems and purchase returns and bugs once in a while, don't they? imagine the boredom of a life without gotchas.

I mean, it's not like we have no car at all. The van still works as well as ever. It's not like I've got no recourse on the computer — the guy I got it from is cool about returns. It's not like I have to watch my house fall down in the jaws of verminous insects — the nice man with the spraycan is coming on Monday.

And it's not even as if there aren't any resources available — the refund from the computer ought to pay for the car. And the bugs are part of the purchase price of the house. Hey, extra protein...Or, as I'm fond of observing, you can't buy beer, you can only rent it — however, you do get undisputed possession of the bottle. (just the sort of profundity that beer is likely to inspire)

On the other hand, it's gonna be Thanksgiving, the marvelous Day of the Burnt Bird, the Festival of the Turkey, Bloatingtide. The day when even existentialists are expected to sit down and count their blessing. And even as Stan Freeberg noted, the turkey came within an ace of being the National Bird. Not the domestic turkey, oh no — not the fat strutting barnyard feathered insect with the self-preservation of a rotting stump, no — but the wild turkey. The colorful, fierce, wily and virtually unstalkable game bird that laughs at beaters, sneers at dogs, dodges bullets like Superman. The avian Sean Connery. Such a creature as this was Benjamin Franklin's inspiration for a national symbol, not the grotesque, cowardly, carrion grubbing bald eagle. So when you sit down for chow this fourth- Thursday- in- November, take a moment to praise the spirit of the wild turkey, The One That Got Away.

Last night I helped a friend move his utterly destitute and demoralized Dodge van from a driveway in Seattle back to his home upstate. In the archetypal PNW drizzle we wrestled with the profundities of the rented towbar, the work of a sculptor wanting to top the Laocoon Group. I crawled into the nether regions, 3/8th box/open in hand, to make fell battle with the driveshaft, emerging victorious and filthy after an extended campaign in the trenches. Slowly and carefully we wended our way, up highway and byway, shaken and stirred by blithering winds and roadhog trucks alike, until finally we reached our destination. And then, after the long drive home, I laid down in as satisfying a warm bath as I have had in several years, a bath by contrast the bequeathment of the gods to a victorious road warrior, much nicer than laurels thank you very much. And I said to myself. I am truly truly thankful, both for what I have and for what I have to do.

King Property

One of the TG recipients was moved to comment on my roofleak adventures with the admonition, "So what if the roof leaks — it's your roof." Amen to that. That's the spirit I'm reaching for, being a chap who knows full (fool?) well what a joyous burden an old mobile home can be. After all, I'm a vet — I've been living in old mobiles for over ten years, larger and smaller. One thing I've found is that they all leak, at least until you yourself get up there and plug up the cracks. Usually by replacing the whole bloody roof — otherwise you play Hunt the Leak (a terrific action game the whole family will enjoy!), tracing the twisting path of intruding water from the inobtrusive, near-inaccessible seam to the spot in the ceiling directly over your freshly printed PR layout, then miring your hands and oldest clothes with wet-weather roofing tar ("bear shit" to aficionados), the only substance known to man that can stop a leak in the rain. Comes off easily with 2% hydrochloric acid and a small blowtorch. Science marches on. Yes, by god, it's my roof.

But the ownership of a building isn't all that big a deal, any more than a car or a bicycle. It's the dirt under the building that's the cockroach in the egg foo young. That dirt is the domain of King Property.

For a long time, I've wondered why landlords and tenants had so irreparable an animosity towards one another. Dogs and cats are little huggy buddies next to the landlord and the tenant. They agree so seldom that when you hear of someone who likes their respective other half you check your hearing aid and wonder about their mental stability. Especially among the low - income, the relationship borders on war. The Landlord is the Enemy, the sworn opponent of all that's right and good, the miscegenation of the worst features of Sauron, Darth Vader and your mother on a bad hair day. Even worse, the low income landlord tends to fulfill this role, shrilly issuing petty regulations, ignoring repair requests and throwing pitiful destitute families out at the first excuse. The whole thing smacks of truelife melodrama: "Out! Out into the cold hard world, moooohahahahaha!" Snively Whiplash Realty strikes again. And it's been going on for years. An acquaintance once sang me an old song that went "Pity the poor old landlord/ His back it is burdened and bent/ Respect his grey hairs/ Don't ask for repairs/ AND NEVER BE LATE WITH THE RENT!!!!!!!"

It seems as tho landlords would love to have you rent their property — they'd just prefer that you not actually live there.

Course, I don't altogether blame landlords (and ladies) their snotty proclivities: the Great Struggle virtually guarantees that if you aren't exceedingly fortunate, your tenant will have the same kindly regard for your property's structural integrity that a wrecking ball has for a plate glass window. What the heck — it's not their house. It's not entirely unreasonable for an owner's view of the renter to be reduced to one of a particularly large and vitriolic ant, one that occasionally coughs up cash. The only purpose for renting is the rent.

At one point, purely from scratch, I started postulating the existence of some invisible tyrant, King Property, who sent forth all this suffering. Under his diabolical rule, all those who owned and rented out property, be they kindly or kindless, had to apply his procrustrian law to all and sundry. Hapless victims of the system, they were forced to learn the stern attitudes of their sovereign, to step on the weak, to reward the strong, to go against every instinct of their group-mammal social behavior. And the penalty for failure to learn this role was equally stern: they themselves would be stripped of their own property, left to the groveling, resentful realm of the landless.

Why do we suffer the oppression of this rat bastard? Why does everyone knuckle under to this guy that doesn't even exist? Have we all been afflicted with some weird insanity? Well, of course it's not that simple. King Property isn't a very nice guy, but King Commonwealth can be even worse, and King Bureaucrat — well, imagine Newt Gengritch as the Commissar and you get the picture. But even so, there's a serious trickledown effect at work in our society, and it's an antisocial one. Humans are herd animals, and we need each other. Forces that set us at each other's throats only damage the whole. Humans make great gregarians and lousey predators.

Probably the real reason for the unsavory reign of Propertysaurus Rex is that old standby, population pressure. One reasonably well-read very proper old British auntie I met once said that much of the excess of the early Industrial Revolution in England was a direct result of the enormous rise in population in Europe during the later Medieval period, resulting in a need for some alternative to the old subsistence agriculture system just to keep people from starving. Perhaps P. Rex serves as a force to thin the herd a mite. If nothing else, he keeps it in line — a junkyard sheepdog.

Hey — I think I stopped the roof leak! Whoop whoop! Maybe this property stuff isn't so bad...

Bucksnot vs. the Ant Farm

In this time of holiday cheer, when we spend so much attention on the dear ones in our lives, it behooves us to be aware of all those less fortunate than ourselves, to recognize their existence, their needs, their importance. Of course I'm talking about insects.

I'm sure you've noticed (you who've been fortunate enough to personally experience that blinding blaze of glorious energy that is Spae and Spae Inc.) that we're relatively silly people. (My mother was silly, my father was silly, and I'm relatively silly). We spend a deal of attention on inanimate objects, bestowing upon them attributes normally reserved for living, sentient beings. With good reason: most objects are capable of being just as ornery and opinionated as cats, dogs, people and other forms of dubiously higher order. It was inevitable, then, that the vacuum cleaner I bought (to placate the new carpet I put in to the new place) should receive such treatment — inevitable in that vacuum cleaners are highly personable and animate objects, performing the useful and seemingly organic function of eating dirt. I pulled out the new possession and showed it to S, and she immediately dubbed it Bucksnot, claiming that it had made a noise similar to that in greeting. Bucksnot received the workout all vacuums probably have nightmares about this week: we used it for an armadillo.

As previously reported, the new place had ants. Yes, that is past tense. Actually, it is less than completely accurate to state that we had ants; a more exact and specific description is to say that we had <<<ANTS!!!!!!!!!!>> At first, we only found a few, waddling around the kitchen in confusion. Since the place had been moved relatively recently, I assumed that they were stragglers, coming out of the cracks and wondering where the nest went. The only ants I knew were the ones we had in San Diego when I was growing up who occasionally formed conga lines into your sugar bowl, nature at her most fascinating and obnoxious. But the ants in our new house didn't conga, and finally S became suspicious enough to call an exterminator. The verdict: these were not ground ants, these were house ants. Living in the walls like roaches. Requiring expensive disruptive treatment. We laboriously hauled everything out of the kitchen cupboards, away from the bedroom walls, and vacated for an afternoon while the man in the black hood did his lethal work. Returning to a curiously quiet home, we ignored the faint aroma of dead ant and started putting things back together.

And then the leak started.

There had been leaks in the ceiling earlier in our tenure here. I thought I'd gotten them all. I was wrong. The new one behaved in a startlingly arbitrary fashion, jumping from one spot to another without rhyme or reason, as if attempting to evade capture. We schlepped buckets around like nurses hauling bedpans for a sick elephant. Curiously, examination of the ceiling revealed not only ambiguous water trails, but a few straggling ants as well, far from their former stomping grounds in the kitchen. After several sessions crawling about the roof in the rain administering patching tar, scraping it off my hands afterwards like some especially repellent fungus, with seemingly no effect on the steady drip drip drip, I remarked to S, "You know, I'm beginning to feel like this leak and these ants are connected somehow." My words proved prophetic: the next day, in desperation, I began taking down the ceiling. It was full of ants. The colony in the kitchen was only an outpost. This was ant China — countless hords running mindlessly hither and yon across the bleak plains behind the ceiling panel. With every house a free ant farm.

It was now that Bucksnot came to the rescue. One of the two best ways to get rid of <<<ANTS!!!!!!!!!!>> is to simply suck them up. S retreated to the bedroom in fearful disgust

and I manfully pulled down ceiling, enduring the rain of insects. Bucksnot the Anteater wailed. Eventually, Unca Thaddie's Ant Farm became too much for me, and once more the spectre of death fell across the house. Two more treatments were sufficient to reduce the Empire of the Ants to heaps of black sand, drifted in corners of the living room rug amidst the dazed ruins of the ceiling.

It took a bit longer to kill the Stealth Leak, excavating the roof with gun and camera to locate the source of the Nile and gloop it up good. In the process, roof tar fell on our brand new carpet, and only the use of the Perilous Caustic Spot Remover From Canada saved Thaddeus from an eternity of ignominious disgrace. I narrowly avoided getting it on the new computer.

Too many adventures. The ceiling is now back together, the house somewhat less trashed and certified Bug Free, and we're finally ready to go back to what we were doing a week and a half ago. Tiny ant angels cloud the air, singing squeaky Yule carols and playing miniscule ant harps. I beg their forgiveness, reminding them that neither one of us chose this path. May we all pray for their souls.

I just hope that when I get to Heaven I don't run into a welcoming committee.

Frosty

I have a distinct tendency to take cold weather personally — it always feels like something's got it in for me. It doesn't help that my body keeps trying to physically get up and run away, preferably to Arizona or points south. The last time we got a major snow job, during the Great Northwest Blizzard of 1990, I came up with a terrific plot for a horror story: Frosty the Snowman as a Steven King novel. This last bout with Winter Eternal has given me even more inspiration.

Stay with me on this one: it's Christmas time, a nice Disneyish midwestern sort of Christmas, and in the cute Disneyish midwestern town there is peace on earth and good will towards capital and all that. Now right around Christmas week there's one heckuva snowstorm, I mean class A. The next morning the whole town is frozen in, isolated, the main roads in and out closed. In this little microcosm a mighty drama is played out, a battle twixt Nice and Naughty.

It all starts with the top hat. Who knows where it comes from, maybe some kid's attic, maybe an abandoned house, maybe an old dust-infested antique shop. One of the cute-but-maladjusted little kids in the Local Gang, all of whom are introduced in loving detail in the seemingly-interminable prologue, gets ahold of this topper and figures it's a cool thing for Frosty, the Super Snowman they're rolling up in the back yard. Hat has the sinister sp-sp-spooky aura of all such spiritually besmirched things, kid debates putting it back and avoiding all this plot development, but no, he takes it, slaps it on the head of their ice sculpture.

A few paragraphs of supernatural manifestations follow, with the outcome of the Fred Astair Snowcone — Frosty comes to you-guessed-it and begins to do the macarena all over the lot. Kids aren't freaking, somehow this seems all right. Uh oh. He's got them in some kinda Spell! ooh ooh, wicked! The kids start spreading mayhem around town, ignoring the duly appointed authorities. There's trouble in River City.

At this point some previously introduced adult occult expert comes into the picture, probly after Frosty has taken down a few power lines and the local weather service starts predicting the worst blizzard in history. Occultist figures out that Frosty, who by now is being sought by the police in connection with a few freeze-murders, is actually the spirit of a Norse Ice Giant, the first rulers of the world who were vanquished by the Norse gods and keep trying to return the world to ice in the final battle of Ragnarok. All portrayed

with suitably chilling exposition, real H P Lovecraft ancient-manuscript stuff. Expert sez that if Frosty isn't stopped he'll just crank up another Ice Age and poof, goodbye modern civilization. No more refrigeraters, dudes.

Big storm looms, police bullets can't stop the snowball from hell and nobody can get out of town because the roads are blocked. Was that a wooly Mammoth I just saw? Argh! All seems lost until the relatively obvious solution reveals itself: Get the hat. Right as the big storm is breaking and the thermometer is cracking out the bottom, same lil kid that found it puts a snowball over the plate in true Otis Spoffard style, knocks the hat off the snowman's head and the police melt him down with a flamethrower. The skies clear, temperature goes up, Civilization is saved. Frosty goes back to the North Pole to shoot craps with Donner and Blitzen. Kid vows never to fool with top hats again.

But nobody finds out where the hat went. And just remember his final words: "I'LL BE BACK!!!!"

I figure a seven figure advance, easy.

Burying Betty

The winter has never been the most accommodating of seasons for musicians. After the holidays everyone crawls into a corner and goes back to sleep. January and February are generally a mess of overdue bills and thin gruel. But do we learn? Do we settle down and study income tax preparation? Do we flee to Jamaica? Do we develop crude animal skills to eke a meager existence out of the harsh improprieties of Old Man Shivers? Well, do we? NOOOOOO!!!!!! Every winter we find ourselves scrabbling through penny jars in the hopes of finding a stray nickel, grinding our way through inappropriate snivling responses to collection agencies, whining to our friends over email about the lot of the poor benighted arteest. Well, phooie! Nuff of this blow! Spread it on bread and feed it to Teddy Bear! I got more 'Portent Things To Do than bitch, namely piss and moan.

Actually we're okay. The roof over our heads only leaks a little, there are far fewer ants than there were, the music is getting going again, and all is at least under some semblance of control here at Spaecraft Manor. Though, in truth, any sense of equilibrium is sorta comparative.

We received an object lesson in comparison last week when we flew to San Diego to bury my mother. Nothing like dealing with death to remind you how cool it is just to be walking around, even if the demise in question was one a long time coming and visible from afar. I had spent a bit of time missing my mother after she became incapacitated, wishing I could call her up and share something or argue with her or just hear her voice. It was as if an anchor that I had had in my life had dragged and I was a mite adrift. When the end finally came, there wasn't a lot of surprise.

Betty was a mystery to me at times — our differing viewpoints were a constant source of miscommunication. Hers was the generation that won the war and mine the one that paid for it. I never understood her submission to authority, she never understood my avoidance of responsibility. She wanted an upwardly mobile scientific professional and I turned out as a wandering minstrel. Fortunately our differences ironed themselves out towards the end of her life, and I was able to be, if not close, at least friends and family with her.

But I hear tell all mothers can be mysterious at times. My siblings and I shared Betty stories while we scattered her ashes around the huge old oak she'd chosen for a resting place, trying, as sister Pat put it, "to put the pieces of the puzzle together." It was an intriguing and very unifying experience, perhaps not the tied-up-with-a-bow satisfaction of an Agatha Christie novel, but a more ambiguous, nonverbal thing, a reconstruction

without a box cover to guide it. As my friend Viv puts it, if you put all the people you've ever been in a room together, there'd be a lot of them, and Betty was definitely a crowd.

Most of the funeral speeches were as loving and solemn as you would expect, but being my mother's son, I told the remains, "Well, Betty, you really made a ash of yourself this time" and threw a handful at the sky, shouting "Here! Catch!" Later, I gathered mistletoe from another tree nearby, inching out onto a skinny branch to snatch it from the luxuriant colony and toss it to my sister below. My own personal forms of mourning.

Being our parents' children, we sang. We sang "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" and "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," sterling titles for events such as these. Sandahbeth contributed a funeral song she'd written long ago for a symbolic death ritual. We hummed and chanted background to the speeches. The big live oak shook its leaves, misty Southern California rain danced across the hillside. We said our last goodbyes. We promised to come back and visit.

And then we all went out to eat, another excellent form of memorial.

My Brilliant Career

The last desparate remnants of the Ant Liberation Front were hunted down and ruthlessly liquidated by the forces of Aadvantage Pest Control (Our Motto: "The Bug Stops Here.") raiding deep into their hidden stronghold in the highlands of the bedroom ceiling. All that remained were a few tiny leaflets like dandreff, which when viewed under a microscope turned out to be lists of unnegotiable demands and moralistic denunciations of the Evil Invaders, along with highly legalistic briefs concerning the Universal Rights of Ants, Petitions of Prior Occupancy and similar subjects. Fortunately, ants do not qualify as tenants under the Uniform Tenant Landlord Law, nor does the chemical warfare waged in their termination constitute violation of the Geneva Agreement. We came back to a house reeking of bugspray and a reassuring note from the exterminator: "Everything should be fine now." Heh heh heh.

Actually, everything does seem to be better — the astral weather may just be easing at last. This last bout seems to have cleaned out the insect hords, but more importantly it seems to have cleared the psychic air in the house as well. Both S and I felt a lightening of spirit, a sense of protection and comfort that we've come in the past to associate with well shielded homes. We expect to do a house-clearing ritual over the weekend to which you are invited to send good vibes and such.

Of course, without the onus of the Great Entomological Eschaton to concern us, I'm thrown once more upon the horns of the ageold dilemma, what do I do for money? S and I aren't performing much right now — she's working a lot harder on her health than on anything else. And while I could go find another band to play with, somehow that seems like treason after 19+ years of marital collusion. In many ways, being a musical partner is as intimate as being a sexual one. Obviously, playing with myself is also out. So I'm supposing and imagining away on other things to do.

To say that I dispise the all American job search is to say I breathe. I agree, this isn't a healthy attitude. Neither are tolerance, forbearance and honesty — in this country. Let it go. I talked this all over with my honey the other day whilst we were driving back from one of her medical appointments. "What should I do?" I mused. "Try to find a job, or maybe do some kind of independant contracting?" Well, at the exact instant the words "independant contracting" expelled from my mouth a most enormous and exceedingly colorful rainbow burst forth above the soggy streets and sombre buildings of Seattle, grazing the industrial grey clouds at its apex and plunging its near foot solidly into Northgate Center right next to my favorite Kinko's. S blinked and said, "Maybe you should try independant contracting."

Great. A sign from God. Can't give that one the pass. Okay, fine. So I'm looking for something to contract out. DTP, maybe. Tapemaking, of course — if I can deduce the clearest road to customers. Perhaps I should design a jazzy logo and become one of those guys that designs web sites. Or maybe I should take advantage of one of those WONDERFUL opportunities that I keep hearing about in the spam, those REALLY GREAT deals involving expensive software packages and two million email addresses. Yeah, right. The most inneresting one of those I received recently offered me a big, big, reallyreallybig package of info on how to get FREE internet access, FREE email addresses, FREE software, FREE this, FREE that. Package wasn't FREE, of course, it was \$29.95 plus shipping. Or if I didn't want that, was I interested in a five CD-ROM package of butt shots? I kid you not! That particular misguided attempt at mass-marketing was almost worth putting in the scrapbook at the Dipshit Hall of Fame, right next to the Taiwanese translation of "Come Alive, you're in the Pepsi Generation" that turned out to actually mean "Pepsi will bring your ancestors back from the dead."

I know — I can contract out mouth fodder! You know, jive talkin. I'm ever so good at it. Course, it is a little tricky to sell. I'd probably have to become a standup comedian or a politician or a lawyer or some other lower form of life. Ugh. I'd vow to starve first, but I might do it if something laid the opportunity in front of me. Mind, I'm not desparate — just a little broke and bored. But that's January and musicians for you.

So when's spring?

Class Encounters of the Web Kind

The spam keeps flying thick and fast on the windshield of my Info Highway tin lizzie. It's getting more and more popular to buy a cheap software kit and set yourself up as a unmessage monger. The funny thing is the recursive nature of the product: Buy my swell program for making lots of money: it's a method of selling a swell program for making lots of money. Etc. I get dizzy just thinking about it, but there's no denying that the greed sell is one of the most reliable sources of income in the world, next to human misery. And the jump from stuffing envelopes to stuffing email addresses hasn't blunted the hyperbole associated with fastbuck flash. Just Think Of Buying The House Of Your Dreams, A New Car, Hey, TWO New Cars, no THREE, Why Not? Imagine Bags of Money In Your Closet, Your Bathtub Overflowing With Lovely Greenbacks, Your Mattress Stuffed With Hundred Dollar Bills! Go To India And Buy The Taj Mahal! Yes! Yes! Yes!

Argh argh argh. I suppose I wouldn't mind being fabulously wealthy, but I'm suspicious of it — I remember the guy who said, "Getting rich is a lot of fun, but staying rich isn't" And I'm EXTREMELY suspicious of anyone who thinks I'm dumb enough to believe that a million-dollar system only costs \$39.95. Do I look like I got stupid written all over my face? (Don't answer that)

Luckily the web is still the Web, a paradise of info-opportunities that dwarf any monetary piffle. One of the best is getting to communicate with folks you'd never get to meet in real life. And weirdly enough, they even answer back! I wrote "fan mail from some flounder" to the author of a web site expositing the nature of modern physics, some really dense and complicated stuff. My mail was considerably more dense and less complicated, timidly postulating some of my pet epistemological musings. You know, relativity and time-travel stuff. And the guy wrote back! Although he said "I wouldn't argue along that line" (talk about your politic disagreements!), he was amused enough at the feedback to debate it. And he concurred with a lot of what I said, adding, "I didn't put that on the web site because I didn't want to scare anyone with wild speculations."

There's an interesting stratification taking place in the world of advanced information. On the one side you have end-users who point and click, enthusiasts of "layman" style

explanations of theoretical physics and mathematical economics and systems theory and all that, people whose knowledge of complex processes and events is limited to their user-friendly features — the kind of people who know how to wind and set a clock without the ghost of a notion of what a mainspring or balance wheel is. Then over yonder in the bunkers are the propeller-heads that keep things marching, specialists whose microscopic command of their field is matched only by their myopic vision of anything outside of it. It's not the Marching Morons of CM Kornbluth, that boogie-tale of my parents' era, it's the evolution of techno-feudalism, of the triumph of the power of knowledge. But in the face of this rift there is also those areas, like the web, where people from the lateral sides of the Great Divide can mix and mingle and even — mirabile! — learn each from the other. The laymen are generalists, mappers of forests, surveyers of the topology of knowledge, while the specialists are busy carving their initials into this one tree right here, and there's plenty of room for exchange. Just from the point of view of intersecting ideas, we're living on the tottering brink of the Golden Age of Correspondence. The net provides the arena for an intellectual concurrence that makes the Age of Enlightenment look like midnight in a coal cellar by comparison.

Now granted, we're also living on the tottering brink of the total brownout of the Web from fastbuck Freddie's and the sound of one-hand typing Romeos and Juliets. And the level of rational discourse taking place in most of the chat places I've visited makes Rush Limbough look like Socrates. Of course, it isn't the easiest thing in the world to maintain a high tone of debate with one-line statements in the midst of people screaming "I'm long! I'm strong! IM me NOW!" whilst eight other people call each other awful names over two or three incidental subjects that was abandoned five minutes before you even logged on and two others are going "Hi! wow, you guys sure type fast!" and "What about them Packers :>)" The discussion equivalent of a bar brawl, without even the solice of beer and a fat barkeep with a baseball bat to break it up. And where the heck are all these hot chat rooms on A(h)ol that Newsweek keeps harping about? I can't seem to find them anywhere in the index.

But still, guys with rugged intuitions like me and guys with Charles Atlas math/physics muscles like the guy I wrote can and are getting connected over the net, and the results are bound to be suprising, apt to be amazing, and very possibly could lead to any number of breakthroughs that could never happen in the world of dross matter. Any minute now, here it comes, just watch. Assuming of course that you can get on line in the first place.

Bar None

Open mikes are never the most comfortable places for me. I generally feel a little put off by the typical tavern, loud and smokey and blaring and dim and crowded and impersonal. The days of the neighborhood bar are just about gone geese, along with the kind of genteel drinking that went with it. The typical juice joint these days seems to run on overpriced microbrews, pulltabs or nekkid broads (sometimes all three), with a skinny little section in the back left over for social intercourse. Folks you meet in a tav tend to be as loud and smokey and so on as their environment, plus drunk. Not to deny their humanity of course, but this is humanity on a loud smokey day.

On the other hand, the folks who come to open mikes are frequently just the opposite of the h. tavernus hordes, frilly, sensitive flowers and bodylocked, leather-jacketed emoticons smouldering their way through gravelly unconscionably (or is that "unconsciously"?) constructed songs about standing on street corners and crushing out cigarettes. These specimens show up on the stage as if they suddenly condensed there, spend five minutes tuning, radiate their innermost bowls into the room and extinguish like snuffed candles, flitting back to whatever cave they hang out in during the day.

Of course, there's always a healthy assortment of friends of friends of friends of the bartender, in to sing their One Good Song and take someone home. Loud, proud and wearing hats that have been beaten like stray dogs into shapes more suitable to bonsai trees than apparel, they usually trail a contingent of similar types, minus the One Good Song, there to cheer their hero on with many a merry quip and jest. On stage, they revel in a demonstration of their mightily thewed arms, throwing their guitar out of tune within seconds of commencing to play. Their vocal style bears an unhealthy resemblance to hog calling, with the question of the exact nature of what they ARE calling as an additional disturbance. They are bluesmen, to a man, and to a man they put the entire profession into serious jeopardy with their zero-dimensional interpretations of some frat boy wet dream of the Black experience.

Perhaps worst of all, there are genuine artists, folks who know what they're doing, have something to say and an eloquent way of saying it, and might as well be at home practicing for the recognition they get from the howling mob. Better you should toss a persian kitten to a pack of starving mongrels than a real talent to a tavern open mike.

Ah, but there are compensations. I get to play trombone in a corner as much as I want, at practice volume, with no fear of disturbing anyone. And if by chance something jazzy starts to happen, there's always the possibility of a few seconds of fame, drunken faux bluesmen attempting to remember the chords when they're not singing shouting "Take it, tuba!" while I rant and roar. Plus of course I get MY shining moment in the spotlight, wondering where Sandahbeth is and talking nervously and too fast, all my cool stage chatter turned to witlessness by the smoke and the babble and the feeling of trying to communicate with a roomful of robots. And then playing some 90-mile-an-hour swing tune and getting some half-hearted whoops and having both the competent guitarists in the room (must've dropped by for a quick one — can't be in for the entertainment) give my hands a quick, curious glance and the over-the-hill hostess who owns the PA saying "Well, that was — interesting..." before moving on to the next shrinking violet.

Not to say there aren't good open mikes — those cushy restaurant-cum coffeehouse type places with lighting and good sound no smoking and somebody smart introducing the acts and a preponderance of performers so good it makes you nervous and flustered and work twice as hard to be good yourself and audiences so warm and open that you end up not caring after all. I'll probly feel less alienated if I can get out to a couple of those.

Know any?

Make Big Money in the Fud Biz

It's a great week for Buddhists, or anybody else who stays humble and contrite. Come to think of it, it's a great era for Buddhists. Anytime you get the kind of negative reinforcement for seeking fortune and fame that these times do, it can't help but aid your practice. Just think of all the holy brownie points you get for being true to your art or your heart and letting the big bad world wax you down and buff you to a deep rosy shine. Oh yes, Grasshopper, there is much merit in the path of withdrawal.

Well, bow-biddy-bowb to that. The Big Bad World had better get used to having me up its nose or get its prosterior outta my way. I'm a steamroller baby, bound to roll all over God's heaven. Snort! Yeah, sure. I'm a pathetic imitation of a super-salesman, but I'm trying to get enough dander loose to actually make things happen. This is me, trying to be a businessman.

It's a standard problem, documented in all corners of the explored world and Canada: not everyone is sliced out to be a businessperson. In truth, this isn't surprising — not everyone is a prime candidate to be a football linebacker either, and that includes some

people with the right height and build. Business is a highly specialized and narrow activity that reduces the breadth of human experience to the bottom line. The value of having people engaged in the practice is their ability to provide goods and services to their society, and as long as they engage in it with that provision at the forefront of their minds, things hum along right well. It's only when the bottom line starts interfering with that value that business becomes a parasite instead of a boon, and businesspeople transform into vampires.

That deterioration, the loss of community spirit in the face of profit and loss, seems something of a one-way street: every step towards lazyfair scroogism reduces the common cause that much more, until in the advanced stages of the disease you have Moscow capitalism: assassination as a competitive tactic. Clearly the final form is Freedom Mogadishu Style, AKA anarchy.

That most people are not willing to enter a race with a bottomless pit as the finish line is a very positive statement about the general mental health of most people. Still, the difficulty in America, and most of the developed world, is the reliance on hard-charging business practices to maintain competitiveness (if we don't, they will) and living standard (have another tv set). It puts the culture at the virtual mercy of a decidedly unmerciful lot.

And these are the folks who are spreading the Gospel of Entrepreneurism: If you can't find a job, make one! Sure, just go out and start your own microindustry: Me, Inc. Become an independant contractor! Market yourself to the highest bidder! Show that independant spirit that made America guh-rate!

Easy for them to say. What percentage of new bizies fail each year? Representing what kind of loss of savings and time and energy (not to mention used office furniture and obsolete stationery)? How many of those folks ever make a go of it? This is the path to success for displaced professionals? The wave of the future?

Actually, this is the wave of a great little industry: doing goldrush grubstaking for entrepreneural 49'ers. No sector pushes the entrepreneural model harder than those wonderful folks who brought us such incredible opportunities as envelope stuffing, chain letters, Ponzi schemes, multilevel marketing, and, not too long ago, gold bricks and killer deals on urban bridges. Nowadays they hang out on the Web, as anyone with an email address is sure to discover. They're ever-ready to sell you a emailorder business, or a Web site, or tell you ten thousand new ways to tie your product in with the growing yak yak yak. In the spaceway store is a whole rack of magazines devoted to FIVE HUNDRED BUSINESSES THAT CAN'T FAIL!!!! MILLIONS FROM CIGARETTE BUTTS! ENTER THE FAST MOVING GRAVEL SIFTING BUSINESS! Lotsa people around to design your stationery, decorate your office, come up with a catchy marketing slogan.

It reminds me of a story about a future in which everyone had to have a job, and a man goes to a job creation agency, only to discover that the owner and sole proprietor of the business only managed to ever come up with one job: Job Creator. Recursion is the curse of the late 20th century.

And now the government in its wisdom is moving to save our economy and liberate the helpless victims of cruel welfare by releasing them to the joyful freedom of — what, exactly? Entrepreneurship? Maybe they can all get jobs as linebackers. Yeah, that's the ticket. Either that or there's gonna be an awful lot of gravel sifters around.

Bob's Valhalla

This begins with Pike Place Market, downtown Seattle's crotchety old collage of family farmers and open air craft booths, antique shops and t-shirt vendors, hung in cobblestone splendor overlooking Eliot Bay. S and I have been playing street music at Pike Place

for as long as we've been together, and I did it for several years before that. I treasure an old performing permit badge from 1977, bearing the endorsement "Street Performer #1" (just happened to be badge #1 that I got that year.) One of the reasons we relocated to Seattle was proximity to this huge monument to small cantankerous independent traditions — like street performing.

Last Thursday, seeking to practice our chops and perhaps fatten the eschequer, we sallied down to the Market, parking next to our favorite performing spot in the Handicapped zone conveniently arranged for our benefit there. We had played a set and were waiting for Majick the balloon clown to finish his turn when Bob Almblade came by.

Bob played hammer dulcimer and guitar with his partner Caroline, had a couple CD's out, was steadily gaining ground in the sputtery field of new acoustic music, but still played out on the sidewalk occasionally. In former times he'd been known as the Cosmic Gypsy Cowboy Dawg, had played with luminaries of the street like Artis the Spoonman, had been a founding member with him of the legendary Band of Buzzards, had traveled and played throughout the local festival and street fair circuit, and so forth. We'd been friends and stalwart companions of the road for years, crossing paths in Seattle and Tucson, sharing stories and tips on secret parking spots and trading off on fat festival corners. We'd lured him into our van in '89 to record his epic ballad "No Love Left In the Haight" on our Walkman.

We hollered after him — yo, Bob! — and he came back and shot the breeze for a minute. Like that photo of you in the ad, Bob — so where you playin? Shoptalk. Busy man, places to go. A quick hug and we went back to work. Just another path crossing with a fellow road warrior, part of the life.

We were back at Pike Place Sunday morning, getting ready to play, when Artis popped up, looking about eighty years old, hugged us both and informed us that Bob had dropped dead of a heart attack on Friday.

We played our set. We went home. We took Caroline flowers. Her friend Robin graciously accepted them — Caroline was asleep, and we approved — told us the memorial would be Wednesday.

So there I was with S, attending the memorial of a person I'd known mostly as a part of a lifestyle, someone I hadn't known all that well. No biggie. I'd buried my mother in January and I didn't know her that well either. Very few people become all that familiar to me, least of all myself. The service was held on a bluff overlooking Puget Sound, Bainbridge Island grey-green in the distance. The day was cold winterspring, cloudy and windblown. I shivered in my longjohns as the Native American priestess called upon the blessing of Grandfather and Grandmother and lit incense. Many of the street musicians who had played the same places Bob had over the years were there, some come from Tucson, others from California. Several gave eulogies and played songs. There was family of Bob's and family of Caroline's. And there were a great number of people I didn't know but knew were associated with the whole melange, the tribe that had been brought together, as is typical with tribes, by a death in the family.

There was a reception afterwards, with party food and sweets and coffee and a keg of local microbrew and a lot of talk and laughing, and a lot of hugging, recognition of the value of living flesh with spirit walking around in it. Some singing, some weeping, some shmoozing and shoptalk and wheeling and dealing. But in the midst of it, the missing person's shadow, the reflection of an empty room in a dark mirror, the background to set the subject in sharp relief.

We were out at the Market again today, a slow Thursday, playing our usual spot. A sundried figure carrying a mandolin case wandered over. It was Crow, who'd played with Bob and Artis in the Band of Buzzards. He'd come up from Arizona for the memorial, and

he shyly asked if he could jam. We encouraged him, and he pulled out his instrument, for all the world a 3D metaphor for the traditions we all shared: a 1923 Gibson with the curly body ornament that he'd found broken to pieces in its case in a flea market and had restored, still tuneful and sweet-voiced for all its wear and tear. We all made a joyful noise together, charming the small but doughty noontime crowd and making babies smile enchantingly as babies have done for a thousand years for charming strangers with instruments.

And after we were done and packing to leave, I looked around at the Market, at the craftpeople selling clothes and jewelry and all manner of trinkets, at the fruit and vegetable stalls under the green awnings. And I thought to myself, for all its petty bickering and debris, this is a heroic place. This is a place that has staved off the attacks of Depression, war and New York corporate lawyers, that for close to a century of commercial expansion has kept true to an ideal of community above commerce, an ideal that was forsaken and ridiculed by the rest of society and which is just now beginning to come back into vogue, an ideal that may yet save what is left of the American dream. And these people, me and S included, are heroes — dedicating in whatever marginal or substantial way we can our lives to the preservation of knocked-apart, glued-together traditions and deeply moral standards.

We talked with Crow about the reception, the way that people who normally were reserved had been unabashedly affectionate towards each other. “Yeah,” he said, “that’s a gift that Bob gave us all — the chance to all be together, to be at peace with each other.”

Being a hero isn’t exactly a profitable profession. Most of the time you’re wiping the mud off your face and the alligators off your ass and wondering why in the world you took this job in the first place. But if it gives you a place in some funky Valhalla, even for a day, it can be worth a lot. Perhaps that’s the paradox — Bob died, and we all went to heaven.

Saint Jesse of the Machine Shop

Call it nostalgia — Sandahbeth and I went to Oregon this week to participate in the opening of the Portland Saturday Market, our alma mater and site of our original wedding reception, as well as an initial cute meet worthy of a Nora Ephron movie. Passage was booked on the good car Silver Fox, the 85 Ford LTD S decided was comfortable enough to tour in. On the way down, the beast went into semiterminal murf-out, finishing the trip at about 20 mph. This is just a stupendous way to make friends and influence people on the superhighway. I pretty near ran out of profane expressions, and if curses actually worked, the Ford Motor Company would be a frog today.

Cast up on the shores of our good friends Roy and Bren’s house in suburban Beaverton, we determined that the Market was not an option for the weekend and took the time freed up to catch up on sack time all the way back to Operation Bughouse (10 TBPs [tricky poop bonus points] if you recognize that reference). Long about Monday I whipped the reluctant car over to the local factory-authorized skin-joint and let them diagnose the poor little thing. They told me, barely concealing their drool of anticipated profit, that the catalytic converters were plugged up and it would cost me \$900 to get it fixed, as federal law strictly forbid removing them. Since this was about \$875 more than I could afford, I did what any other red-blooded American would do in the same situation: I walked to a hardware store, bought a \$5 hacksaw, came back and proceeded to ruthlessly violate federal law by sawing a great big slot in the exhaust pipe forward of the constipated units. This fulfilled my immediate goal of getting the car as far away from these vampires as I could, which turned out to be about three blocks, after which the ignition system failed. Crime doesn’t pay.

I pushed the car back to the openly gloating vultures for a second round of diagnosis. This time they informed me that the ignition module and stator were fried, and it would cost \$250 to fix. I thanked them as politely as I could under the circumstances and pushed the car back off the lot.

Now, the major expense in this particular repair was not, as you might suppose, the parts. They were actually quite reasonable. The problem was that portions of the distributor had to be violently disassembled to accommodate said parts, a process no shadetree mechanic could hope to accomplish unaided. I had seen the look in the eyes of the mechanics at the dealership — gotcha, sucker. But I had an ace in the hole: I knew about machine shops.

I'm convinced that if more consumers were aware of the existence of independent machine shops, the cost of auto care would go down in a truly magnificent fashion. Anything an evil car shop can do the machine shop can do just as well, provided you bring the part to them. Admittedly, this is less feasible in the case of engine blocks than that of distributors, but still. Sandahbeth got on the phone and found a friendly local lathe-and-hydraulic-press joint down a country road a piece, and we trundled the still-beating distributor over, first purchasing the necessary replacement parts at Schucks.

Neither S nor I are machinists — while she does metal jewelry and I do car repair, we aren't big on surfaces corrected to .001 inch or the intimate habits of bearings. But we've always had great fun in machine shops, particularly the more informal ones with the prices we like. Perhaps this is because of the people that run them. An independent machinist makes all the money he likes, answers to nobody, and his or her success is a direct result of skill and customer satisfaction. Work attire is informal. Seldom does advertising play a big role, and logrolling for accounts is practically nonexistent. Consequently, small machine shop people tend to be idiosyncratic rugged individualists much in the same mold as, dare I say it, musicians. They also share an enthusiasm for their craft that any artist can easily connect to.

We've had trailer axles rebuilt by elderly Christian gentlemen in the dead of winter, suspension shored up by wild young men in midnight shop frenzy in Palm Springs, frames welded by whole familys of metalworkers in Wyoming, complete with a shaky 70-year-old Grand Expert in a chair in the corner, squinting til his wrinkled face becomes a fractal surface at the work of the 20-year-old 'prentice and pronouncing it good. We've entertained wives, children and hangers-on while torches flared, sparks flew and vehicles regained their mobility, shared their RC cola and smoked fish (caught the day before), swapped improbable stories and horrible jokes, admired their casual manipulation of stupendous forces with the aid of Study Engines Of Refined Distruction, and on the whole laughed a whole lot. And we lived next door to a couple who went from working poor to industriously industrially self-employed to gritty nailed middle class while we watched and cheered them on.

This shop was no exception to the rule: a pair of gloriously informal guys in a garage full of well-worked tools, supported by a shop dog, Jesse, who couldn't decide if she wanted to be scritchd behind the ears or under the chin or on the belly or just jump around and bark. S kept her busy while I watched the younger guy pop the gear off the distributor shaft as neat as neat. I did the nobrainer installation in the back of the borrowed car we were driving and brought it back in for reassembly. Total cost: \$20, cash. And cheap at twice the price. Take that, Fraud Motor Company Authorized Factory Trained Jackel Repair Facility! Yah yah yah!

Part went back in car, car went back on the road, and we went back to Seattle in short order, plastic-depleted but with a whole skin, thanks in part to Jesse and Co. Thanks, guys!

We are told by the Wise and Foresighted that we create everything that happens to us. Maybe S and I just let ourselves have mechanical breakdowns to give ourselves the present of visiting happy machinists busily wreaking havoc on metallic chaos, rendering it whole and having fun too. There are worse ways to pass the time.

Schroedinger's Cat is Watching You

The Macintosh operating system is a marvel of customization potential. One of my favorite features has always been the startup screen, a picture that appears when you boot. My sweetie has a startup screen of a wizard scuba diving, a drawing of Macro the Mighty I made several years ago and scanned into the machine. My startup screen is a birthday present from this year: a cartoon of Albert Einstein in what used to be termed a compromising position with an entity dubbed the Black Lady, made of stars, comets and the night sky. Not only is it a juicy piece of work, but it also represents fairly closely Einstein's religious views (except for the intimacy part, which would probably have offended him, at least publicly). He once described his search for meaning in the universe as the desire to know "the thoughts of God," dismissing all else as trivial.

One of Einstein's principle philosophical tenets (and he had several — he was as much a philosopher as a scientist by many assessments) concerned the establishment of theories. He was convinced that while experimentation and proof were important means of proving a theory, intuition was the chief tool by which one arrived at a theory to test in the first place.

To me, a curious layman with no heavy technical training but a whole lot of intuition, this is heartening. It means that I too can come up with a plausible physics theory, despite my lack of rigor. I just can't prove it is all. Oh well.

I've been fortunate in being able to follow in the footsteps of my buddy Roy, host of last week's Excellent LTD Adventure, who is both curious and technically trained in the field of quantum physics. He loaned me the excellent book, *In Search of Schrodinger's Cat*, which I've been devouring gleefully. This is an attempt in the early 80's by a scientific writer and scientist to explain some of the really bizarre results of the very proper theory of physical activity called quantum mechanics, and pose some of its more serious philosophical problems in layman's terms.

Skipping the heavy math and cutting to the chase, what really put a burr under science's saddle about quantum was that nothing was certain. Things — genuine, identifiable, predictable, observable, no-shit-yes-sir real things — could act as if they were more than one thing at the same time, sometimes even opposite, mutually contradicting things. This breaks one of the prime unwritten rules of the whole scientific approach, one that distinguishes it from any number of other philosophical systems: the belief, or if you will the assumption, that there's something out there, that physical objects exist whether we observe them or not. If, on the quantum level, things cannot be definitely said to even exist, how does the universe continue to be itself? Why doesn't it dissolve into a mush of probabilities?

Answer: according to the math, because whenever an observer interacts with an ambiguous, quantum event, it immediately ceases to mush and "collapses" into a single, measurable state. This effect gave rise to the debate among physicists over whether the world exists only when we look at it or only if we look at it, a dang serious distinction. Some have gone so far as to imagine that the development of 20th century physics caused a crystallization of the entire structure of the universe, right back to the Big Bang.

This is the stuff that led the German Ernest Schrodinger, the primary architect of a branch of q.m. known as wave mechanics, to remark, "I don't like it and I wish I'd never had anything to do with it!" Tough nipples, Ernie, that's the way it is. Or isn't. Or is/

isn't. Whatever. He's the guy who came up with the famous, ill-fated kitty, the one locked in a gas chamber with a quantum event driven trigger. If an uncertain event takes place, the cat is gassed, if not, not. As long as the box is closed, the whole cat is stuck in a state of uncertainty, not alive, not dead, since the quantum event can only be predicted statistically, not deterministically. This is all served up with mathematical meat garnished with Greek letter gravy, most of which he invented himself. Schrodinger himself rejects the notion of a limbo kitty, calling it an outrage against common sense. Hence, like Einstein, he quits on quantum mechanics because he can't fit it into his world view.

A common solution to the Cat problem, the need to get the beast out of limbo, is to assert that it can observe its own quantum state, resolving itself. But this only clarifies the matter for the cat — the rest of us are then left holding the bag, or the box, with what remains for us the cat mush inside. Even worse: even if we do look in the box, resolving the quantum state of the cat for us, what about all the people in town who haven't heard the news? What about the press? What about the Brits? What about the Martians? what about the lovebirds, THEY never hurt anybody... this is generally described as "an infinite recursion," which is scientistese for "I don't like it and I wish I'd never had anything to do with it!"

Worst of all, it raises the nastiest question of all: if this cycle eventually involves the interaction of the entire universe with this quantum event, who observes the universe to resolve it? Pretty good trouble for one little cat — our old lady Helena would have approved, she was always ready for a scrap. Probably wouldn't have dug the Caryl Chessman bit, tho — she preferred mutilating dogs.

Another solution is to reduce the problem to one single observer, you. What you observe is what exists, period. Anything you resolve is definite, all else is mush. They have a dirty word for this in philosophyland: solipsism. Wash yer mouth out with cosmic soap, young man!

Now, here we have the opposite of Einstein's method: this is a bunch of math, self consistent, demonstrable, eminently useful for everything from atom bombs to solid state computers to gene-splicing to wasting time writing longwinded letters to your friends, in search of a theory to "explain" it. But instead of one head, hahahaha, we've got a bunch of bananas.

One desperate graduate student (redundant phrase, that) solved the problem of quantum uncertainty by devising a scheme in which the universe split in two whenever a quantum event took place, creating godzillions of all-singing all-dancing all-different universes of possible events in parallel to one another. And then proved it mathematically. Einstein and Schrodinger did the conga, the rumba and the chachacha together in their disparate graves.

Now here's one I can fix, thank you very much. And my argument is based on a simple trick: just let go of our usual notion of objective reality. Instead of one head we've got two. Objects do seem to hold still, despite the myriad quantum events that take place in them every moment, so almost all quantum events can be imagined to cancel each other out. Yes, things are mushy, but no, you can't see it. So the math-proven many-worlds are there — all of them — inherent in the objects and events we observe every day, all the various possibilities piled on top of each other to form the kind of stuff we're used to.

What about the Cat? An unissue: close examination of this experiment reveals that the quantumization of the cat is not as simple as stated: that puss is the product of uncounted quantum events from the released particle through the trigger mechanism to the broken bottle of gas to the biological disruptions in the cat leading to something called "death" which in fact takes quite a while to work its way through the cat's body. So there

isn't any way to resolve the beast to a single wave equation, which is what Wicked Uncle Ernie was trying to do in the first place. The cat may be alive or dead, but it's no weirder than any other material object you don't happen to be looking at right now. Give the poor little thing a bowl of milk or a hole in the back yard already.

Hey, that wasn't so hard. I'm getting a real taste for this quantum stuff. So what about this who-observes-the-closed-universe stuff? Well, reason from the conclusion: the universe is there, isn't it? so Something must observe it, right? Call it God, call it Goddess, call it late for dinner, IT'S OUT THERE. And what is this Observer of all Observations? Well, according to one experiment, the whole universe is causally linked in an instantaneous fashion. And remember the purveyor of the forbidden s-word who said another interpretation of the same information was that you the reader is the source of all the reality to you see. Put these two together and you get:

The Observer is God.

You are the Observer.

You are God. You create your own reality. Send me a check for five dollars and I will reveal my secret method of ruling the universe. Who says you can't make a buck from your PhD?

The Future History of Sampling

One of the most amusing things that has happened in the arts in the recent future is the way in which formerly obscure techniques in music have mainstreamed themselves. It's like, what was outrageous twenty years ago is now bubblegum. The obvious success story here is the synthesizer. From its propellerhead beginnings in the mad-scientist labs of rogue electronics techs and the soundtracks of scifi movies, through a succession of ever-more-commercial incarnations, down to the present day anything- you- can- play- I- can- sequence- better workstations and playalong popular keyboards, the synth has consistently moved from the beepsqueal school of contemporary art music into the hearts and minds and booties of squirming high schoolers.

So what's the big hooroorairay? Innovation in music seems to resemble invention during wartime — first it gets developed as weaponry in the Art Wars, then the civilians get ahold of it and turn it into toasters. It's ironic and amusing to see the skittish eccentricities of doleful intellectual philosopher-kings of the art of noise transmogrified into vehicles for the sale of pimple cream.

Sampling is perhaps the most poignant example of this trend. In the early postwar period, a lot of mechanically inclined musicians started playing with that sterling example of Nazi ingenuity (along with the Volkswagon), the tape recorder. Along with capturing the odd jam session (and when we say odd, we mean ODD), they started playing with the medium itself. The very fact of the objectification of sound as strips of magnetic oxide led to examining it in a fashion usually reserved for print media or the makings of sculptures. The result was a style of music called music concrete. Such luminaries as Edgard "The present day composer refuses to die!" Verese created compositions by laborious cutting up lengths of recordings of various sounds and splicing them together in various orders, accomplishing the traditional musical effects of mood, tension and release and so forth with completely noninstrumental sounds. Does this ring a bell? Music concrete was considered very advanced and difficult to deal with, and indeed a great deal of it sounded like poopoo — but then, a lot of all avant garde stuff sounds like poopoo. But Picasso's Law ("You do it first — somebody else does it pretty.") inevitably set in. It could be claimed that music concrete was just as influential as movie soundtracks on the addition of various sound elements to easy listening music of the sixties, a veritable cornucopia of rainstorms, thunder, crashing waves and what was generally characterized as "The Passion-

ate Sounds of Nature!!!” There was a considerable amount of it in the studio-heavy sides of the psychedelic era. But it was really the invention of the first samplers that put post-commercial music concrete into the mainstream.

The rest, as they say, is history. Future history, if you will. Nowadays, compositions entirely comprised of samples of sounds, without a speck of cereal, are so common that they’re becoming passe, with the cutting edge passed back to — gasp! — live instruments. To me, the interesting thing about sampled music is that it changes the character of composition from a notes-on-an-instrument activity to a sequence of predefined events arranged in time. The art becomes the act of choosing the events and their arrangement. This is a fundamentally different sort of sound art, leading to very different choices from traditional techniques.

My own interest is getting the computer to tell dirty jokes, but let’s not get into that. It’s an application of Sphincter’s Law: You do it first, somebody else does it pretty, then some fool comes along and ruins it for everyone.”

Alberta

The bestest tree we ever had was a tiny Alberta spruce, named Alberta, appropriately enough. We picked her up at a xmas tree remainders sale (Oh look! It’s a little tree with no one to love it. Don’t worry little tree, I’ll take you home...), and she lived with us for over ten years in a number of houses and even on the road. She also paid visits to various friends and relatives and once hitched a ride home, waving to passing motorists as she went (more than one waved back). Trees tend to like travel, as it’s one of the more difficult luxuries for them to obtain. On the other hand, she was never happier than sitting out on the porch with a thick covering of new snow, palpably relaxing in what was basically her native environment. And when the winter solstice came around, she did her indoor decorative turn with enough grace and dignity for a tree five times her size, not to mention a greedy covetousness towards the gifts under her. We constructed delicate ornaments of mirror and crystal that graced her elfin form and hung miniature strings of blinking lights on her. Set in the window, she was a twinkling symbol of the turning of the year for the world to see.

About the third winter we had her, we kept Alberta in a touch too long at holiday time, and the next thing we knew she was turning brown and molting all over everything. We evacuated her to the front stoop but alas, her needles fell like rain, leaving her a naked tangle of sticks. Unable to bear the thought of throwing her away, we left her out, a skeletal remnant of her former self, lashed by the dark winter rains. But then came the spring. One morning I came out to get the mail and found the little carcass covered with the tiniest, most ‘squisit green needle poofties imaginable. Yes! Alberta had come back! We celebrated long and fervently, and immediately went out and got the biggest pot and the best soil we could buy, replanting her in a manner befitting her oversized spirit. By summer she was fluffier than ever.

Alberta, alas, is no longer with us — she got caught in the sun during a ferocious Willamette Valley heatwave and never recovered. But we recently picked up another Alberta spruce and it seems to have many of the same qualities as the last one, so who knows? Maybe plants reincarnate, too.

Matthew Saves My Skin

I was a bit stumbly writing the Gazette last week because I was suffering from a self-inflicted Wound of Stupidity, one of those badges of dubious honor you get from forgetting simple little things like the boiling point of radiator fluid. Perhaps the proper term of art is

Bigtime Owie. In any event, I was able to keep my arm out of the ice water for about five minutes before I started gritting my teeth and making low moaning noises. S went out and got topical skin ointment and lots of gauze and after fending me off with a chair once or twice got me to hold still and take my medicine.

I'm a car mechanic by necessity, not by choice. Once or twice I've heard tell that manly men are supposed to be able to pop the hood and rebuild the distributor with nothing more than a swiss army knife and intuition, but I've never been more than marginally invested in my sexual identity — seems more of a burden than a prized possession to me. No, I fix cars because I'm a musician, and because this is America, that means I tour. And when there's 2100 miles of icy highway between you and the bozo that put the fuel filter in backwards, quality guarantees are not highly liquid currency. So I do my own wimpy rendition of the manly thing and keep a grimy helping hand at the end of my radiator-barbecued arm. Wear the scars proudly, arm.

Actually, it ain't so bad — S did tender loving first aid all last weekend on the road (once under the interested observation of a twelve year old girl who was really into blisters) and my body was very good about growing new skin quick. But it's very likely that the ice water I anesthetized it with up front knocked a week off my healing time. And it was Matthew the park snoop who got me to soak it in the first place.

Matthew is like something directly out of an Eastern European village, a little old retired guy with a thick accent of indeterminant origin who spends his time wandering around the park (and for all I know, the neighborhood) getting into other people's business. If you're planting a tree, working on a car, fixing a roof leak or painting a wall, Matt will be there to offer advice and sidewalk superintend. He knows who's new, who's visiting, who's a delivery. If something unusual happens he's there to check it out. His opinions are loud, raucous and good-humored, hotly defended and just as quickly abandoned in the face of superior evidence. He is, in short, a character, and if his familiarity and abrasiveness seem hostile, they mask a shy and concerned interior. Matthew likes nothing better than to have someone disagree with him in his own manner, but he's also quick with genuine advice. And while he's the first to make raspy judgement of someone, he's also the first to lend a hand when they need it.

I'm a guy who heals quickly, and I hate making a fuss over a small injury. So when I absent-mindedly scalded myself from the radiator hose, I was ready to shrug it off and keep working. But Matthew was on me. "Put dat in cold water! Best ting for it!" I went and put some ice on it, but it was messy and I couldn't make it stay and I had to finish the radiator flush. I went back out to work on the car. Matthew came back. "Don't worry bout the car, you do that later. Cold water!" S later told me that it was Matthew's concern that got her roused to check what was going on.

Some of the neighbors get irritated at Matt and his constant hectoring, his eternal vigilance in their affairs. The guy we bought the place from referred to him as "the superintendant." Another who lives directly across from him said he feels like he's living in a fishbowl. But others tell how he checks on them if they're home alone, tells them when people come by their places. Crystal next door likens him to the watchman, and says she feels safer knowing he's there. Certainly if there was ever a robbery in the park Matthew would have at least a notion of what happened. He constitutes a neighborhood commodity, volunteer one-man blockwatch-cum-character, loud and raucous and very human.

The burn is down to the Hawaiian-sunburn level, which means I'm about to take the gauze off and start scratching off the loose skin. Look mommy, I'm a snake! Uh, the proper term is "debride," darling...

The Angel and the Clerk

Lively times around the fine fine superfine Box. The reconstruction of the house has actually progressed to the point where I can get back into the task of arting instead of farting, at least part of the time. Boney Fido Studios (small maybe but doughty — or is that doughty?) is up and carving its destiny out of the inside of my brain. I spent a day or so preparing an Irritatingly Complex Patch Cable complete with zillions of tiny gold-plated contacts to access the high-output section of the recorder, and seems to have worked it has. I feel a big creative bulge coming on here.

Only problem is, as usual, commerce — if my artistic soul demands I dump all my resources into musical equipment, then proceeds to spend the next two years playing Twinkle Twinkle Little LED's, what's a poor beleaguered body to do? Go play on street corners? Give plasma? become a monk? I've already got the tonsure. Or maybe start a monastery, more money in it.

That's all right, I'm doing what I love, so the money will follow, right right right? I'm a relatively hopeful Thaddeus on that point. I realize that I'm giving full rein to my creative side, just begging it to run wide and free. In a way, this is a form of enterprise, entrepreneurship: all business is built on adding value to natural resources, and I'm investing in the most reliable, readily available resource I have, my own musical and artistic abilities. In a sense, I carry a goldmine around in my head, and if I use the right mining and refining equipment, I can get it out and vend it for a good return like any other raw material. Kinda cold thinking like this, but also a useful viewpoint — certainly superior to the "everyone's a salesman" or "everyone's a product" views. To me, making everyone a subset of the Chamber of Commerce is like spraypainting us all gold and calling us Oscar. I'm just trying to identify the relationship I as just another guy who needs a job have with me as El Profundo, Arteest Extraordinario.

One of the more interesting non-spiritual ideas Alyster Crowley put forth was the parable of the artist as dual natured, a combination of Angel and Clerk. it's a standard joke just how much of a letdown it is to meet a treasured idol and discover he/she doesn't quite stride forth, lick the sky and rattle wildcats in real life. Crowley sez this is because the stuff you're really impressed by from an artist is done by the Angel in them, while the person who takes the work and makes some money with it or at least gets it out the door is the Clerk. The Angel is a lofty being, beyond mortal matters. The Clerk is frequently a grubby exploitive little shit, taking advantage of an intimate relationship with the divine to feather their own pimpy nest. Go visit expecting the Angel and the Clerk's bad breath and lousy posture can be a rude shock. On the other hand, the Angel is frequently so fluffy you might as well be conversing with a 150 pound bag of popcorn. But it takes both the guy with the wings and the guy with the three day stubble to make art happen.

So here I am, trying to reconcile my Clerk and my Angel, perhaps serving as well as Office Supervisor, trying to whip these recalcitrant mental employees into some semblence of productiveness. This of course when I'm not being Plant Manager or Critic or Bookkeeper or any of the three or four godzillion other hats I wear.

But hey, these days you're either in business or getting it — mize well get used to it. Even so, I always used to say I'm unsuitable for any job in a company except custodian or CEO. I saw a cartoon a while back showing a typical self-employed person wearing all his hats: Manager, Salesman, Accountant, Developer, Technician, Janitor, and at the very top a tall spotted hat with poofies on it: Office Clown.

Now there's a position I could qualify for.

Showdown in Kulch Gulch

It's a tough little row to hoe being a musician in America, no doubt bout. But it's nothing compared to being a musician's mother. My mummy was a twelve-synapse nervous wreck about me most of my adult life, afraid of my perchance for living "one paycheck away from disaster," as she put it. As if! I'm reminded of an old dialog: "Don't quit the day job." "What day job?" The arts, may we be reminded, have no job description in the Big Book of Employment. Look up Artist and you'll find an entry, "Artist — see Creative Product Sales."

All part and parcel with the big Generation Gulf that hamstrung families in the '60's and even impacted them after the kids grew up and their hormone levels receded. The folks that fought WW II and had so much fun that they never came home had a hard time dealing with a bunch of people who thought Hitler and Brainiac were equally entertaining supervillians and questioned the entire comic book scenario their parents had lived through. That that gap resulted in the Counter Culture and all its fruits, from environmentalism to cultural diversity, may be held in its defense, but certainly doesn't mitigate the general suffering and familial disruption that was its principle symptom and most pervasive consequence.

The basic cause of the Great Divide, seems to me, was the inability of the elders to objectively view the world they'd created, that they were in fact a subsector of. They were blind to the insanities of the Cold War and the Eat More Twinkies For Jesus consumerism they embraced. As the holders of power, they saw any criticism as a threat. And by their paranoia, they created the very threat they imagined: their thoughtful criticisms spurned by authority, the younger generation turned to more graphic methods of communication, like blowing up buildings and rioting in the streets. And they got just what they imagined, too, a repressive, prejudiced UberKultur stomping them into the ground like field mice under the heels of Little Bunny Foofoo. Sort of a mutual admiration society from hell.

Well friends, we're at it again. We've got ourselves the makings a great little Kulch Gulch right here in river city. And it's a real simple problem, just like before. We're not listening.

Perhaps I'm a victim of NPR Syndrome: starting to believe the image of the world presented on All things Considered. Certainly those liberal wonks are painting a very one-sided picture, as is the media in general (example: those guys in Texas that are holed up in the trailer? The ones they refer to as Republic of Texas leaders? Ain't. RoT [isn't that cute] repudiated their asses on their web site a week ago. The main guy got impeached, tried to go off and start a Republic of his own, and in the words of the site "has gone off the deep end." Did the press report THAT? NOOOOOOOO! much more fun to portray them as wackos from Waco and dump em down the memory hole of media representation.). But it's not the Republicrat Follies in Washington that I'm looking at here, nor the fringes of the Substance Wars in the tobacco sector (hey, fight for your right to smoke, foke). It's the inability of the Big Blob to comprehend the direction of 90's smartiepants thought, and its ironic attitude.

Trying to lecture 16-year-olds is a waste of time in the best of circumstances, and during the 60's it was a negative sum game: any stern moral grounds Daddy took were just proof of his perfidity. It was all Don't Do As I Do, Do As I Say, and the short side knew it and pointed it out sarcastically and often. Well, it's even worse now. The short side doesn't even bother arguing any more, and Daddy had his chance back in his long haired days and screwed the pooch in the back of his BMW. Not to mention that the pooch is suing for child support. The Ironic 90's don't go much for criticism — it's postmodern time here, and nothing has meaning, only message. Make of it what you will. Or call it WC Fields epistemology: Everyone has to believe in something, and I believe I'll

get as fucked up as I can as often as I can. You say you're trying to save the world? Cool. Got a cig?

Worst of all from the point of view of the narrow sliver of the Counter Culture that hasn't assimilated, the narrow sliver of the Numb Generation that actually wants to change things for the better is running into exactly the same walls the old hippies did, and frequently from exactly the same people, or their clones. We're STILL fighting WW II, like a decorticated dog snarling at its shadow. And now we've got a resurgent New Right that comes on like pod people from the McCarthy era. Is it the 50's all over? Yes. Only this time the bad guys are mainstreamed.

So what? Yeah, we're all getting a little numb. Maybe it's time to strike a blow for reality. As if.

The Sword in the Cornpone Stone

Hoowee, it's a great big complicated world out there and it's so much easier to deal with when you reduce it to little hard lumps of certainty. I spend a certain amount of time every day unlearning absolutes and embracing the great Wha?. Seems like people are wedded to the illusion of catagorization, like some aspect of the human nervous system is in love with it.

Could be just the action of the mind itself, finding and catagorizing patterns, that leaves us with fewer resources to cope with ambiguity. Certainly a physical fact like "gravity sucks" or "lions eat you pert near ever time" has a continuity and pertainence to it that calls for its preservation within the structures of thought. So we evolved towards certainty as a processing method and developed a lot of tools to aid it. The persistence of memory is just the beginning: there's prejudice and circular logic and fanaticism and pigheadedness as well as faith and hope and courage and independence of spirit, methods both simple and complicated to prevent hard-edged observations in general from leaking away into the constant chaotic wash of everyday mishmosh.

I've spent years railing against the two-edged sword of certainty that lets General Lee wipe the deck with the opposition using entrenched defense in a half dozen battles only to surcumb to the same tactic himself at Gettysburg, that gives the early Church the strength to defend itself against the massed legions of the Roman Empire and the stupid stubbornness to crush the faith's intentions to powder in the name of an Empire of its own, that gives the patriot and the militia maniac equal fervor and self-righteousness. But what do I have to offer as an alternative?

The vacillation of the weak is so evident in the world that any attempt at contemplation of one's actions becomes tainted with the suspicion of timidity. Forebearance does have a properly positive reputation, usually in the guise of aphorisms like "Look before you leap," "Don't count your chickens...", "Measure twice, cut once." The ones you learn in school right before spelling and just after arithmetic. Still, the external human world, especially the more mercantile portions of it, has a hard time dealing with grayscale when everything looks so much better in black and white.

One of the weirdest places this tendency shows up in, and one that to my taste points a huge warty finger at the crux of the problem, is in the philosophical debate surrounding the e-word: epistemology (ooh, I said it!). There are whole teams of hoary professors engaged in logical fisticuffs with one another over such highly significant and earth shaking matters as the origin of thought, the mind/world division, and the Main Event, the Rumble in the Blackboard Jungle, Does reality really exist or do we just make it up?

That last one constitutes a Mother of All Debates because the answer dictates modes of enquiry into the nature of Life The Universe And All That, and it also hits the absolut-

ism vrs. relativism battle. Suiting your thinking to the subject matter is vital if you're gonna find anything out, and if the world is just a self-referenced joke the gods secretly howl at us for believing, how can you know anything? Ah the pretzels you'll eat when you start staring at your navel. Anyways, there's a whole School of thought - think of it as a kung fu school like in a Bruce Lee movie, complete with ten-foot portraits of the founders and venerable ancestors - that contends that if you can't directly observe it, it has no bearing on the subject. These guys also have a heavy commitment to absolutism and consistency, and they spend a lot of time doing their logical katas. On the other side of town is another dojo where people believe that the world contains a certain irreducible ambiguousness, where some of them advocate what they call "fuzzy" logic, logic that includes the greyscale of uncertainty. Now, when these two gangs run into each other at the local cafe, the most amazing chopsocky ensues. The Absolutists sneer at the Relativists and call their fuzzy logic "the cocaine of philosophy." When confronted with evidence of the mushiness of things, they try to pretend they have a fly up their nose and change the subject. These guys are absurdly attached to their Really True, Really False, Really world view.

Why? For the same reason Dad can't allow you to talk back. For the same reason policemen and lawyers and doctors and all the other apostles of the almighty binary stand up on their high holy horses and hoist their high holy chins to the high holy heavens to proclaim their rectitude. The minute you allow greyscale into the picture, you've eliminated absolute Right and Wrong, replaced them with wimpy simpering Better and Worse. You've driven a stake right through the heart of the Divine Rights of Kings, Princes, Philosophers and all other cardboard supermen. Worse. you leave the poor suckers bereft of the one weapon that has served them when all others turned aside, that self-same sword of certainty to whack off the heads of the Evil Others who refuse to face the inevitable and agree with them. How can they deal with their secret fear of being wrong when it's inevitable that they are?

No wonder chaos has such a bad reputation. Once you start down the slippery slope of relativism there's no way back to the high ground. You're left adrift in a world of dreary, unromantic greys, slimy, clumsy little truths with no big Truth to sweep them up and put them away in, left to piece together what you can with what you have at hand with no real hope of ever cutting through the murk to a well-blazed path. And worst of all, you're left without the big egoboost of that shining billboard with the ten thousand watt kliegs illuminating it that proclaims I AM RIGHT, mounted over you head to light your way through the fog, to say nothing of the sixteen lane TRUE WAY Expressway.

I'm inclined to think, however, that the ability to tolerate and cope with ambiguity and insufficient information is one of the prime marks of a mature individual, someone who can make their way in the world in a reasoned and focused way without letting the iron rails of their own preconceptions run them over the yawning precipice. Certainly the thoughtfully uncertain person strikes me as healthier and closer to reality than an enthusiast of almost any sort of ism, however noble and energetic.

Of course, once I get full of espresso, all bets are off.

A Headful of Rebo

In Paul Simon's abortively insightful movie One Trick Pony, there's a scene of a buncha old hasbeen rockers riding around in the tour van (no airconditioned bus for these losers) playing a little game: name all the dead rock stars you can think of. The game goes on for an unpleasantly long time, and watching it even a year after the fact I could think of people they hadn't mentioned. Today it could get downright depressing.

At the time the morbidity of the game seemed self-indulgent to me, but I've been awfully lucky. Most all the people I know are still alive.

Feels like my luck's a little slow this year, tho — I lost my mother and two members of my local tribe, and then there's Alan Ginzberg and Tim Leary, not to mention Laura Niro. No, I didn't know them. Yes, I knew them. Some ways, better than my mother.

What's the relationship between a relentlessly public figure and their audience? You can't really call them your friends, although you feel that way towards them, because you know that feeling isn't reciprocated in any but the most general way. It's almost like a relationship between you and yourself: the part that holds the image of the famous person and the part that observes, relates, cares, disputes, loves and hates. They aren't people at all, those people, just ghosts in the media, figments of your imagination. Beloved fallacies.

Stars are nothing new. We've been fixating on public figures ever since we had kings and popes and priestesses and performers. They seem to be a mechanism of the human mind, a way to become larger than yourself by the encompassing of the mighty other. But like all such magical empowerments, the price of gaining power from another is losing that power when the another goes away. How many women and men drew sexual and social power from Elvis? Is that why they won't let him die? Not out of love — not even out of fear of death. Just fear of losing the edge that they get by having a live Elvis in their heads.

But, turn it around — it ain't the bodies that matter, it's what got into the media, into the heads of many, into your head, that matters. Elvis is alive and well — hey, S and I play "Jail House Rock." When Frank Zappa died, his widow suggested as a memorial that people play his music. Whether that was an implicit blanket-license or not is debatable, but the notion is right on.

So what we the living do is carry the dead around with us, stacked up in our heads like those monks in that catacomb in France, tho hopefully in slightly less deteriorated condition. What legacy they have is there. Maybe all mourning is the attempt to let them out and rest in peace. Them and us.

The most recent addition to my own private graveyard was a woman named Rebo (yes, she had a last name and no I don't know it — so much for familiarity). She was an active member of the Vaudeville tribe, of which I've always been a peripheral ancestral figure, revered for the writing of the Chumleighland March, but mostly ignored because I'm never around. Rebo was a singer and performer and general sweetiepie, a staple of the Country Fair circus as half of Girls Who Wear Glasses and later as cowgirl Misty of the Rodz Sisters. Only after she was diagnosed with lymphoma did our paths really cross, at the houses of friends and once by chance in our old trailer park. We became, if not good friends, good acquaintences, people who trusted each other to speak the same head-language, who could hug without worrying about any ulterior motives.

During the last Chautauqua benefits, her deteriorating condition was a constant underlying concern, and Paul Magid of the Karamazovs led the audiences in an energy-yell of her name — "Hey Rebo!" She went almost immediately after that — so much for alternative medicine. So much for allopathic medicine, for that matter.

Sometimes I write songs, sometime they write me. This one kept resonating in my head until it picked up enough energy to kick my ass out of bed and write it down. And then it made me edit it. And then it made me play it at a memorial gathering for Rebo in West Seattle. And now it's making me inflict it on you guys.

Gimme a break — I'm just mourning here. Somebody had to get the song written about them. The words aren't as universal as they might be, but if you use your pattern-recognition, you'll probably get something out of them.

HEY REBO

Hey Rebo, last time I saw you
Talkin to my neighbor lookin at his trailer
Hey Rebo, I didn't recognize you
Bald as an eagle, skinny as a needle
Hey Rebo, I didn't really know you
But you sure looked awesome in that cowgirl costume
Hey Rebo, you sure got shirty
Layin out a J card in an allnight Kinko's

Midnight oil and daylight dark
Laugh while the wind blows out the spark
Nobody said it wouldn't get real
Everybody dies, it's no big deal

Hey Rebo, you made it look easy
You had a lot of heart and you finished what you started
Hey Rebo, you really took your chances
Love and forgiveness is such a risky business
Hey Rebo, you left too early
Party's still poppin but you just let it drop
Hey Rebo, drop me a letter
Send it to me care of the allnight Kinko's

(break)

Hey Rebo, my throat's still hurting
Calling out your name in that healing game
Hey Rebo, we tried to make you hear it
Whoopie wowie zowie, kiss you on the owie
Hey Rebo, you rode into the sunset
Happy trails to ya, at least no one can sue ya
Hey Rebo, hope you go camping
Don't let me catch you in no allnight Kinko's

Roll em and smoke em, saddle up and ride
pack up your sorrows and drag em outside
lay down your weapons and give up a yo
for the foureyed sweetheart of the rodeo
Hey Rebo!

Pain, Gain and Boris

Ever since S got diagnosed with degenerative arthritis in her hips five years ago, its been one of them longwinded struggles you read about. The allopaths had their way with her (but were polite enough to return the hip bones), the alternative people had their inning, and various whitecoats are still monkeying around with her trying to get the owie to stop, with only temporary success.

On the other hand, even temporary success can be a big help when it comes time to suppliment the ol income. Northwest Folklife was one of the big weekends of the year for

us back in our vaudeville days and we were well aware of its potential. As well we were aware of two (count 'em) cutoff notices from The Phone Company, a shadow of doom on our already overcast financial straits. Plus of course it is nice to eat every week or two. Well, it was time to dig out the old greasepaint and rubber noses and get back into street performing, yowsah.

In the past, the primary difficulty of Folklife, not unlike other Seattle street events, was its strenuous character. We're talking a four day marathon musical festival with thousands of participants and megathousands of audience, crammed into Seattle Center navel to nosering in one big filafel frenzy. Our typical mode of action was to get up at five or six in the morning, go down and stake a claim on a corner, wait for the rest of the world to show up and play until we or the crowds completely gave out, then go home and do it again the next day. By the end of four days, we were toasted lil weeners and our voices were hideous travesties of their former selves. It was fortunate that the place actually covered the rent because we frequently couldn't work for a week afterwards. And the competition for good spaces frequently turned ugly, with shouting matches and trial-by-bad-example the norm if not the accepted standard. We developed what I think of as the Competence Defense: because we're good at what we do, we don't need the really cherry high-traffic spots that draw a half-dozen ragbutt guitarists disputing turn order like finches at a sunflower seed feeder. We can sit over in a corner somewhere and still do well enough. Whether we'd do better taking our turn at the trough is moot — like they say, "Better is the enemy of Good Enough." The greener grass grows on the slippery slope.

Well, this year things were also complicated by the aches and pains. Certainly nobody wants to watch a performer that dragged themselves out of bed and limped down to the show, reciting their work through a grey mask of agony. Unless of course they're into pathos. Thank you, no. No, thank you. This essentially gives S veto power on physical actions. And that puts her in the position of fighting both the ouch and her own ambition. It's a monument to her overall integrity that she can focus well enough in the midst of chronic pain to make meaningful decisions pro or con any given day's activities, based both on what she wants to do and what she needs to keep the meters out of the red.

Okay — we actually made it out to the fair. And not only that, the gods were kindness itself. We skipped the redeye bit — instead of doing the great 6 AM Claims Rush, we got up at a decent hour and made it down by early afternoon. Didn't matter — our usual space was there. We didn't try to play Fat Saturday When The Wallets Go Walking, opting instead to go buy plant starts and wait. And we played a decent respectable six hours and dint try to go for the Guinness Book.

But it was street performing all right. We got our share of walleyed strangers barging the case, jabbering loonies with encyclopedic references to recite, bumbling drunks that wouldn't leave, and all the rest of the paraphernalia that goes with the smiling mixed couples and dancing babies. As I repeated pointed out throughout the weekend, busking: it's not just an adventure, it's a job. On the other hand, there's a lot to be said for smiling mixed couples and dancing babies, not to mention posing for pro photographers, trading silly hats with the Radical Grandmas, demonstrating swing chords for wildeyed teenage rockers, and seeing the old friends we shared champaign with on the eve of our engagement twenty years ago, still astonished at our marital longevity. Folklife is as much a portable village as a musical extravaganza, and it stands with Pike Place as a monument of culture over commerce, of Good Enough.

As the fun was winding down on Sunday, a young woman came up to us and requested a song off the CD, her entire attitude that of a very knowlegable Amber Tide fan. Well, yes, we can dig this. Some of our young fans have literally grown up on our music, and we're very much into TNG Tideheads. But then the young woman's mom showed up, and we realized who she was. Six years ago we performed and recorded "Rusty Buses" in

a living room in West Seattle. Two members of the audience had been very young children. Their applause at the end of the song was credited on the CD as “Tiny Hands.” This gorgeous young thing in the grey vinyl pants was none other than Tiny Hands, grown large and still clapping.

Money comes and goes. Business deals blow away. Art is as disposable as toilet paper. And no matter what triumphs you achieve in entertainment, they’re only as permanent as the last echos of applause from the last show you did. But there are monuments you make in the music dodge, and they can last as long as the spirit you share continues to flow. One twelve-year-old fan may not look like an equestrian statue, but it is. It is. And that, too, is Good Enough.

First Anniversary

Beloved Ladies and Gentlemen of the TG mailing list,

By a sort of default procedure, this is designated the First Anniversary Edition of the Thaddeus Gazette. You may now drink the champaign. I’m not sure exactly what the date of the first TG was, and if anybody saved the original email version and has it, lemme know what the creation date was. In any event, I believe this constitutes the fifty third in the series and as far as I’m concerned, we’re at year one. Sometimes there actually are perks in being the editor.

I’m immensely gratified by all the positive feedback I’ve received. This began life as a glorified correspondence and kinda snowballed from there, and it’s marvelous for me that you folks are willing to put up with the amount of babblizing that’s crept into it. When I put out something I think is pretty good and the thoughtful, perceptive people I send it to agree with me, it helps strengthen my resolve to continue and sharpen my mental rewriting pencil. It’s indisputable that the creative arts are only rictuses of the personality without audiences. Thank you for being there.

I’m nominally a pretty literal kind of person — I consciously tend to go from what I perceive as point A to point B without seeking major digressions. But I’ve learned at a sort of second hand that there are portions of me that do very devious things. Seems like maybe I had ulterior motives in this project. Oh, nothing sinister, mind you — I’m not secretly programming y’all for world domination or anything. It’s more like my mind had plans it didn’t bother informing me of.

I started writing compulsively at the age of about nine, first scribbling derived sf stories without plot or end on wideruled school paper, then banging them out on a typewriter as my manual skills cut in. I had oceans of words leaking out of my head and tried to get them on paper, but while they were facile, they were empty. I had no experiences to draw on, no perspectives to reflect events off of to make my writing worth reading even once. By the time I got to college, I’d degenerated to navel-gazing fantasy worlds that I never even wrote about, just sketched and endlessly fillagreed with mindless detail. I realized that I needed to get some life under my belt before I’d be able to write anything but birdcage liners.

So I went out and became a wandering minstrel and got married and moved here and there and lived in vehicles and played a lot of bars and parties and festivals and wrote a lot of songs, some of which even started coming out well, and in general tried to stuff as much experience under the aforementioned waist protector as would fit, given the unstretchable nature of underwear.

And in the process, my wordriver dried up. Sure, I’d been keeping a journal, and I could still write if I had to, but the crazy torrent of blab receded right along with my hair-line. It was a blessing in a way — I’d been caught sleepy in a lot of highschool classes from latenight word blabbing sessions — but it felt like I’d missed the boat on one of my talents.

But this is where Stealth Thaddeus got into the act. A side effect of the A to B syndrome of my conscious mind is a penchant for routine: I've found enjoyment in any number of dull repetitive tasks like sticking labels on cassette tapes or folding J cards, and occasionally I've turned this trait to my artistic advantage. In 1981 I taught a swing guitar class in Bellingham and wrote an instruction book, one lesson at a time. I don't sell it — it needs revision like a rock band needs a drummer — but I've never been able to summon the consecutive spit to re-engineer the whole bloody thing. But the original came out as a side effect of a relatively ordered, sequential task, and that I could do. And I think that's where the Thaddeus Gazette was born. I think.

Sandahbeth doesn't use it, but she has a motherlode of novelist in her. She plots and characterizes like anything, and she has a major gift for sensing the motivations of the people she invents. Her spelling and grammar is atrocious, but that's why there are editors. Her major block is the same as mine: writing is essentially a sitdown and do it kind of job, labor intensive and repetitive. That old German word *sitzfleisch*, literally "sitting flesh," used in chess to denote patience and perseverance at the board, could easily be applied to the writer's craft. S figures she'd start writing all her bestsellers after she's too old to run around doing really fun creative stuff like playing on streetcorners and starving. I always figured they'd be collaborations: she could come up with the plots and characters and motivations and fun dialog and swell scenes and then I'd come along afterwards like the little guy with the white suit and the broom and wheelbarrow at the end of the parade and clean up, mebe class up her joyful chaos a little — y'know, metaphores, similes, all them litcher thangs the critics eat up.

So now with both of us getting older and no retirement in sight (Just remember kids, like crime, street performing doesn't pay — Social Security), I'm starting to look at my fallbacks and options. Playing the programmer card is one — I always figured if everything went to poop there's still a future in computer maintainence. Just recently I've become involved with creating theme music for a game developer and aiding an artist in getting her lettering on line as a shareware font. And in its subtle way, the TG is another fallback — poking my rusty writing machinery on a weekly basis, trying to coax it into a pale semblence of its glorious youthful bloom, hopefully without its obnoxious youthful acne. Even if I did have go around myself to do it. It's often said that positive motivations are much better at leading to positive results — the road to Hell may be paved with good intentions, but so is the road to Heaven — and my original desire to stay in touch with the people I care about has been much better at pushing me to keep up than any dreams of fortune and fame in the Big Time Book Biz (%>P — I knew I couldn't say that with a straight face).

So when S and I become the Burns and Allan of the sci fi/ detective/ western/ pulp/ romance/ true confession/ mutantlesbianfetishisttreehugger fiction genres, scrapped over by giant multinational conglomerants, the toast of publicity flacks and major bookstore signing tours the world over, you can all say you saw it here first. And don't say I didn't warn you: we're gonna be cute as a bug's rear on Good Morning America.

Stalking the Wiley Minivan

Our esteemed Ford LTD (Lots of Trouble Daily) suffered a massive stroke on the way to a gig in Canada a few weeks ago and is now a Ford OTD (Out The Door), and I'm engaged in that great all-American passtime, shopping for a used car. Seems like I've been doing this a lot lately — probably because of my stiffnecked pride in getting a bargain to brag about, which keeps getting me into horrendous lemons that belch and stumble and leave me in the lurch in colorful communities a hundred miles from home — but boy, were they good deals. That this has been my *modus operendi* for lo these many years is finally beginning to dawn on me, and for perhaps the first time in my adult life, I'm trying

to buy a prudent vehicle. The prospect disgusts me, but there's clearly no other choice, especially since this time I'm doing it on a bank loan. As the remarkably candid car salesman at the Big Fattie Dealership remarked, if you buy something on payments, it's best to ensure that it'll last as long as they do.

My bank's faith in me strikes me as a clear violation of the sacred principle that you only offer a loan to people who don't need one, but perhaps they err on the side of the angels. Who says deregulation's always a bad thing? Maybe if I default they can write it off as a contribution to the arts.

So after much discussion and divination S and I are out sauntering into Fat Jack's Clean Previously Owned Quality Cars, Trucks And Industrial Waste looking at minivans. Oh no! From Camel Caravan to Dodge Caravan? Heaven forfend! Well, heaven doesn't forfend, in fact, heaven encourages our primordial quest for orthopedic seats and mileage in the Jazz Age or better. S, facing two counts of ruptured disc, needs something a little more gentle than the 70's B-series Chrysler iron we've specialized in over the last fifteen years or so, and unless we want to become teenage idols or bank robbers, we've got to cut our road expenses in these days of \$1.29 unleaded.

There's seldom anything exciting about necessity, unless you count running from tigers, and that's an entertainment I'll pass on along with stalk-and-slash movies and Sixty Minutes. But for me, there was a small thrill in hunting for a car back in my salad days of involuntary simplicity. The searching of the want ads, the polling of friends, the perusal of bulletin boards, the aimless cruising of streets and alleys with one eye peeled for likely For Sale signs — then, the thrill of the chase, endless phone calls, cryptic journeys to obscure corners of town to examine pathetic overpriced rustheaps, spirited dickering with characters out of an old episode of The Rockford Files (showing my age there) (actually, no — TRF is a syndication staple) — then finally, success! A purchase! And of course, the awful aftermath as the precious conveyance melts to slag at the first stoplight. I think I liked it better when we chased gazelle with big sticks and rooted for grubs (and vice versa). Of course, that period also involved fleeing ferocious felines, so, well, whatever.

At least that method yielded up a real car, an ornery, cantankerous, opinionated object with a lived-in vibe and a personality that could be related to, even if only in quadrascripts. What with S's and my animistic tendencies, they provided transport and companionship in equal measure, serving as family rather than possession. These newer vans we're looking at give no hint of personality — they're all Robo and no Cop. It's a struggle to tell the difference in memory between the silver 86 caravan with the bad tires and the good radio in the lot in Ballard and the burgandy 89 caravan with the good tires and no radio and the big v 6 in the lot on Lake City Way. One and all, they blur into a faceless, lifeless mass of Dull Grey Van, a conformist straitjacket ready to wear right off the rack.

I know, I know, you can't tell a book by its cover or a person by the car they drive. But still — are we being domesticated by our tamer tendencies? Are we trading our edge for back support and tilt steering? Are we turning into our parents? Lordy lordy, is dis de end of Rico? Probably depends more on where we arrive at than what we sit behind the wheel of to get there. And if there's still a road in front of me, at least the ride will be less arduous. And that's a comfort. I think.

The Mile Long Finger Writes

Songwriting can be a lucrative profession, but it's a frustrating calling for me. I started writing songs when I was sixteen, more or less as an outlet for teenage hormonal angst — I wasn't a jock, I got no respect as a grind, and songwriting at least let me fanta-

size being popular, playing loudly and badly on a horrendously cheap electric guitar while staring at myself in a mirror. Weirdly enough, though I was physically implanted in the Age of Flower, in my heart I was a proto-punk.

But even then I found that songs had a way of scheduling themselves without my permission. One month I'd have a dozen songs blasting out of me, the next none. The creative spunk flowed when it listested and not when I willed. The lightning struck and then there ninety days of drought.

The hard part isn't not writing — it's wanting the emotional lift of writing and having nothing to write. Sexual analogies immediately come to mind, but songwriting is such an engagement of the mind, heart and spirit that comparisons with sex are almost irrelevant. My journals are spattered with examples of songwriting self-abuse, horrendously forced and weary attempts at lyrics without a trace of divine juice in their desiccated hulks.

At times I reach the point of being almost painfully ashamed of these abortions, cringing internally when their grotesque scansion crawls up from the murky bottom of my boggy mind to google and gargoyle at me. My one defense, which I offer as a relatively useful technique of ego jujitsu for almost any painful memory, is not to deny these pitiful children of a wayward past, but to accept them. The narrative I use goes, "If I died and went to the Heavenly Tribunal and they sat me down in that Big Uncomfortable Chair and God Himself thrust his hundred mile long Finger in my face and demanded 'WELL? DID YOU DO THIS? DID YOU?' — I'd have to say, 'Yeah, I did that. That's me.'" No excuses, no explanations. Just Yep, that happened all right. I did that. For some reason, this works for me.

Well, I've been cuddling up to a lot of Funny Looking Kids this week. In preparation for our 20th anniversary CD project, intended to be a nosespray of original love songs from the sacred to the honkeytonkey, I've been delving into the debris-choked mines of my old notebooks, seeking in their dark and sp-sp-spooky depths the leftover excretions of my lifelong devotion to rhyme and reason. In a way, I'm just harvesting a crop I sewed long ago, a gold (okay, coal) mine I left myself in the will of the passage of time, a gift I sent to my future from my pimply past. Which, I guess, makes this my transfer from Angel to Secretary modes in that artistic pantheon Mr Crowley spoke of.

Certainly I feel secretarial — I'm transcribing the lyrics of about fifty songs I wrote between 1988 and now, simply to escape the need to constantly search the thousand-plus handwritten pages from that period for a particular lyric I might want to reanimate this week. Partially this is the result of the CD, but it's also inspired by the relatively cool studio setup I now possess. Back in 1993, I postulated (in a notebook) My Dream Studio, with every bell and whistle I could think of, stuff I had no hope of obtaining at the time, even if I wasn't broke. I found that description yesterday, and realized that I had achieved it. Eclipsed it, in fact. So now, every song, every arrangement, every funny noise, every dismembered travesty of an album project that I ever thought, fantasized or even idly considered is lined up at the door screaming "Me! Me! Make me! ooooh!" You think cats are obnoxious when they think it's chow time and you don't? Try songs. And these aren't just nice easy-going guitar-and-voice sensitive folkie strummers, no, these are modern rock numbers, punk raveups, contemporary art music arias, overorchestrated movie music, production pop, faux funk idiocies, F Zappa pastiches, ironic dixieland — these are songs with attitude. And just because the bare possibility exists that I could actualize them in some gawdawful form, they're trooping up and down the bed at night prowling and yowling and purring in my ear and licking my nose and snuggling up to my lungs and trying their darnedest to get the ape to go make it happen. This to be achieved in my copeous free time when I'm not trying to stay ahead of Taxman and Robber the Boy Burglar.

the truths of the hunt is that game is where you find it, and no habitat, scrabbly or not, can be overlooked. So it was that on a fateful day in 1988 I strolled into a loans joint on SW 5th in Portland Oregon, casually browsing the guitar rack, and met Homer.

I wasn't really looking for a twelve string. Most of the time I had enough trouble playing the Indie 500 swing chords I specialized in on a six. But this particular guitar had a most important feature: the name Guild on the headstock. Of the half-dozen or so serious collector guitar manufacturers in America, Guild was the most inconsistent — some of its models were passable, others were firewood in masquerade. Except in one area: 12-strings. Guild 12-strings at their best could blow Martins and Gibsons right out of the water. And because of Guild's tailend Charlie rep, their instruments could be had for a mere fortune instead of a sultan's hoard. I checked the pricetag: \$275. High for a pawnshop box, but peanuts for even a bottom-of-the-top-end brand. Down it came. Oof! Ebony and rosewood are heavy! Serious pick-wear around the sound hole. Some body damage, well-repaired. Definitely an experienced guitar. Somebody had played this baby hard but cared enough to put him back together. I pulled a Herco heavy out of the watch pocket of my thriftstore baggies and took a swing. Out of tune, like all 12 strings. A quick pass through the tuners — instant tuning, my specialty. Another strum.

And the room was filled with the voices of angels.

12 strings are the most disparate of guitars. Their tones can range from dulcet sonorities to the harsh clacking of a spilled recycling bin, depending on the make and model and frequently the strings, the room and the accuracy of the tuning ear. All too often they're boomy or tinny, or both. At their best, they project a truly celestial vibration, the hunky bass strings complemented and enhanced by their delicate octave companions. But very seldom do you find one in which the voice is both full-bodied and balanced. This one could write the book. It shook the floor. It rattled the windows. It sang like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. It even sounded good playing swing, like a little Hammond B-3, warm and sustained.

S says she saw a lightbulb go on over my head. I hit it two or three more good licks and the guy behind the counter said "Yes, I know it's a loud guitar — do you think you could tone it down a little?" I was in love. The negotiations had the inevitability of fate. The owner saw a cash customer and immediately dropped the price to \$225, complete with an equally battered but equally utilitarian hard case. We plunked down all our spare cash for deposit and departed to make more, and a week later, passing through on the way to Eugene, we doubleparked our van-and-ugly-trailer parade outside long enough for me to rush in and bail the cutie out. Homer was mine.

Why Homer? Ask S — she named him. She always claimed there was someone named Jethro going to come along, but he never seemed to show up. But Homer remained Homer, and loud, and gorgeous-toned, and hideous, for the remainder of the 80's and most of the 90's, in sickness and in health, through sun and rain and hail and snow and the ravages of the street and the viscidities of the studio. And, sad to relate, the benign neglect of his owner/operator, who apparently refused to believe something so heavy could possibly be fragile as well, abandoning the sheltering hard case for a less bulky soft one and having less than perfect attention for the niceties of packing.

At last, brutalized, battered, warped and cracked, Homer reached the end of his wear cycle. His appearance no longer dramatic but merely degenerate, his tone dimmed by loose braces and a broken back, he had to be replaced. But how do you replace a stalwart companion? How can you substitute anything for time spent, distance covered, notes played? What possible surrogate is there for the Party at Pirate Cove, the triple standing ovation at the Victoria Folk Music Society, Saturday night bars and Sunday morning church services, the late night explorations of dissonance and resolution? We're not

talking an object here, we're talking about the Best Guitar I Ever Had, introduced as such on countless occasions to admiring strangers struck by the Been There Done That vibe Homer carried with the assurance of the cigarette dangling from Bogart's lips. A piece of my heart, that's what that guitar was.

But times change, and hearts change, and while love is eternal, the trappings of art and craft are the grass that dies and comes again. More and more, my interest has been turning to different pursuits in music, to composition and variety and multi-instrumentalism, away from the one-guitar-one-player model of classic folk and the street, and away from the bloody but unbowed Invictus spirit of the downtrodden proletarian artist. Poverty is great for the soul but it's lousy for the pocketbook. Welcome to the Age of Irony.

So off we went to our favorite guitar stores, one after another, gazing with glazed-eyed wonder at the burnished treasures there to behold and grunting in involuntary pain at the prices. I have many talents, and one is the ability to find the most expensive guitar in the store blindfolded: just let me play them all and the one I like the best is the spendiest. But after much petulance and gas we landed at the store that had sold S her previous guitar, a place up on the north end of Seattle called Guitarville, where the hustle is tinged with sympathy and the salesfolks remember you from the last time you came in. And there I picked up a shiney new Sigma 12-string off the rack and gave it a stroke, and the angels sang again. Not a name guitar, not a collector's make or model, but Martin design, Korean workmanship and a solid-wood top combined to produce a marvelous stock instrument. And the price was pretty close to right. I only needed a little vigorish. So I brought in Homer, bankvault case and all, for their inspection.

The salesman was nonplused. He declared Homer the most beatup Guild he'd ever seen, bar none, but you could see the respect he had for the venerable character of the instrument. The other salesmen gathered around in awe. I suppose there's a certain thrill when one is presented with an indisputable artifact of Really Real Life, an object so totally alive with the joys and sorrows of the Great Big World that it becomes testament, a work of art. That these guys could feel that life, and respect it, took much of the sting out of the necessity of passing Homer on to be patched or dismantled, salvaged to sing another day or consigned to the scrapheap we all end up in eventually. They gave me \$50 in trade, and they cared about him, and that was enough.

So long, Homer. I never did do the fingerpicking album I wanted to with you, but we had fun, you and I. Hope they fix you up. Thanks for the times. Don't take any wooden flatpicks. And so long to a piece of me, worn-out self-images and good times and bad that are no longer constrictions, but only memories.

Stuffle on Mars

As you may have noticed from previous broadcasts, we have a passion for animation in our household. No, not the Mickey Minnie Daffy Bart variety — I'm talking real animation, the process of infusing life into common household objects. Or maybe the process of recognizing the innate liveliness of said objects, their natural tendency to make adorable squeaking noises at appropriate moments. Most people associate this activity with a) stuffed toys and b) children. But I'm here to confirm what a dyed-in-the-brain Animist friend observed: "Once Stuff knows you can hear it, you get no more peace." Actually, her word for the animated objects in question was Stuffle, as in stuffle toys, a variant on stuffie, both diminutive forms of stuff, intended as terms to distinguish animate objects from things that just sit there and sulk, like the trash (but don't count on it).

I have an elaborate Theory of Stuffle, an attempt to codify some sort of sense to the habits of Things With Attitudes, but never mind. Suffice it to say that bears, dollies, frogs, bedspreads, rugs, even tables and chairs have their say in our household. Not always

their way, but always some smartass comment or other. This circumstance, though annoying, is tolerable, since without it we'd surely have a much more boring lifestyle. But I hadn't realized just how far it had gone until the recent Mars mission started getting into the news. The kicker concerned the Mars rover, Sojourner, which was described as "the size of a microwave" and "as large as a toaster oven." It was at this point that things got out of hand. The stuff toys and dollies and all were content to make the odd remark, but it was the toaster, the refrigerator, the microwave, the stove and the computers — in short, the appliances — that were the most interested in the progress of what became known around the house as "The Brave Little Toaster," after a children's book I've never read but whose name alone is enough to invoke just worlds. Nobody would rest until they had heard the latest news about the fascinating rocks the rover was sidling up to to lick on. The notion of a piece of ambulatory equipment sent across millions of miles of empty space through threat of meteor and cosmic ray to go bouncing across the landscape of another planet in quest of scientific data was simply thrilling to them.

And of course, to me. Would I be wasting so much time commenting on this just at the behest of a bunch of stupid noisy household devices? Well? Don't answer that. It is, in fact, yet another marvelous reminder of the fact that we are, inescapably, living in The Future.

Back in the fifties, like many children, I was a captive audience of science fiction, devouring tales of robots, spaceships and trips to Mars like so many M&M's. Naturally, the future described in these stories was a bit skeletal: everybody acted, as Vonnegut noted in one of his books, like *Americans*. Like 1950's *Americans*, in fact. The principle characteristics of The Future distinguishing it from The Present were the stage props, the gizmos and geewhizzies lying around in future piles cluttering up the landscape. You couldn't turn around in these stories without running into deathrays, wrist radios, electric sliderules, atomic powered typewriters and the like. Apart from that, it was still 1950 — Future Dad went to Future Work and Future Mom stayed home and took care of Future Home and tucked Future Johnnie into Future Bed at night. When they weren't all being wiped out by Future Aliens or attacked by Future Facists or Future Russians or investigating Future Conspiracies, that is. Stilted as it was, though, all this futurism left me with an indelible impression of the Future as a place where all these strange and marvelous things happened, a place as weird and wonderful as Oz or Wonderland, and a darn sight more scientific, too! It didn't really dawn on me then that I was headed inevitably towards this very fantasy destination at the rate of one second per second. Might as well tell me I would move to Disneyland on my 21st birthday.

So, what did I do yesterday? Yesterday I booted up my home computer and signed on to the Internet, called up the NASA web site on the World Wide Web and downloaded a few photos taken by the cameras on the Mars explorer, imported them into a graphics application and cleaned them up, then printed them out on my home color printer and took them to the hospital in my minivan to show to Sandahbeth who was in for back surgery. On the way I heard the news on National Public Radio talk about the expansion of NATO and the influence of the Chinese on the Democrats, as well as the new cooperation between the US and Russia, the severe restriction of the tobacco industry, the debate over global warming and the dispute in Congress over the balanced budget agreement. I switched my digital-tune car radio to a commercial station and listened to industrial, rap, urban dance, techno, electronica, grunge and memory-makers from the 60's and 70's, interspersed with ads for cellular phone services and gum (some things never change).

Need I go on? We're inhabiting a fantasy, walking around in the flesh in the middle of a dream scarcely glimpsed a quarter of a century ago. It's amazing and delightful and pretty flippin' weird and it isn't like they said it would be and is too. And we're so used to it that all we do is bitch about the traffic. All the sf writers could think of was extensions

of what they already knew: roomsized computers, teardrop-shaped rockets on fins, deepsea diving suit spacemen. The real future has them outnumbered. Instead of trimming the social Christmas tree with gaudy new ornaments, time has ripped the old evergreen up by the roots, tossed it in the trash and set up an aluminum siding sculpture in its place, complete with photos of Mars and Bosnian war criminals. All without so much as a by-your-leave.

And the really freaky part is, this isn't The Future anymore. It's daily life. It's happening, man. As usual, The Future is still in the future, barreling down on us like a bull elephant in musth, horny as all getout and taking no prisoners. Which is to say, if you don't like the weather, wait five minutes, we got an earthquake scheduled.

Well, three cheers for the Brave Little Toaster, anyways — we're learning far more about Rock on Mars than we ever thought we'd want to know, and while the strains of the Planets whack away in the background (synth version, natch), we of the Spaecraft Fun and Stuffle Revolutionary Brigade congregate in solomn solidarity, sworn representatives of animate objects everywhere, in recognition of your contributions to interplanetary peace, freedom and microchemistry. Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!

Return to St. Maries

Last weekend was our second year at the SMart By The River Festival, held in a football field in St Maries Idaho. Seven hours down I 90, over the mountains and far away, back behind Lake Coordelain, y'dig? A little teeny tiny festival with the nicest folks you'd ever want to meet as hosts. There are worse jobs in the world than visiting dear friends in scenic vistas and getting paid on top. I won't say we'd do it for free but last year the old van was running so bad we nearly did. But this year, we've got Woody, a dear sweet slightly dumpy 85 Voyager with vinyl faux paneling peeling a little on the sides and a big fat bank loan on him, and we traveled in comfort and some semblance of style, much to our relief and the preservation of S, who is trying hard to pretend she didn't have back surgery two weeks ago.

Woody was a great help to us in doing the necessary Do in St Maries, and so were Anne and Keith and Heather and Rue. Keith is a baldy inneleckshul computer nerd from Seattle, a pun-spouting, factoid-quoting, nay-saying exleftie, hopelessly infatuated with crafty, plump, perky exhippie lifeguard Anne (and vice versa), middleaged studmuffins the two, sweetly fiddling around and riding herd on Anne's magic beanstalk daughters. Rue, the older, is oscillating through adolescence, orbiting eccentrically around the local Christian youth group. Heather, her redheaded kid sister, is perched on the brink of teenagerdom, and while we were in St Maries she popped over.

So there were overnights, and parties, and giggling, and ice cream and cake and icecream cake. And presents. S had queried Heather at long distance as to her birthday preferences and she'd replied, "Anything glow in the dark." This is the equivalent of waving a red flag at a bull for S, and the Birthday Girl got glow in the dark aliens and erasers and pens and paper ands stickers and a pair of dark blue shorts with glow in the dark stars and moons on them that we'd found in a thrift store and had passed on only because neither S nor I wear medium anymore. When we realized that they'd been frantically waving at us because they were supposed to be Heather's, we rushed back to the thrift store and scooped them up. And birthday songs, natch. At our show on Sunday we made her come up to the stage and let the whole crowd give her the song, threatening to reveal her family nicknames if she didn't. In private we sang her our own favorite birthday song, inherited from SCA companions and well-worn with years of repetition in stinky bars and pagan frolics alike:

Oh Happy Birthday
Happy Birthday
Misery is in the air
people dying everywhere
Happy Birthday...

etc etc. But Heather is a kid who likes gross, and this was just the stuff for her. That and glow in the dark aliens made out of what appears to be snot but isn't.

Late on Saturday night we were all hanging out, having a beer or two and pun wars. The talk turned to the past. Anne spun yarns of the olden days, of communes in the woods and teepees and natural births and growing squash, of ex's back when they were sweet and sober, of babies with big heads and young cute mothers, with pictures to prove it. She shook her head. "I was having so much fun I never worried about the future," she sighed. "Now I worry about having enough for my old age, to put my girls through college. Did it do any good, I wonder? Did it make a difference when I put the flowers in the rifles of the ROTC while they were drilling? Did it matter that I burned my bra at the Feminists rally?"

Did it? A relative question, perhaps. Too many unintended consequences over the dam for any of us to say we truly did anything. But still, there's evidence. There are two women on the Supreme Court. That's a LOT more than none. There's a bedrock concern for ecological preservation, for justice, for peace. The last forty years have seen a sea change in the psyche of America. For all the reactionary backlash and talkshow bullshit, we really are a kinder, gentler nation. And we raise the flame of that kindness and gentleness for all the world to see, sign of weakness or no, and we raise kids in the light of that flame — our kids, other peoples' kids, kids we don't even know. What little change we've made in the shifting sand of human history we're passing on. Happy Birthday, Heather — hope you enjoy your hormones. We did.

Trailer

(The following PREVIEW has been rate PD (Pretty Dumb) by the Email Movie Board)

FADE IN: Closeup Thaddeus's face, intent, serious, eyes moving, intelligent enquiry at work in every muscle. Obviously, here is a keen mind hard at work.

VOICEOVER: Thaddeus Spae has been watching too many videos.

CUT TO: Medium: Object of T's gaze: a rack of videos in a rental store. Titles include "Godzilla and His Sisters", "Bombastic Revenge", "Green Slime Rules", "Crusher" etc. Sign above section reads "Adventure/Sadism".

VO: And he's running out of choices.

MONTAGE: T entering sleazy video store on Lake City Way advertising "Hot! Hot! Hot!", T leaving in disgust, T searching racks at local Safeway, T pondering the back of "Mindless Distruction", T at specialty video store discussing auteur with the clerk, T at Blockbuster cringing at the neons, etc.

VO: He's been to every video store in town trying to find something his wife hasn't seen.

CUT TO: High speed long shot of T checking and rejecting videos one after another. He resembles the platen of a manual typewriter, scanning each row then returning to the beginning of the next. As he descends the rows, gradually he sinks to his knees in an unconscious act of veneration.

VO: His life is turning into one big movie trailer. And he still hasn't found what he needs. But his luck is about to change.

CLOSEUP: T's face in rictus of joy and relief.

VO: Or so he thinks.

CUT TO: Closeup, Video held in his hands, titled "Ritzy Artistry" with quotes like "Meaningful restricted stocastic rituals of sin and redemption. Two Thumbs up!"

CUT TO: Video player exploding.

VO: But there's just one little problem: his wife.

CUT TO: Sandahbeth holding smoking shotgun. Closeup on S's face.

S: BORRRRING!!!

CUT TO: T entering yet another video store, holding the shotgun, cleaning out the rack marked "Sly and Arnold Only" into a paper bag, menacing the clerk, fleeing in his anonymous Plymouth Voyager. Taillights disappear into the urban night.

VO: And she's the one going out of her mind from forced inactivity. She's the one who needs...

CUT TO: Title frame.

VO: MORE BOOM BOOM. Coming to your living room this summer, whether you like it or not.

Title frame explodes.

Blackberry Philosophy

Well, Summer has finally made itself apparent — 80 degrees plus for more than a week constitutes a heat wave in these climes. My roof is nicely cured, ready for reflective overcoating. Not that it's done yet, just the part I slopped in before Major Sunstroke started ruling the day with a fist of photons. But the Box is relatively pleasant, at least in the back where I hang out the most, with the instruments of sonic manipulation. Or out on the functional but groovy deck, at least after the sun is past the angle of incineration.

But I'm not permitted the luxury of unremitting studio potatohood. I'm still overweight and understaminoid, and the minimum exercise I'm allowing myself to do is a half hour walk every day or so. The concept isn't totally my own — both my main Supah Dupah GP Dr Maura and the guy I visited at my nominal main care facility whose name is a cypher encrypted in Erewhon to me gently suggested that a little footflopping wouldn't hurt either my wind or my girlish figure (what I have left). So bright and early many mornings (these mornings it's real bright and detestably early in sheer solar self-defense) I pull on my cheap new Kmart walkers and go strolling out into the erstwhile real world.

Usually the first five minutes on the road are a tussle with my recalcitrant Fat Mind — you know, that portion of the cerebrum identified by medical science as the source of all those impulses to spend as much time supine and consuming as possible, the part that supplies the handy aphorism "If god intended man to go for walks he'd've been born with Nikes instead of feet," that nexus of the neural net that identifies chocolate as one of the four food groups. While this little battle is going on, I try to aim myself downhill, in the hopes that gravity will supply a certain impetus that my legs may lack. Once, however, the juices begin to flow and the body starts to realize that ambulation isn't a potentially fatal activity, I start paying more attention to the environment around me, the blabberbeak crows and sweetly squeaking chickadeedeedees and scuttling squirrels, the rustle of the blindingly green scrub trees lining the stream bed that still streams alongside Lake City Way, sheltered by the odd culvert.

Oh, and watch for cars. LCW is a peculiar concoction of leftover nature and used car lots, land and vehicles in approximately equal stages of abandonment and entropic

advancement. Wild and weedy though the greenbelt be, it seems to be taking better care of itself than the rows of more or less shiny, more or less hopeful Hondas, Fords, Dodges, Toyotas and such that grace such establishments as Cheapies, Lake City Auto Retailers and mayhap even Honest Ed's, I dunno. Chief of such as these are the ranks of Karman-Ghias in the lot across the street from our driveway, sporty little anachronisms of such intense conceit and self-confidence that they could easily pass for Tom Cruise in a dim light.

But the real rewards of the pedal propelled excursion are to be found in that undisputed titan of Northwest cuisine, the noble blackberry.

Oh, the legacy of the noble blackberry! The stained fingers, the scratched ankles, the prizewinning pies, the usurped backyards! One summer in Portland we spent a good two months in fell contest with a backyard of canes like spiky green dragons. We hacked, we tore, we powermowed and mulched, and in the end we gave up and covered the entire area with several layers of disgusting old carpet, which was being breached before the end of the first month of rain. Blackberries are of course famous for such behavior, but despite their alien origins, imported by cobbler-addicted Scandos in the last century, they stand as The Protector Of The Northwest, sworn defenders of all that is right and good and undeveloped. Let the greedhead contractors lusting for yet another Wildwood Holler Condoapartments Gracious Living Complex beware: Blackberry takes no prisoners.

For those who approach afoot and with respect, however, Blackberry is graciously pleased to offer ample reward. This has been a remarkably good berry year, lotsa rain followed by lotsa sun, and the berries are ripening in clots . Not quite as good as the year we found the bushes everyone else had ignored and filled gallon buckets in two minutes flat by brushing our hands over the stupendously ripe clusters and letting gravity do its dreadful work, but that may come yet. It's still a little early. But there are plenty of good ones out there. Twenty minutes into the March of the Fatbutt, with my breath coming a touch faster than before and a pleasant twinge in my calves, I generally take a 30 second break to plunder a passing bush.

There is, I've discovered, a philosophical angle to picking blackberries, particularly if you're doing it with a goal in mind like filling a yogurt container. You start by taking the very easiest and ripest customers, the ones that are trying to jump off the branch into the bucket or your mouth, dangerously close to exploding with juice. You work within a very narrow angle at about head level. Once you've mined these out, you tend to move to the next patch of bush, and so on until the pickings start to get thin on the nose channel. After this you make the supreme effort to actually bend over or reach up, immediately encountering vast new reserves of potential preserves. And even when the big beautiful specimens are all harvested, there are still a plethora of smaller but no less tasty second stringers. And no matter how diligently you try, there's always that gorgeous gob of specimens the approximate size and shape of walnuts, straining the boundries of blackberry stem tensile strength just barely out of reach, or lurking deep within the prohibitive entrails of emerald razorwire, sniggering lewdly at your futile, masochistic attempts at exfoliation. And despite your most diligent efforts, there's always a few perfect berries that choose the moment of your approach to kamikaze into the undergrowth, there to bring nourishment and fertility to the Mother Cane.

And when you think about it, isn't this much like the opportunities we pursue in life? Always seeking the best and the ripest, the easiest and most apparent, and only in times of approbation turning to new locations, to the less evident, the over and underlooked, or to the small but steady profits? And dearly beloved, is it not Just Like Life Itself to be presented with those luscious fruits only a little too far out of reach, too deeply buried in stings and frustration? Do we not watch countless chances for happiness fall ripe and rotting into the undergrowth to be lost forever? Now think, my friends, and remember

that no matter what brambles we encounter in life, no matter what matted tangles we may traverse, always and forever the Great Mother Cane is with us, thorns and fruit alike, protective and benevolent, to stand, proud and spiky, a source of that pleasure and pain that is our lot in this life.

Can I hear an Amen? Not with your mouth full, please.

House of Dreams

The rain (or as we PNWer's like to think of it, the self-watering garden apparatus) has returned in all its gooey grandeur. Not the pounding ceaseless Niagara of deep December, but a lighter, brighter, blackberry-friendly mist, backlit by the summer sun still much in evidence right behind the used bedsheet grey of the sky, and punctuated by occasional roaring thunderstorms, the drum circles of the Gods. A decent thunderstorm is entertainment outstripping two videos and a Fourth of July display, at least in a small town.

We have our own reason to blow and celebrate: we think we've got a house. It's the usual (usual for home ownership, anyway — this is all virgin territory for us) dance of agreements and credit and mortgage and platt and disclosure and inspection and what-not, but it really looks like it's happening, really. Eeeek! We're becoming landowners! We're chaining our souls to a.. a... BANK! (shivver shudder shake) Is that Snively Whip-lash over there? Nature bows before us! We're fleas arguing over a piece of the dog! What would Chief Seattle say? Wow! Yow!

Yes, Virginia, we're some confused. Only the paradoxical character of the whole event allows us to maintain a sense of rational absurdity. That and the suitability of the property, a two bedroom with a detached refurbished garage, compact but lots of space, flanked by mature cedars and firs and blessed with a football field's length of crawling wild Puget Sound hillside behind it, sloping down towards a seasonal creek in a wee hollow just reeking of seclusion, out in utterly hip West Seattle. Looks like a good blend of all the contradictory things we wanted: enough house, room to grow, raw screaming land (maybe even subdividable?), peace and quiet, close to Seattle, almost on an island but not quite.

The container garden on the patio is rotten-ready for the change — they've been weeweeing about their disgraceful lack of dirt all summer. Even stalwarts like the hydranga bush we traded a tape for two years ago at the Bellingham Farmer's Market have been wilting and whining, and the infant fruit trees we potted with so much fanfare this spring are already rootbound. The weeping pussy willow bears up bravely, but she has twice as much pot as the rest of them combined and can afford to bide her time.

Certainly in all the humous we're taking option on there will be room for everybody, but we also have to take the locals into consideration. We were speculating, long before acceptance of our most generous offer, on potential improvements and accomodations in the property, and one of our chief concerns was the possibility of parking our old funky RV, currently languishing far far away on a friend's land, somewhere down the slope. To do so would of course require a driveway of some sort. At first we envisioned bushwhacking a trail through the blackberries, and that seemed reasonable enough until yesterday when I went to seriously survey and discovered a very large, very stately and very firmly entrenched prune tree right smack in the middle of the proposed route. I munched fruit and decided to park the RV in front for the time being. The blackberries too offer an intense challenge — I'm beginning to wonder if there's an enchanted castle and a sleeping princess hidden downhill. I fearlessly entered the sawtooth jungle armed with a pocket knife and a plank and beat my way down to the first tree beyond the break of the slope, but I can see that a mulching lawnmower and a machete are probably more appropriate

tools, if not a sherman tank and a flamethrower, or perhaps a tactical nuke. Until we open up a few tunnels in the rampant ranks of the Protector of the Northwest, we won't be able to tell much about the Lower .40, beyond the fact that there's Lots Of It. I inform the blackberries that a) the race of Blackberry is hardly in danger of extinction, even if I rip it out of the hill wholesale and b) blackberries aren't indigenous to the PNW anyways, and as far as the firs and cedars are concerned, they're weeds. The blackberries respond as they always do — oh yeah, you and what army?

But they'd better beware. Sandahbeth has been threatening to get a milking goat, and a nan-nan would go through a blackberry thicket like a freckle-faced kid taking out a triple-dip ice cream cone on a hot afternoon. Goats constitute, however, only the second or third most effective land-clearing convenience appliance. From all I've seen, the champions at the Art of the Browse are donkeys, who seem to be possessed of rhinoceros hide mouths, although pigs are pretty good mulchers too. But if I intend to be El Compositoro Majestico I'll just pass on the Ass of the Dreadful Voice, and pigs are too durn mean. Them suckers'll eat anything. Not that I blame them.

All things considered, I can probably thank my lucky stars that the close isn't any sooner than it is — it'll take me the rest of the month to settle down enough to do more than stand in the back yard going whawhawha. And I can see I'll have my work cut out for me.

Boom Town

A most enjoyable trip we had, last weekend, back out to the Wilds of Idaho, or more correctly the more civilized quarters of the Sticks of Idaho, visiting and performing yet again in the itsy bitsy borough of St Maries. This time, tho, the gig was closer to a county fair than an arts festival, a traditional Labor Day weekend event called Paul Bunyan Days.

That name alone should be enough to tip you to the news that the Age of Irony has not yet begun in St Maries Idaho. We of the worldweary beeeeg city can smirk behind our hands all we want to about the Created By Weyerhaeuser signs stuck on Paul's britches by the deconstructionist brigade, but for these folks, there's still cultural juice to be wrung from this fusty old tradition, and juice it they do.

It's the kind of event that requires rural conditions. You need a constituency meagre enough to encourage group participation no matter what the excuse, just for the social exercise and the chance to see more people than your family and the hired hand once in a while. You also need the sense of we're- all- in- this- together that really small towns can still muster in this era of every economic unit for themselves. St Maries fills the bill. There's a Norman Rockwellesque spin to the place, not the New England/Midwest staging that Rockwell used, but the very real suggestions of safety and sedentary self-assuredness that he manipulated so cleverly and reduced to such artificiality in his paintings. It isn't that the place is a postcard — far from it. The surrounding hills bear the scars of real life Bunyans, and the stores on Main Street are decidedly more functional than kitschy. Tourism for these guys means you don't put on your big fireworks display the same weekend as the other town 20 miles down the road, so's you can lure those folks over to yours later on. But the people are civil and the local economy is healthy, and there's enough support for cultural events to bring in hired guns like us from out of state for a treat, plus enough perception to appreciate said guns.

Our buddy Anne put us up again, forsaking her own bed for the benefit of the wayfar-ing strangers. Her downtown- if- that's- the- word apartment was two blocks from the fairgrounds, allowing us to nap and poodle around until about 20 minutes before showtime, then leap up, fling on our outfits and pile over to the stage with plenty of time to unleash the instruments and tune up before we were on. But the real convenience of

the place was the outside deck that faced both the fairgrounds and the hardware store parking lot where the Pet and Dolly Parade formed up. We got to sit in sybaritic laze watching the the little girls prepare their Raggity Annes, little boys teeter atop splendidly appointed and groomed ponies, and a kindly rancher herd a thoroughly disgruntled, blue-dyed steer while his youngster strutted behind in a lumberjack shirt and a fake beard. I shouted "I never saw a purple cow!" but I don't think they heard me.

The big payoff didn't come until Sunday evening. One of the traditions of Paul Bunyan Days is the Sunday night fireworks, the ones that refuse to compete with Fourth of July in the next county. Anne recounted twenty years of fireworks stories, all the way back from when she was young and svelte, as though the town were agreeably trapped in a Groundhog's Day time warp, and the Cynical 80's and Downsized 90's were just another miniseries on NBC. She promised that they would be special.

S and I are kinda iffy about fireworks. When I was a kid, we'd go down to Ensenada in Baja California, buy tons of streetvender fireworks and blow the pasta out of the beach. Other years we'd go see the Big Display in North Park. I had my own timewarp for a few years there. But we both have a certain edgyness about pyrotechnics, even for the sake of art, legacy of the Bomb Generation I suppose. But it'd been a while since we'd gotten such killer ringside seats for a big show and we pulled up our chairs and settled in to enjoy the action.

Not the least of the entertainment was the right to sit and get slightly groggy on dark beer while carloads of spectator cruised the locale in search of the wily parking place, gathering children, picnics, blankets and all and trooping off towards the carnival-bright fairgrounds down the way. From our Olympian heights we speculated on groups and pointed out this or that particularly 'dorable youngster or weathered elder couple, here for yet another Labor Day fireworks show and still holding hands. We waited in the warm darkness until the sparks started to fly.

It was my stalwart companion the Rev Chumleigh who first identified the power of money as a design tool in stagecraft, and fireworks are a primal example. There is little that can be done with bottle rockets and ladyfingers to increase the dramatic effect, and virtually nothing, short of firing it into the ground by accident, that can blunt the impact of a Mighty King Kracker skyrocket with all the trimmings. Dispite this, there is such a thing as artistry in fireworks as well as a healthy wallet, and the perpetrator of this display had both in abundance. Our vantage point gave us widescreen vision of the sky bursts, although the ground displays were hidden by Ace Hardware. The first few sets were the usual fare — two and three or even four fireflowers unfolding noisily in the night sky, separated by respectful intervals and punctuated with ground displays. By the third set, however, the pace began to pick up, and the bursts were coordinating tighter and tighter together. After a particularly rich and raucus display that would have served as finale back home in San Diego, a ground fountain started up with enough force for the flares to be visible to us over the buildings, and went on and on in a welter of colors and crackling, then was joined by a ferocious display of rockets fully twice the intensity of the last, then another, and then, as the fountain went into sudden death overtime, the whole sky was filled with flying fire and the surrounding hills resounded with the cannonade of the big, big riiiiilly big climax.

S and I stood and cheered, we could hear the audience at ground zero going nuts, the firestation honked their horns. It was the best fireworks I've ever seen in my life. Probably the most expensive too — I was told a dozen assistants labored to combust twenty grand's worth of Hong Kong's finest during that show. And I was informed that the coordinator, who's been doing the display for years, is constantly trying to top himself, and is already hard at work planning the Labor Day 2000 show.

As long as he doesn't get any ideas about tactical nukes, I'm likely to be there.

God Does the Soaps

I get the weirdest sensation sometimes that God is a big fan of The Brighter Day. The tragic and ill-fated death of Princess Di was one of those historical moments that points up the essentially soap-operatic nature of life. But it also seemed a logical consequence of the media-zation of Di's entire career as a world-class celebrity. As one of the longest running miniseries in tv history, Di went out with a real season- closer bang.

The most disturbing element of the whole thing, at least for me (maybe I disturb easy), was the seeming emptiness of the whole process — artificial princess, artificial fame, artificial drama, artificial climax, artificial grief. I may be a deconstructive cynic, but I couldn't dredge up a shred of grief for the pretty lady in the photos in the National Inquisitor. The buckets of tears shed worldwide for the ignoble final smashup of a child of privilege, a woman so devoid of useful purpose that she received more attention for what she wore, what she ate (and threw up), who she married, divorced, screwed, even how she died, than for any good works she did, an appendage of celebrity and a cashcow for tabloids, seemed wasted.

I'm an implacable enemy of my own cynicism, and I immediately went to work on myself.

Like — I know this perception can't be true — the response was too enormous, too genuine, to be nothing but a manipulation of the infosphere. It would be far too horrible if entire lives lived on the media stage were reduced to pantomimes, meatpuppet Punch and Judy shows to keep the masses and classes distracted.

Maybe there are levels at work here: the tabloid level, the CNN level, the British cultural level, the high-society level, the monarchy level, the world dogooder level — and the Di Effect is a result of a multiple resonance on all the levels at once. As though by accident, her life and death hit home as hard in Buckingham Palace as it did in Podunk.

We might even be dealing with a spiritual principle here: the sacrifice. Not a soap opera, but a genuine Tragedy, an arc of destiny decreed in whatever Olympus the Gods of the collective hyperconscious dwell. Natural drama, universal, contrasted against the manufactured backdrop of This Here Modern World.

And just about the point I got to this thought level, Mother Theresa went. I can't win. There are just too many jokers in the deck of Life. Rush's Litany resounds in my head — "Folks, I'm not making this up! I COULDN'T make this up!"

Still, the relative calmness of the response of the world to the death of the Sister of Mercy vis a vis the Royal Miserable made a bit more sense when you reflect that she was far more of a success than Di ever was. Think about it — Mother Theresa saw a job that needed doing. She overcame her own contrary impulses, harnessed the necessary resources, went where she could be the most effective, did what had to be done. She demonstrated a variety of superior talents in pursuit of her goal. Her fame proceeded directly from her effectiveness, not just her intention. She displayed all the drive and ambition of a multinational CEO in her charitable efforts. If you need a Peoples Exhibit One of a life well lived, compassion fully and inexhaustibly demonstrated, there it is. Highly successful life, that.

Princess Di lived a life of unintended consequences, Unhappily Ever After. Mother Theresa died old, proud, fulfilled, respected, and above all, Finished. What's to mourn? We all die. A good death is hopefully the consequence of a good life.

Only the juxtapositioning remains, a nagging psychic toothache, a nasty little giggle from the Jolly Goblins In Their Halls Of Imperishable Stone, chuckling with obnoxious glee at the Irony Of It All. And somewhere, God changes the channel again.

The Unified Folk Music Theory

It's grey. It's cold. It's wet. It's September. It's Washington. The pandemic moisture is seeping into the pores of our souls once more, nourishing the growth of grey thoughts, grey moods. Woody, mossy, mushroomy autumnal equinoxy stuff.

But hey, it's all right. Face it, without a taste for the earthy flavor of fall in the PNW, you're not likely to last up here anyways. All my Scandahoovian forebearers think this place is way cool, if perhaps a trifle warm, and my Celtic ancestors love the greenery. And if you get too weirded and weary you can always stay in and watch videos. There's always another Clint Eastwood movie.

And I think the part of me that likes to stay up late just for the buzz actually likes the seasonal wackyness that comes on this time of the year. Like many aficionados of mental alterations, it isn't the mindstate I achieve that's the real kick for me in being high, it's the process of getting there that's fun. Don't even attempt to diagram that last sentence. Obviously, then, I dig the Vernal and Autumnal Equinoxes the most, man. Like wow. Heavy. This is the time of the year when the big scales go bouncing back and forth a lot, sorta like the stock market recently. Big Roller Coaster Universe. A carnival ride you don't have to pay for and can't get off til it's over.

Well it's weather and video and late night long distance driving that has brought me to my sermon this week, brothers and sisters, cousins and neighbors. Oh yes. Sleep deprivation and the slow march of time and change, dearly beloved, they inspire me, they bring in a heightened awareness of reality, of the ways of the world, of — Folk Music?

Among the inscrutable questions of life, such as Why are we here?, Where are we going? and Will there be pizza when we get there?, is the mighty conundrum, the Zen Koan Of The West, What is Folk Music? A subject for endless debate, a source of countless career moves and callous putdowns, the foundation of multitudes of philosophical card houses and toothpick palaces. Answers from the profound (iterations of the number of generations of influence separating Roots Folk from Revivalist Folk to Revisionist Folk to Commercial Trash) to the sublimely simple (Son House or Woody Guthrie, I forget which: "Must be, I never heard no cows play it.") reverbrate and rattle like fireworks in a back alley.

Of course, I have a real answer to this question. Go no further. I have found the True Way, the Unified Folk Music Theory, which in addition to resolving The Folk Issue brings to a magnificent conclusion the argument over Heartfelt Art vrs. Pop Garbage that goes hand in hand, or perhaps boxing glove in karate slipper, with it.

I came to this great clarification on the trip back from a truly humdrum gig at Boise State Yawniversity, twenty hours in the car to get our fee and pay for ten confused students who'd wandered into the cafeteria by mistake. Now that's what I call presentation. The nice young lady who booked us really did try — she put up posters, she hung a banner, she contacted the newspapers. Apparently there just wasn't anyone interested in hearing jazz and blues that night — or if they were, they wanted to go somewhere besides the cafeteria to do it.

The late night road back required strong stimulants and we did imbibe quantities of sacred coffee, grinding along on cruise control and between our teeth the imponderable issue of how we were going to get up the ladder of the music biz to the point where we'd have a real audience every once in a while.

Part of the problem was lack of proper genre terminology. The Thaddeus Iron Law of Musical Marketing states, people won't buy it if it doesn't have a name. Are we jazz? blues? acoustic? singer/songwriters (gag me)? Dare we call ourselves folk?

Certainly, within the wonderland of record bin labels we'd encountered, folk was one that kept coming back to haunt us. I hated the thought of being locked down in the No

Kumbiyah cellblock, but our delivery, our performance style and a lot of our original material works better with folk audiences than anyone else, even though I'd be the last to call it that. Our top gigs ever were the '86 Tucson Folk Festival and the Victoria Folk Music Society, and then a log split between Pirate's Cove and the Tipitina's bar break incident. We may not think we're folkies, but we sure waddle and quack like anything. So what's folk?

You obviously have to be 1) very tired 2) v. wired 3) v. v. V. bored to even start into this can of worms, and we met the qualifications. The challenge is breaking the field of music down to first principles. So with the aid of Son or Woody or whoever it was, I found one: Folk Music is Music played by Folks (big duh). Human beings, in their natural state, will tend to make rhythmic noises as a nonsurvival passtime. They do it in groups, several at once or a few to several, usually with the several joining in. Don't ask why. Ask the folks doing it why. Ask the abos scuffing up the dust to a songman and a didj puller, ask the farmers playing the same old timey tune for two hours on the cabin porch, ask the kids in the garage jamming Led Zeppelin riffs at 108 db. Might as well ask why people fight, or screw, or breathe.

Ah, but! But! There is a second type of music: Art Music. Art music differentiates from folk in that it is created instead of played. Folk music is played in real time, as it happens, based on whatever common conceptions of performance might be laying around. Art music gets thought up beforehand and played as a result of that thinkage. Somebody writes a melody, somebody sings a song, somebody gets a great idea for a symphonic treatment of a birdsong. It blubs up in someone's head and they just gotta hear it.

Now this is where things get inneresting. By this analysis, there's precious little pure folk. Almost every folk performance has some art music thrown in, whether in the attitude of the fiddler or the current version of the songman's chant or the leftover tune they heard Ol' Bumpumukulus play thirty years before that just kinda stuck in the ol' noggin, y'know? So you can think of folk and art as two sliders on a mixing board, notching up and down in given situations, all the way from banging rocks together to Beethoven's Fifth.

And that's all right. While art music is essentially creative, the outpouring of the soul, folk music (and you can see that folk is a mighty big genre by this definition) is what gets performed, what compresses the airwaves and causes the group mind to happen. Humans being social animals, defining and unifying activities increase the survival potential of the group (like, I can't eat him, we were singing together last night). (Of course, this implies that tribe or clan is the natural atomic state of human society, not the oh-so-sacred Family, but let's just leave that for another late night drive, shall we?) And while a musical piece might be conceived as a work of pure art, someone's got to play it, someone's got to hear it, and that's folk.

Of course there's a third slider in here too: commerce. But contrary to the old song, in this case money doesn't change a thing. All commerce involves is the means of delivery of art to the folks. The cheesiest disco trash (or pop trash or rock trash or folk trash for that matter) reconstructs itself as folk the minute it hits the ears of a receptive audience and starts to put them into the group space. It doesn't matter what the guy who made it was thinking of: at the tribe level, all music is folk music. Played on a rusty National Steel on a levy, bashing out in a basement bar, blowing out of a boombox on a dirty streetcorner, wherever it is, when it impacts human ears, when it contacts human spirit, it's folk.

It's the nature of a useful theory that it can be used to explain things previously misunderstood or mysterious. And an offshoot of this whole trip is that S and I are obviously folkies: we need an audience to really perform. We spent the bulk of our career

returning to the street in search of real audiences, people who were standing there because they wanted to hear us, not because they were lured in by alcohol or sex or snooty genre exclusiveness. And the music that we do, be it old swing or originals or sixties standards or Irish tunes or whatever comes into our heads, has the patina of folk to it because we, and our audience, relate to it that way. Folk is where you play it, where you hear it.

But please don't request "Michael Rowed the Boat Ashore", ok?

Felix D'Menace

It is in truth a fine thing to be purchasing a house. Not only do generations of disembodied ancestors link arms and sing your praises, but you feel a certain thrill in knowing that all those wicked little tax credits they give to landowners can now be yours as well. You're on the Royal Road to Total Middle Class Servitude, but at least they let you deduct the interest.

Now that's all well and good, but there are some disconcerting side effects to achieving dirt ownership. To wit: we're being stalked by Cat.

Feline spirit is an old friend of the family, of course — both S and I have been aficionados of the children of Bas since childhood, and while happiness may be a warm puppy, true tender sentimentalism can only be roused in us by the presence of a sprightly young kitten of the level of development referred to by our friend Flip as "the ba-dump-ba-dump stage," this being the onomatopoeia she uses to describe the gait of said creatures.

The fluff-butted fearlessness of a 6 or 8 week old kitten is, of course, a matter for legend and innumerable cheap calenders, and we did at one point imagine doing just such a calender of two kittens we had at the time, a matched boy-girl set with big hair and bigger attitude. The lack of a decent camera was our only salvation from a life of sleazy pussy exploitation, curse the luck. Imagine being able to deduct Science Diet on your taxes.

This was during the halcyon days of our ownership by Cat, when we committed the classic and unpardonable sin of allowing our mama cat to breed and then keeping the babies. This is a sign of how low we had sunk. Everyone who has ever confronted this issue knows full well the consequences involved — food dish wars, affection competition, urinary display behavior, cat hair everywhere. But, as everyone also knows, little tiny kittens secrete a powerful and well-nigh irresistible adorable field, possibly supplemented by esoteric pheromones currently being investigated by the Government as possible brainwashing agents. This devastatingly powerful phenomenon is capable of reducing grown men to gibbering childhood, otherwise sensible women to slobbering koochykooism and clean respectable households to flagrant catteries. Witnessing

sober, well-raised adults straight-facedly justifying the retention of yet a third litter of li'l dumplings by the excuse "I just can't bear to break up the family" is enough to drive rational observers to thoughts of restrictive legislation, if not neurosurgery.

What can I say? We knew. No excuses. We kept them anyway. For about five years there we had three cats, living in spaces from two bedroom houses to 12 foot trailers, transporting them to gigs, smuggling them into hotels, snuggling with them on cold winter's nights, rescuing them from trees and the odd dog or policeman they couldn't handle themselves, wearing them as lap rugs along the highways of our land. My prototypical image of the period is driving to a gig in a Dodge van pulling a trailer with a cat in my lap. On the road again.

The beginning of the end came, as it does for so many things, in LA. Streetcamping in San Pedro, the little darlings picked up a titanic case of Southern California Barrio Flea, a

species which may yet conquer the world if it learns to use tools or fill out a business license. After cringing at the sight of our pampered pets defoliating themselves from scratching and repeatedly sickening them with flea spray to no effect, we were forced to find them a new life as rodent control specialists at a central Oregon candle factory. It took three more months to rid our quarters of the understandably disgruntled insects, who continued to chew on us without sustenance in an effort as commendable as it was futile.

Some say life begins at 40. Others, less charitable, have suggested that it begins when the kids move out and the dog dies. We were pleased to find both those conditions fulfilled in one fell swoop, and after the initial shock felt no inclination to revert to outmoded, cataddled ways. We've been content to make friends with other folks' cats, who recognize us as soft touches and are always pleased to help satiate our kitty jones. Cowboys may love little soft pussies, but we can take 'em or leave 'em alone, thank you very kindly. The colorful traditional kitten vendors outside the supermarkets of our land cannot tempt us with their wares. Wide staring eyes and comical whiskers leave us cold. So there, too.

But now we're buying a house, and it's clear that we've attracted the attention of Felix Eterna, that etheric presence certain that there can be no Home without Cat. Last week we were out reliving our childhoods at a basement jam session and were confronted with an entire litter of babies, weeweeping and squeaking and blundering about in invidiously adorable fashion on their tiny stockinged paws, presided over by a sleek little black mama as poised as any madonna, all glowing with the health and vitality that only freshly minted life has. Clearly, our recent activity has not gone unnoticed by That Which Is Cat. Another friend's recently acquired comensal, DJ Scratch, also seemed primed as an agent of cuddly and soft, trying to pin us to the floor by the lap and purr us into submission. And yesterday, the last blast of summer for the year as near as I can tell, I had the doors open in the house and was at work in the back when I heard a jingle-jingle-jingle, went to investigate and discovered a small poofty calico inspecting potential quarters in the living room. I immediately set the young lady straight about the lack of openings for the position of housecat in this particular home, although she jingled grumpily around the perimeter for the rest of the day.

This is unconscionable. I refuse to be bullyragged in this fashion. Simply because I am a potential property owner, must I be harassed by Catgeist? It's bad enough that the post office and the telephone company are going to sell me to every gymcrack mailing list in town, that I'll be besieged by offers of rugcleaning, furnace repair and similar wonders of civilization, that long-distance companies will fistfight on my front porch for the privilege of badgering me to turn them down — now I've got Puddie Tat on my case. Many roles have I played in my long and motley career, but Tweetie Pie ain't one of them. I'm drawing a line in the cat-gravel right here and now.

A standup comedian of our acquaintance once made the observation that a particular product, Cat Flea and Tick Spray, seemed a bit intense. "Just the thing to rid yourself of those annoying infestations of cats you get this time of the year."

We're stocking up.

Honeymoon Shadow

The leaves are rusting, Fall is falling and all around, the northern world prepares for The Big Dark. In the PNW, October is a month that typically begins with the hearty insincerity of leftover late summer and quickly degenerates into cold, cackling senility. We're getting into the foggy, drizzly section of it now, breaking out the longjohns, cranking up the oil furnace, pausing to take whatever comfort we can from brief stabs of afternoon sunshine, and dreading the first frost.

Of course, it hasn't always been like this. During the drought in the late 80's, October did its best September imitation, and even November and December were mellow and copacetic. Then it would snow like horrors in January and all bets would be drawn. Laugh at this, grungers. Now go defrost your toilet.

But before then, back when I first started hanging out in the PNW, it was much like this — the golden glow of early autumn transferring itself to the foliage and dribbling away into the squishy grey of wet wintertime. The weather we've had the last three years or so reminds me of my youth. Call me sentimental. I kicked my way through a deal of brilliant dead leaves in the Octobers of the early 70's, turning them over with my California shoes like tarot cards.

The year I met Sandahbeth, though, it was fairly dry. Dry and a leetle cold. Portland can be a touch chillier than Seattle, lacking the Emerald City's nearness to big water. Plus, they get the decidedly questionable benefit of the howling Canadian coolers blasting down the Columbia Gorge. Whatever. We had incentive to stay warm, anyways, S and I, and we did.

Being able to time-travel through the entire sunspot cycle of a climate zone in the comfort and privacy of your own mind is, at best, a mixed blessing. But as I slowly so slowly grow older and fatter I am constantly reminded of the positive side of experience — the slight but noticeable edge of performing ability that yearly grows ever sharper, the triumphant mastering of trivia games, the lack of challenge in routine car emergencies that shipwrecked me in my youth but hardly occupy an afternoon now. Alternater gone? No problem. Flip that puppy on outta there and run to the store for another.

Nobody told S and I that marriage was like compounded interest — mostly they told us we were crazy and drank the champaign we passed around anyway. They toasted our recklessness and for all I know made book on how long it would last. But of all the investments in time and energy and money and attention that I have made in my life, marriage has been the most consistent gainer. Time spent with one person, engaged in myriad wacky, direly creative adventures, has given me more true satisfaction, both to contemplate in the past and to exercise in the present, than any assortment of wealth, fame or intellectual achievement I can imagine. Okay, so maybe that's almost any — but without true love, there's an awful (and I mean awful) lot of catchup for the cover of the Rolling Stone or the Nobel Prize to do, at least for me.

Over the years, I've had occasion to lament not having gotten a proper honeymoon. Of course, by the nature of our lifestyle, much of our honeymoon could be said to have come on the installment plan, like Travis McGee's retirement. But that's not exactly the same thing. Honeymoons aren't like vacations or hotel gigs or retreats at the beach or hippie craft fairs. They're exotic locations, moonlight on the ocean, palm trees, warm dark perfumes and long wet looks and — roMANtic, okay? About the closest we came to that was in Key West, about a year after we were married, playing a courtyard gig in an idyllic jazz club near the pier. Another boring day in paradise, back before the place went completely to the dogs, the Cubans, the coke smugglers and the tourists.

Ah, but that's about to be corrected. Oh me oh my. In a move that would surely have pleased my globe-trotting mama whose bequest (but little enough of it to make the travel agent fairly crow with self-satisfaction) is paying the piper, we've booked ourselves a mid-winter dive vacation in Aruba. And not only are we getting the locations, moonlight, palms, and wet et cets, as well as a seven-day dose of our fourth favorite passtime (and probably first second and third too), for no additional charge we get to be in the three-minute totality path of a solar eclipse. Oh, it's the twentieth anniversary moon job, no doubt no doubt.

On the other hand, I'm not absolutely sure I wouldn't trade it all for the chance to discuss my mom's honeymoon with her one more time. But some things just can't be

traded. So we'll go, and we'll dive, and loll, and dine, and play music probably, and experience the Wedding of the Sun and the Moon. And we'll be grateful, for family and life and each other and the coyote blessings of experience that we each of us inevitably receive, and inevitably must lose again.

Topsy, Part One Twenty

One of the fun games to play when you're a homeowner is topsy. Y'know, it just sorta grew like? You start out just making one or two little changes, nothing serious or special y'unnerstand, when lo and behind you're replacing the walls and wondering what jumped you.

In our case, the seed of the matter was S and her studio. Our heroic (heroinic?) local jewelry student took over the unfurnished garage as a sanctuary and party shack for all things crafty, and the first thing she wanted was more light. A four by five skylight wasn't enough. A triplepaned side window wasn't enough. No. She had to have a sliding glass door! All right — we went out and found one for \$75. Not too shabby. Then we spent a week chasing down someone with a vehicle to tote it home from the wilds of northern Lynnwood. Finally I got my sister to come by with her funky new pickup truck (some sis, huh?) and run it in.

But then came another small matter: there was no point on the garage to properly hang a sliding glass door to provide said light except the rear wall. This gave us a door approximately 6' off the ground. Watch that first step, it's a dilly.

So our dear sweet construction guy Karl and I stuck a deck on the back of the garage, complete with a poured concrete footer b'gad — earthquake proof and ready to hold the whole rest of the house up, this deck. We labored. We sweated. I dug great trenches in the earth and pounded endless nailheads. My budget flowed like wine. But the results were quite impressive, providing a commanding view of our backyard ampitheater, currently graced with a spikey haystack of harvested blackberry canes but soon (okay, sooner or later) to become a stately pleasure dome decreed, with acoustic concerts under the stars and maybe a koi pond. And it (the deck, not the ampitheater) provided a firm footing for the aforementioned, as yet uninstalled sliding glass door.

Upon completion of the deck, however, we realized with some chagrin that unwary visitors to the Palace of Craft who wandered out back for a smoke or something were in serious danger of being guillotined by the power cables coming to the house, tied off as they were to the edge of the garage right at average neck level. As everyone knows, merely coming within shouting distance of mainline fresh-off-the-transformer electrical cables is sufficient to sizzle you like a cheap french fry. No problem, sez Karl — call the electric company, they'll just move em up. I dutifully dialed up City Light to inform them of our circumstance.

This morning, I got the reply: problem. No way are they going to just move 'em up. Oh no. That would be far too simple. They have to completely reroute them, and I have to move my meter. To quote Barney the Dinosaur, oh boy!

So, for my next incredible feat, I have to become acquainted with the National Electrical Code (AKA Linear A), draw up plans, get a permit from the city, find an electrician to sign off on the really scary parts, and basically rewire the main service for the house. If I really want to do it right, I also get to replace my breaker box. And the bloody sliding door is still lying in the yard.

At this point I'm bound to wonder if guillotined guests aren't a viable option. Maybe if we just put up a warning sign...

I keep telling myself that all this is perfectly reasonable, and I'll be ever so much happier with the results once the sticker shock wears off. But I keep getting this awful

sinking feeling that somehow they're going to decide that the plumbing is involved, or maybe the roof or the foundations or... naw, I'm just over-reacting. Besides, it's too late for me to back out now, unless of course I like headless guests. Come to think of it, it might be an improvement for some of them.

On the other hand, I might end up getting a job as an electrician and actually earn money off this experience. That would be a change.

Thanksgiving Again

Yes, it's The National Day Of the Sacrificial Dinosaur Descendant and Thanks To The Powers That Be That Nobody Pulled The Pin In '97, or whatsit. And Yes, I am thankful. Plenty to be thankful for.

I'm thankful for the chance to clean up my house for the holidays. I spent yesterday vacuuming, tidying, washing, putting away, putting up, trashing, fixing, sealing, reglassing, constructing and standing in the backyard staring at my gutters. My gutters are choking with rich organic refuse from the Tree Gang in the yard, but my attempts at cleaning them have been thwarted by two factors: 1) No extension ladder & 2) Can't fly. I teetered at the brink of doom and shoveled out a couple of them, but I'm not pleased with the prospect of breaking my fool neck just as I finally score some gutters _to_ clean, and so close to Thanksgiving too. Probly I'll go blunder out to AA rentals up the road and check out a ladder after the world comes back (and preferably on the next dry day).

I can use the ladder on some of the locust trees in the yard too. Two large, gnarly, ugly, inchlong thorn-infested locusts sulk about the front and back yards. I have the assurances of a respected tree surgeon that locust trees are unnecessary weeds in the positions they occupy on my property, and every morning as I go out to my funky van parked next to the dumpster in the front I tell the locust tree there, "YOU'RE GOING DOWN!!" I always wanted to do that. The respected tree surgeon gave me an estimate of \$500 to take the trees down, but as the bully sez in Maverick, I shoulda come to me, I'd do it for free. I need a chainsaw.

I actually have a chainsaw, but it serves more effectively as a musical instrument than as a weapon of thorn tree containment. It's quite the antique, a 1947 model I found for twenty bucks in a thriftstore in Cottage Grove Oregon the year S and I nearly died of respiratory overload and spent a winter convelescening on a farm outside Eugene. The saw plays a crucial arpeggio on our originals CD and was actually used live in concert — once. It filled the tiny hippie restaurant we unleashed it in with blue oil smog and likely deafened some of the customers, which may have contributed to our not being asked back. When abjectly begged, the saw also consents to (slowly) cutting up firewood. Unfortunately, there are no longer parts for 1947 chainsaws, and the clutch appears to be extinct. I expect to find fossil evidence of one in the next shale bed I pass.

Actually, what I really need is a nice little handheld laser that slices through all manner of substances like a hot knife through defrosted Sara Lee fudge cake. Much easier to tote up the 30 foot ladder. Just hop a time machine to the year 2525 and pick one up for me, will ya? On second thought, don't. I'm willing to forgo the pleasures of carving ugly thorn trees like turkey breast for the reassurance that Mario and Puzo the Anaconda brothers can't score one over at Mickey the Mouth's place and chop up the local Home Federal Security. Or each other, for that matter.

Yes, I'm thankful. I'm indeed thankful for the absence of handheld particle beam weapons. I'm thankful for the little pine needles drifting in the front door and for the vacuum to suck them up. I'm thankful for the nasty sharp toothy trees. I'm thankful for ladders and chainsaws and music, for gutters, for tree surgeons and carpenters, for space and time and a body to experience them in. And I'm thankful for email, so I can tell all this to friends far away, and for the friends for putting up with my nattering.

CD's in the Dark

We alternate these days, dull grey and brilliant hyperfall flipflopping like a slothful kinescope, flashes of light contrasting the all-consuming evening. I spent half of today drumming my fingers in the hostile Seattle traffic trying to get rid of a pile of box cardboard at the local transfer station, getting home too late to begin the frightening dissection of the garage roof for the second skylight, “too late” in this case being like one thirty in the peeyem. When the working day gets this short, it becomes more and more attractive to get up with the chickens. Pity we haven't any. What we have is NPR, which is admittedly pretty chicken itself, but just doesn't have the cockadoodledo to force my rusty rear into motion.

S has her own solution to the shortsheeted days problem: she works at night. Drinks a lot of tea, turns up the local alternative-to-the-alternative station and tweaks away on her jewelry homework til four and five in the laughably-misnamed morning. We still haven't gotten the garage insulated properly, so when she knocks off the Icewoman Cometh and Thaddeus gets yet another caregiving role: living electric blanket. My Wife Be Cool.

This of course is worth not a pence to me when I'm trying to get the roof opened and closed before Darkness Unending decends upon the land. Even the famous Northwest rain isn't as much of a hinderance as the clever disappearing daylight trick. And since most of my current activities center around my own personal piece of the great outdoors, I'm inclined to be at a loss for activity after dark. Practice on a dozen instruments can only divert one so far, and I've been a little short on obsessive composition lately. I'll read the encyclopedia for want of a better activity (did you know that in old English law a window in existence for more than twenty years is known as an Ancient Light and cannot be blocked by other construction? And that's just Vol. 1!)

Luckily for me, I have a craft of my own to while away the stygian solstice-heavy evenings. CD making has barely begun to move, but I am getting a client or two. And this is an activity that thrives on late hours and strong stimulants, although once the equipment is set up I can go take a nap while it churns out the polycarbon and paper for me. Part of the reason I can work so cheap is the amount of the job done by patient, fully amortized mechanical servants. Remember the old sf novels? In the future, machines will do all the work and all people will have to do is sit around. Nobody stopped to consider who would own all the machines, like Standard Oil and Bill Gates. But these robots at least are mine, all mine, mine haahahahaha! Work, you mechanical contrivances you, whack whip program command... Where was I? Oh, craft, right.

My primary delight in making recordings and packaging them has always been turning the music in my own head into little sound universes in plastic boxes. But close behind that is the simple pleasure of making something, the combining of sound and graphics and mechanical ingenuity to produce a beautiful and useful object. The tools of my craft are certainly irregular, and even its pedigree is subject to question — just how many sub rosa tape and CD crafters are there, anyways — and how would you be able to find them? You can't exactly look them up in the library in back issues of Home Cassette Gazette or something. Craft it undeniably is, though.

This week's commission pointed up to me exactly why I bother doing this for anyone else at all. It ain't the money — I think I'm breaking even right now, but I'm one gunked up printer away from the red ink sea. No, it's the chance to interact with artists who'd otherwise never have any outlet for their art except the woodshed and the open mike, the privilege of giving them an icon of their ability: product! It's a truism of our culture that you're no one til somebody buys you.

My client of the moment is Anna, who was referred by a friend of a friend and wanted to make a CD for Christmas presents. How nice, I respond, and we communicate our respective needs quite effectively. She had a pleasant slight German accent, and I wondered what kind of music I'd be listening to — polka? Beethoven?

What I got was some of the best classic cabaret I've ever heard outside of a Lotte Lenya recording. Anna is terrific. She has that ability of communicating the essence of a song without a word of common language. Her voice is wide-ranged, flexible as a snake in spring and capable of going from sexy to tragic in the same note. Not only that, but she provided cover art, a simple, elegant art deco-esque cartoon that conveys the mood of her work perfectly. In short, this babe has got it. It's a pure joy working with her.

When one is presented with a bright and shining performing talent, fresh from the halfshell as it were, the first response is almost always "Why aren't you doing this in public?" But face the music and dance here. Where is Anna going to get a fair audience for her work? Cabaret may be high art in Europe, where she almost certainly was professional, but here in the Yew Ess Eh it's a novelty, confined to claustrophobic bars and sandwiched between female impersonators and the like, to the tune of the whiskey glass and the perfume of cheap cigar smoke. Anna has as much chance of getting the respect she deserves in show biz as a possum has crossing I 5 at rush hour. She'd be out of her mind to try.

And of course, in the usual run of things, no gigs means no fame, no fortune, and no record companies knockin at the door. But of course, that's the usual run. Here at Bard's Cathedral, we specialize in the great and good work of helping the Odd get Even. And along with the raucous punk bands and the aspiring singer-songwriters and the like, we get the chance to add the slightest touch of digital immortality to people who sound like they deserve it. Now THAT'S a craft.

The Palimpsests of Yesteryear

Hope y'all had the Merry Yuletide you richly deserve. Around this man's house it's been a crash course in relativity, without math but with extra sugar. I hosted the family in my brand new housie, and it's been wild and wooly and very high fun.

Having the same siblings I conspired and clashed with as a sprat return to visit me as fusty old adults is something of a time travel experience. I superimpose the homeprint black n white photos from the family album on the houseguests, without any clear notion of the line of connection between. In truth, I'm not sure there is one.

I've had recourse to inventing a theory of personality development that takes the inner child a degree farther. I call it the palimpsest model. A palimpsest is a canvas that, having been painted on, is painted over and reused. From what I can tell, personalities develop in a series of sudden changes followed by long periods of relative stability, like the punctuated equilibrium model some evolutionists advocate. What causes the changes is immaterial, be it trauma, revelation or just ordinary growth: one day the personality up and changes. Within a short period of time, the old "person" has turned into a new "person". The old personality is painted over and a new one painted on top. The new personality may bear little resemblance to the old one, but the old one doesn't go away — it just gets buried.

So here I am with all these people I knew the first three or four personalities of, who related to me in my first three or four personalities. But all that is in the past, buried. Naturally, the dead don't lie quietly — ever and again, the palimpsests get up and walk around, and we all revert to the passions and politics and power clashes of 1962 or whatever. Equally naturally, such episodes don't last long — one of the skills you learn from being in a body is palimpsest management. So if the 8 or 10 or 12 year old has something

to say, they generally get filtered and stifled by the current CEO. But when they occur within earshot of other palimpsests, the room can get crowded with pod people trying to recreate their past relations, and things can get twitchy fast.

Perhaps one of the reasons so much emotional crap gets shoveled out around xmas is the universality of the event — every bloody year, dude, since time immemorial. All the kids inside us know xmas, whatever else they might be missing, and they all line up and sign up to get to open their gifts and eat some chocolate santas. Now this isn't altogether a bad thing. Them little peanuts aren't going to go away — a token principle of the palimpsest theory is that nothing is ever forgotten. Exercise is frequently the best relief of tension, and it's a darn sight better to blow off at your beloved sister because you're an edgy frustrated horny 12 year old for five minutes than, say, the next cop that pulls you down for random candling. Palimpsests can be hazardous to your health, and holidays are a useful safety valve.

So there — tell that to your spouse the next time you grinch out. You don't have to thank me — unmarked bills will always be accepted.

Coming Down from Yule

A Hippy Hoppy Happy Noo Yeer to all and such sundry as may be patched in to this irregular network. Hope you all got through the preceding annual thing with grace and glory. It may be noted that despite all evidence to the contrary the earth is actually closest to the sun this time of the year. Go figger, Tigger.

I think mebe a little of the Post Holiday Crash syndrome everyone seems to contract around nowadays is a product of reduced expectations. One of the strictures that active old people prescribe for a happy life, along with unimpeded bowls, is to have something to look forward to. And gawd knows there's plenty of that after Thanksgiving — be it wondrous or horrible, the whole glittery juggernaut of family-friends-presents-cooking-social-rounds-YARGGGHH is a conveyer belt to the Tunnel of Holiday grinding slowly ever so slow, presenting you with a veritable live action novella or mini-series (depending on your taste in media) to star in. And when the show's over, you're left in the lighted theater amongst the spilled popcorn feeling like "Now what?"

My own year end clearance sale was a great big whopper topper of a success, with all — three — SIBLINGS! come to visit us in our new place, party upon party, multiple pots of coffee, late night conversations, and more. I finally got to watch our world-class tech design friend meet my PhD candidate older brother and exchange concepts on new frontiers in disability engineering. May they found an industrial cartel worth untold billions and save the world in the process. Then in '99 they can run for president. My younger brother displayed his startling skills at piano resection, deftly plucking the entire 3000-plus-part key action subassembly out of our ancestral Star upright, carrying it out to the garage and adjusting its accuracy until three ayem, plopping it back in time for my ivory tickling sister to lead a medley of all the oldtime favorite xmas caroles, with me on sousaphone. Sis also provided such diversions as well-stuffed stockings for all, including S's beloved teddy Billy, a Nativity jigsaw puzzle for the over-stimulated and two kinds of fruit cake, regular and high-test.

Younger bro cleaned up the yard and swept the kitchen. Older bro did the dishes and vaccumed the living room. They kept my home cleaner than I do. Older bro took a break from soberly lecturing me on the need for fiscal responsibility (a job he inherited from my late mom) to help ream out a plugged bathroom sink, and just before he left town he induced me to rent a log splitter and single-handedly reduced the four trees I'd taken down (in a previous episode) to shards in a fenzy of delighted physical activity. I kept the rounds coming and stayed out of his way — I know fun when I see it.

And I took everyone on ambling safari's to the bottom of the yard, through the gap in the fence on past the ferns to the big cottonwood, and showed them the Cool Staircase next door, thus contributing to their aerobic fitness. Despite my brothers' success at dieting, I still have the smallest potbelly in the family, a distinction I attribute to rigorous diet, clean living and a 40% slope. Who needs a home gym when you have a home?

Having played host to a week of nonstop action, the last couple days have been a touch slow for me. No patter of mighty feet, no disembowled pianos, no horrible jokes in the kitchen, no white tornados sweeping through. All my kith and kin are dispersed back to the exotic locations from whence they came. It's quiet. It's too quiet.

And now, here it is the bottom of the seventh and the year of the tiger in the bullpen. Midterm elections! Welfare reform! Taxes!

I ain't worried. I have plenty of silly little projects to concern myself with, and a big old mortgage to pay, and time enough for all of it. Hopefully, the trappings of a '50's married-couple comedy (except the kids) can provide suitable substitute for the three ring family circus I've just been in. Santa Claus gave me tools this year, and I'm just as pleased. Move over, Tim Allen.

It's not a Mortgage, It's an Adventure

It's so nice being wanted. After three months of paying my contractor to perform wooden miracles around and about the new abode, he wants to hire me. And I think I'll take the job.

House ownership is weird. After ten years or more of knocking about the road, owning nothing more penurious than the clothes on our backs and the van seats under our keisters (plus our instruments of course), I'm sitting here in the benign presence of more luxury than I ever dreamed possible. Of course, my idea of a cushy lifestyle isn't any more run of the mill than my taste in email correspondents — I take delight in the chickadees and the dancing cedars and the little polycultural squeakers waiting for the schoolbus at the head of the driveway quite as much as Meester Heemself Burgermaster digs the pink flamingos on the obsessively manicured front lawn and the genuine faux-brick fireplace.

But the upshot of all this boundless fun is a certain sneaking suspicion that someone's going to be knocking politely at the door some Monday morn with a few bills to collect. Even if the bills aren't payable in money, there's going to be some kind of dues due. Hey, don't everything come with a price? And never mind that I've already put a bundle into the place and I'm horking up the mortgage every moon. Suspicious minds want to know what's the catch.

And of course, there is a catch: to be a home owner, one must needs pay attention to the future. When we first moved from the van-and-trailer arrangement into the RV, back '91 or so, I saw the metaphor in terms of driving style: when your ride is something small and cute, you needn't worry so much about what's over the next hill, around the next corner — chances are you can careen around or gun through just about anything. But when you're driving twenty five feet of sixwheeler class A rolling stock, you have to think ahead, look ahead, plan ahead, brake and accelerate ahead, and you have to stay in the right hand lane and not do anything too exciting. Of course, for that you get a house that goes wherever you go, and even gets pretty good mileage — for a house.

Now I have a house that doesn't go anywhere at any mileage, nor needs to. And I'm happy with it right where it is. But if I wanna keep it and keep in it and keep it from slithering down the hillside into the ghost of Puget Creek I gotta look sharp and watch out for the bears. Not to mention the birdfeeder raiding squirrels. And while I know how to do an awful lot of things, it's been a while since I've punched anything remotely resembling a timeclock.

Plus there's the pearshaped factor: how many of my compadres in the info biz have I seen acquiring the genial outlines of a Howdy Doodie Plastic Bouncing Clown? Far too many, that's how. Seems as though the proximity of a CRT or a network protocol or a MIDI keyboard is enough to turn the studliest physique into a generous bowl of mashed potatoes and gravy. And that guy in the mirror there is no exception. The last three years of limited habitat have seen me bloat right out of my svelt '80's wardrobe, not to mention my svelt wetsuit. Only the last three months of yard stewardship, blackberry decimation and firewood processing have done anything to reverse this trend. And now I should go find myself some 18-hours-a-day potato chips and pizza skullsweat and buttswell gig? Yikes!

Now, I'm aware of a lot of things. I'm aware that the life of a carpenter's assistant is nasty, brutish and short. Sounds like a folk group to me. Well, this job only lasts til June — plenty long enough to give me the incentive to find kinder gentler work, but not to rupture my dinky, assuming I'm at least moderately careful. I ain't as young as I used to be, but that hasn't stopped me yet. I'm also aware that I can make a bazillion more bucks hawking my propeller-head to MicroShaft than popping nails into two by's. Still, six months of gainful employment in my recent past won't hurt my employability, even six months as a wood butcher.

Besides, there's a certain romantic cachet to the building trades. It's the next best thing to having a tattoo.

Pampers for the Software

There are two kinds of people in the world: lovers of children and parents. Okay, that's not true, but it resembles the kind of humor WC Fields was fond of. In any event, I do find it much easier to dote on other people's babies than I suspect I would on my own.

Last week was an opportunity to do just that. Pals from Oregon came avisiting, multi-media project in hand, for a little recording and digitizing. For payment, they offered the rights to playing with baby Symphony for a couple of days. Now despite evidence to the contrary, this was in fact a more than generous offer, since Symphony is without a doubt one of the coolest little girls we know, cuter than a litter of calico kittens and blessed with a mild, sweet-tempered personality with very little power-struggle. At least for now — I didn't have to change her nappies or give her a bath, so I had the best of the deal.

So for a couple days Symphony had the run of the place (under the watchful eye of one or another of the adults), and she played happily with all the various toys S keeps around (strictly her idea, of course...). When she got a little jumpy there was a whole backyard to mess around in. About the only thing we didn't provide was a big ol sloppy dog to ride, but we have to draw the line somewhere.

In addition to baby dandling and coffee supplements, our guests paid up in information. The chief instigator of the project is a website spinner, and hearing that I was at least somewhat interested in work, she hipped me to a relatively well-traveled job-search site for network and multimedia types — just the place for T Spae, Inc. to plop down a rich deposit of self-promotion.

But there was a catch: The actual onsite autostroking was limited to about 25 words or less, so to really make hay from this particular sunshine, I needed a website to stash my more voluminous qualifications, especially with my particular style of polymath perversity.

Not a problem — a(h)ol may be kludgie, tedious and censorious but they do give you a place to put your stuff. I've been maintaining the Amber Tide and Bard's Cathedral sites for a year now, but somehow I never got around to implementing the T Spae site, and not just for the same polymath perverse reasons I need it.

S and I have always avoided making babies, presuming that our artistic life was our form of reproduction: You make the hardware, we'll write the software. But physical children, for all their faults, have autonomy. Once they're up and running, your responsibility to them is supervisory. Creative children, the offspring of imagination, experience and craft, seldom display the same independence. So, in a way, marshalling the extended self that constitutes the geletainous creative structure of tspae is parenting a gang of robots, trying to get the bleeping little tin cans to work long enough to program some kind of purpose into them. Not to mention having to stare the greasy rugrats right in the eye and pronounce them good.

I suffer from the tendency to undercut my accomplishments. Maybe I'm just insecure, maybe I'm imbued with the habit of self-deprecation. But when I have to sit down and blow my own horn, I'm either all wind and no note or squinting haplessly at the sheet music trying earnestly to avoid reading it at all. A strange paralysis comes over me when I try to make meaning out of what I've done, a feeling that nothing I've written or composed or designed really matters at all. And on one level, of course, I'm right — in ten million years this too shall pass.

But I know I'm not alone, that most serious artists face this self-same problem, reconciling their tyrannical Inner Critic with their outer work. The process of self-promotion requires a competitive, commodity-based thought style that doesn't sit well with the receptive, extraconsciously-inspired mindset of the work itself. Inevitably, the best artists are likely to be the worst advertising execs, and vice versa. Cold comfort, but comfort all the same. And given the choice between weenie self-criticism and changing diapers, I think mebe I'll keep the children I have.

N*tw*rk Adm*n*str*t*r

I greet you this morning from the depths of profoundest humiliation, of ignomy so overwhelming that it burns the tongue to tell, the fingers to type, that black ooze flows from the keys in protest of conveyance of the news (okay, I'm lying about that part):

I have become a network administrator.

No! I hear you cry. Not even ol' blabbermouth Spae deserves such a hideous, an odeous, a downright ickkie fate. Ah, but it's true. I, Thaddeus Spae, have just purchased, installed, configured and brought online a 10BaseT Apple Macintosh EtherTalk network. Yes! I confess it! I have plunged into the murky waters of bitrate and RJ-45, of DTE and MAU, AAUI interfaces and EtherTalk extensions and crossover cables.

And bizarrely enough, I succeeded. I can now pass information between my digitizing mac (Joe Quadra) and my punkass SE/30 (Thirtyweight) at speeds resembling those of a SCSI bus. Well, exactly like those of a SCSI bus, actually — from what I can tell, EtherTalk runs so fast that the bottlenecks in the system are all internal.

Yeah, sure, right. And bumblebees can't fly. Engineers are so smart. It still takes me an hour to run an hour of CD audio between the two stations. At least that's better than overnight, which was what it was with LocalTalk.

Okay — it's real obvious that what I'm talking about here is a glorified intercom for digital information. You and I know that. Real network administrators know that (hi, Bob!). Even managers know that.

But the important question is, do personnel interviewers know that?

For the last month or so, I've been contemplating the impending necessity of gainful employment, trying to imagine myself going someplace else in the morning to earn the daily mortgage. Not a horrid spectre, really — I can handle a little discipline and order in my life (put down that whip and let's talk sensibly here — I said a little). While I still

expect to be hitting nails for bucks for the present, I'm not nearly macho enough to believe in physical labor as a solid foundation for the future — not at the age of 47 anyways. So, natch, I'm checking the info biz. Bytes don't give you hernias.

How I use my time is, of course, a matter of not inconsiderable importance to me. I didn't spend twenty years of married life avoiding the nine-to-five out of hippie diffidence, after all. Okay, at least not entirely. How I choose to pass the priceless span of my life is the only important decision I ever make. If I'm going to be passing a third of it (for the next while, anyway) at some outside task, it behooves me to maximize goodies and eeliminate the negative and don't mess wid mistah in-between.

Naturally, one of the prime ways of soaping the skids towards gainful employment (if there is such a thing) is that shining silver trail of veracity, the resume. And within the narrow confines of paper, buying some surplus tech from the guy with the basement fulla junk and wiring a couple computers together and resoldering a connecting cable transforms, as if by magic!, into Experience. A-and not just any experience, either — Network experience. That's one of those Power Words they look for, i'n't't? One of those Sub-tile Lil Clews revealing the spoor of the nascent propellerhead that moves an application out of the slush pile and onto the conveyer belt of doom that leads slowly but ever surely to the gaping maw of the corporate furnace, into which we all must inevitably fall to be incinerated and rise as pure white ash towards the airy heights of stock options and shooting lodges in the Berkshires.

Not to mention shooting pains in the prosterior when they decide that you're just the candidate for Second Assistant Network Wogwiper Trainee and give you a provisional hire without medical or overtime bonuses and the wart who should be the network administrator goes out and gets drunk and leaves you to answer the phone just as the entire network plunges into terminal packet collision and grinds to a cursing sweating halt in postmodern metaphoric imitation of the I-90 bridge at rush hour...

Yargh! Whoa, what a nightmare! Whew! Glad it was just a dream. Well. Lessee. What am I doing today? Working on my resume? So what's this here? NETWQRK ADMINIS-TRATOR? Who wrote that?! What are they trying to do? Why don't they just shoot me and get it over with? You'll never get me to be a stinkin' lousey network administrator!

Too late — I already are one.

At Sea in the Land of Men

I ache. My feet and ankles are twingie, my back is pudding, my arms are jello. I'm a working stiff, and I'm stiff from working.

The theoretical carpenter's gofer job became all too concrete this week. I'm in jeopardy of earning my first paycheck with withholding withheld from it in I can't even guess how many years. My line of distraction for this week is that I'm doing it partly as paid exercise — gotta get in shape for Aruba. Woh, Jocko, no chuck.

I've pretty much avoided the world of Manly Men's Physically Fit Labor and Noble Sweat, mostly out of a profound dislike for breaking my ass and having to rebuild it on a nightly basis, but also from a sense of bewilderment at guys and their ways.

Of course, I'm laboring under a handicap in this department: there's a 99% chance that I'm a woman.

Oho, don't believe me? Well, according to that infallible source of all human knowlege, the Old Farmer's Almanac, a carefully recorded, scrupulously scientific study involving actual men and women uncovered this indisputable conclusion:

99% of men think the Three Stooges are funny.

99% of women think they're stupid and violent.

Defense rests.

Question is, can I let this ambiguity in my internal life cripple me to the thrills, spills and ugly rumors of dudery? Must I spend my life a puzzled inbetween, unable to fully embrace football, foosball, beer, pizza, baseball caps and all the other trappings of the incurably testicular? Am I doomed to forever peer from outside through the candy store window of gender at the muscle shirts and drunken debauchery, the fast guns and loaded cars, the bewildered expressions and denunciations of business taxes (or of business operators, depending which side of the pay stub they're on — but that's another story) littering the Land o' Men?

Judging from what I've been observing this week, the answer is an unqualified HUH? I watch my fellow workers spend 20-30% of their time:

- * Smoking cigarettes
- * Telling bad jokes.
- * Telling good jokes (<1%)
- * Searching for lost tools
- * Searching for lost workers
- * Searching for lost cigarettes
- * Searching for lost workers with lost tools, cigarettes and/or lost addresses
- * Scratching
- * Putting in order things that aren't disordered
- * Doing bad work
- * Undoing bad work
- * Giving advice on subjects they know nothing about
- * Pulling rank (particularly common in those with none)
- * Waiting around for someone to tell them what to do

Yes, it's a typical American workplace, and I'm in it. I have not the slightest doubt that were I to run screaming from this job, jam the Net with resumes and land a swell-paying job as a network administrator, I would encounter much the same space and place of behavior in the white collar office as in the blue collar construction site.

But hey, I'm a grateful guy. Not only am I getting in shape for my big dive honeymoon, provided I don't throw a lumbar vertebrae into the middle of next week hauling stalls around the corner, but I'm also collecting material for my Great American Novel about some poor yuck who lands arsey-farsey in the middle of Guyville and has to swim back. And I can subtitle it, "Based on a True Story."

I gotta get to bed — work, y'know.

Surprise

Kiss me, it's my birthday. Or was my birthday. I turned (if that's the proper term — it felt more like lurched) 47 yesterday, and I'm still not a sainted Nobel laureate with a MacArthur grant. Oh well, maybe next year.

Sometimes even after you do get the pony, you still have to shovel a lotta poop. Yesterday was, well, interesting. Started the morning trading typical male insults with the apprentice at the job: said apprentice being 19 and relatively thick-headed, the insults turned into a pissing contest, and while I may have won on points, the lead carpenter told

us both the knock it off or one go home, he was tired of the noise. We both said yassuh and went back to work. After cleaning up with Jose, the other helper, a patient, jolly soul with a taste for girly mags and slowing down on the job, I felt a lot better. I told him he was a life-saver and he said, "I don't like getting trouble from people so I try not to give it." I realized that I'd fallen into the trap of dissing the apprentice because everyone else did because everybody always disses the apprentice, and decided to try killing him with kindness instead. He was predictably ungrateful and made disdainful distinction between himself, an apprentice, and me, "just" a laborer. I took it philosophically (what would Jose do?) and went on about my afternoon's disgusting business. Still, kind of a boring birthday so far.

Next stop was the UPS station, where I'd asked the Big Brown One to stash a COD package for me. It was a midget reverb for our mini PA system, and I'd found it used for half the price of new. Okay, here's where the birthday starts. But no, the hold request had been fumbled, the COD was out on the truck being nondelivered and I'd wasted a trip to the wilds of South Seattle for nothing but exhaust. Cough. Poo.

Mumbling Happy f*cking birthday to myself, I drove my weary, muddy ass home, only to discover the other car sitting in the driveway with a flat and Sandahbeth on the lounge inside nursing a disgusted expression and an interesting day of her own to relate. Oh, this is wonderful. The flat had not been changed because the Chrysler Corp in its infinite wisdom had put locks on the hubcaps of this particular model, and of course the key was long gone and only obtainable from the Chrysler Corp for \$30 and a two month wait. I practiced some of my manly construction job specialized vocabulary, pounded a screwdriver dull trying to remove the lock, drove to the parts store for an easyout that wouldn't, practiced more vocabulary and finally gave it the carpenter's solution with a hammer and a pair of vise grips.

Still job-begrunged and even muddier from kneeling before the Altar of Flat, I drove off to my regular Wednesday guitar student, a lesson that earns me a half-day's wages as a nail flunky in an hour. I teach a sharp-as-a-tack 16-year-old into creative writing and drawing more than music, but game, and equally important, solvent. Four more of her and I could quit my good paying job and concentrate on chasing squirrels off the birdfeeder. Well, things did get better, and after the lesson I hung around the house for a while, yacking with her and her mom, a classmate of S's in jewelry. Finally, S called and asked them to send me home. She had a special birthday dinner ready for me.

Back at the ranch, I noticed a car parked in front of the house, and the thought came to mind that maybe someone came over to help celebrate Thaddeus Day with us. That's nice. S greeted me at the studio and I noticed she was wearing a new dress. I wasn't being very sharp, but then my entire woozy soul was bent on shower, dinner and cuddle, with sleep to follow soon after. I mentioned the car in front of the house. S's face fell: "Oh, they gave it away." I started to say that I was glad a couple people came over, but she just ushered me into the house.

This joke does have a punchline, and as a number of you TG'ers know, the punchline was "SURPRISE!!!!" You know it because you were there. My living room was full of merrymakers, some from as far away as Oregon, there to wish grungy ol' mere laborer me a happy natal anniversary. There was a truly startling pile of shoes in the kitchen under the "remove shoes here" sign. They planted me on the piano bench, refused to let me go long enough to take a shower and sang the Miserable SCA Happy Birthday song, the one to the tune of the Volga Boatmen that starts out "Oh Happy Birthday/ Happy Birthday/ Misery is in the Air/ People dying everywhere" and gets worse as it goes along, all to the accompaniment of the gong, tibetan bowl, dumbek and other instruments I'm foolish enough to leave sitting around in plain sight. S admitted she'd been planning this since Christmas.

Gifts were opened, candle (one — you're only born once, you know) was blown out, cake was cut (inscribed "Happy Birthday Thaddeus" — I inquired who wanted to eat me as I passed the appropriate piece), songs were sung, piano was pounded, merriment was made, Symphony the angel child ran around dumping sugar all over everyone, my student (who'd been in on the plot — her task being to slow me down long enough for the revelry to be prepared) made the acquaintance of a girl her age who'd just moved in from Idaho, two musicians said "Fancy meeting you here" to each other, and all in all A Swell Time Was Had By All, including yours truly who felt more appreciated than he had in a month of Mondays.

The best present I got was a replica of the Mars Rover, my own personal Brave Little Toaster to drive across the living room and to carry coffee in to S in the morning. It was indeed, and in all, and after all, a Happy Birthday.

To those of you who were there, thank you for coming out. For those of you who weren't there but were in on it, thank you for being there in spirit. And for those of you who weren't there, well — you shoulda been there.

The Reconstructionist Manifesto

The job has definitely improved some in the last week, probably not because I blew off some supernumerary steam and toasted one of my coworkers' backsides. It's just not quite as hard. I'm getting stronger, the work moves along and I'm even making friends. The mud, boredom and strain are pretty much the same as ever.

I was astonished to discover how much tension a dumb construction job could harbor. Just a buncha dudes picking things up and putting them down can generate soap-operatic conflicts to give The Brighter Light a half-nielsen. I was equally surprised and much less pleased to find that I was just as vulnerable to stupidity as any other jerk. I consoled myself by noting that at least I figured it out. Live and learn, again and again and again.

All this hairy energy looks suspiciously like displaced rage. Certainly there are plenty of suspects for the cause of it — the Boss, the work, home life, road conditions, the aforementioned mud, boredom and strain, and on and on. I was prepared at one point to run a whole routine about the buried sadomasochism implicit in employment, with its attendant pecking order and ritual abuse and belittlement, and the channel it provides for resolving and relieving inexpressible anger at the whole system.

Well, that's off. I've got deeper grease to fry.

Let's face it: the Unabomber, for all his bloodthirsty kakaheadedness, was right. Much of his wacked out, incolherent rant about the evils of technology was absolutely on the mark. In particular, his discussion of the role of technology in the widespread alienation of humans today had a great deal of weight. The greatest problem people are facing in this moment of our species' history is that our software is out-evolving our hardware. Biologically, we were hunter-gatherers about five minutes ago and suddenly we're playing with fusion and redesigning our genetic structure. The technology we invented to improve our physical lot is trying to reinvent us, and we aren't ready for it. Worse, it's trying to reinvent us in ways that aren't particularly good for humans, even if we could be instantly retrofitted to accept them without going bugshit in the asles, which as of yet we can't.

Consequently, there's an epidemic of displaced rage at the whole process of civilization, an epidemic hundreds of years old and getting more extreme all the time. We've all got it. Our genes revolt at the constraints technical evolution puts on them. Tech tries to soothe us with abundance of toys and food, but the absence of human life, of life lived on a human scale by human rules, grates far more than any Big Mac or videocam can smother.

When humans are disturbed, it usually shows up in their dreams. Culture dreams art. The past 150 years have seen anxious art movements come and go like trolley cars — romantics, realists, naturalists, dadaists, surrealists, futurists, existentialists, running all night and another one every five minutes. Like dreams, none of them address the angst directly, but they emote plenty over minutiae.

Currently we have progressed (?) to the Postmodern period, with the advent of Deconstructionist criticism. In a way, pomo is the very essence of techno - alienation, a view of the world of man from the cold, detached context of a machine or semifriendly extraterrestrial. Thought processes and cultural patterns usually relegated to the unconscious are thoroughly and mercilessly picked apart like a 8-year-old dissecting a clock, and, like the youthful investigator, leaving the pieces uselessly scattered about the rug afterwards. Yep, it's sho-nuff angry stuff.

Now, as one of the certified Dreamers of Dreams (Poetic License # G35X-76112), I'm constantly confronted with the challenge of creating meaningful visions for popular consumption. Never mind that mass-marketing is itself part of the disease. Within the (semideliberately) narrow confines of my audience, I'm trying to find processes to help maintain sanity. Whether I'm telling bad jokes at the construction site or singing for babies on street corners, my real business, calling, role or whatever is to controvert the negative influence of Civil-lies-ation on folks' ability to remember that love and shared experience with others is what human life is really about.

So here's my latest idea: the Reconstructionist art movement. Reconstructionism is founded on the premise that wounds can heal, that unhealthy patterns can be repaired, that humans need not be enslaved to their tools if they simply wake up and reclaim their humanity. This is not a militant process, nor is it a knee-jerk retreat from civilization and its very real gifts and advantages. Hey, you'll take my computer away when you pry my cold dead fingers off the keyboard, jack. What it is is a recasting and a reminder of the advantages of living humanly. It is founded on hope, and its chief principles are love and laughter.

Saving the world is a dirty, lousey, thankless job, but somebody's got to do it.

Social Behavioral Variance in the Common Dude

Oh yeah, it's the t, it's me, it's the man, oh yeah. Boy, this construction job is giving me way too much testosterone supplementation, lemme tell ya. Hanging out with dudes can be dangerous to your vocabulary. I have to watch my mouth in restaurants (which is anatomically difficult without a mirror). However, when in Rome, cuss like they do, or eat lunch alone. Sorta like grade school, only louder, badder and far more potty-mouthed.

It should come as no surprise to you, dear fellow inmates of this our orbital asylum, that I don't share a large number of esthetic views with my fellow workers. Such questions as the merits of sports cars, the ideal size of mammeries viz a viz waist and/or posterior in random passing females, or the proper use of various sexual aids are not my first tier conversational topics.

On the other hand, I'm becoming aware of a distinct and telling variance in social behavior amongst the Common Dude. Two distinct modalities are indicated, which I choose to call Heirarchical Dude and Fraternal Dude. The deciding factors in which modality is used are relatively complex, but generally center around the presence or absence of local authority.

Classic H. Dude behavior involves that ageold skill, sucking up to the boss. Artificiality, ritualized submissive actions that would do credit to a B&D bottom, anxious busying about, the use of the word "Sir" to a slight degree of parody, and more complex tech-

niques like rumor spreading and skirt blowing all abound. The authority maintains a certain regal familiarity with subjects, occasionally reenforcing its position with arbitrary reversals of policy, the setting of unnaturally brisk work paces and complaints of the demands of duty. Usually, H Dude behavior also involves whispered warnings of “Look busy, the boss is honked off today,” and so forth, providing subterranean reenforcement of the workforce’s unity in their antagonistic position towards management.

As soon as the authority is absent, of course, structure changes abruptly. The chief flavor of F Dude behavior is burlesque of authority in all its forms. Cussing and loud rude jokes about the government are only the beginning. The basis of F Dude banter is most often mock authoritative demands, frequently directed at ipso facto underlings, who frequently respond in similar manner. “Hey! Pick up that butt! Were you born in a barn?” “Yeah, I was, you got a problem with that?” “Fine, be that way.”

The absence of malice in all this is hard to explain, but there is a strong sense of bonding involved, and the unity of underlings, who despite their need for money and relative respect for the authority that pays them, need to blow a little blue steam now and then (like about every two minutes). None of the jabs are meant to really hurt, although thin-skinned people could easily end up crying wee-wee-wee all the way home. The major communication is, There Are No Big Dogs Here. Somebody has to run the job, but on a mature site, the foreman is just another guy and doesn’t growl very much. Good workers like to do a job, although they prefer to take their own time doing it, and the work gets done well. Important matters of decision are left to the foreman, and the wise ones allow their workers leeway to do what needs to be done without a lot of micromanaging.

This division of behaviors blurs when an individual misplays their role. Occasionally, a socially inept or innately unpleasant person will present cues that indicate his belief in his own heirarchical superiority to the group. At this point, things generally turn distinctly bluer and less friendly. Everyone has a certain rank as such, of course, and directly challenging another’s is a very serious matter. Raucous ridicule is the most common response, in keeping with the mock-authority game, but if the individual is foolish or creepy enough to persist, he’s generally left to eat lunch in the sandbox while the rest of the boys go to MacDonald’s and hoot at attractive women.

Individuals develop styles of banter. My chief riff is the Amoeba Technique: embrace whatever I’m accused of and laugh. I also do the role of the Old Guy — tell stories, offer self-parodying bad advice and occasionally mutter “I’m too old for this,” especially when things are especially strenuous or the boss has just left. There’s something satisfying about being the weird older guy in the midst of a bunch of twenty-somethings, a kind of merit badge earned by sheer attrition. On the other hand, I was 25 about ten minutes ago, and respect for elders directed at me can be a nasty shock.

Gloop

Greetings Pod-Brethren of the Z’Tz Invasion Force,

Are we not proud? Do we not stand in papal fusion, rigorously at attention, our scent-polyps in concord? What then can stand against us? We who are the mightiest of the mighty! The slimiest of the slimy! The Very Essence Of Great Swamp Z’Tz’T’z!

At ease, great mucous hord! Our report commences:

New reports from our Penetration Staff indicate a suffused ratio of over 1%. That’s up a good .003% from last century, clearly an indication that the dry ones are losing their pitiful struggle for dominance. Soon, when saturation is reached, the Great Mold will be ready to sweep across continent and ocean, embracing all corners of the globe in a loving Slime embrace. We shall be triumphant!

Technological Division reports new advances in penetration methods, including viral and pseudoalial genetic injection and mitachondrial subversion, aiding in our inevitable victory. Glorious Slime scientists predict rapid assimilation when these new methods are perfected. The Great Mold comes!

Attend, oh Pod-Brethren! We view the site of our future triumph, this spacious globe with its disgusting land and sea divisions, its infestations of dull dry vermin. How glorious our imaginative cognition, how splendid our reconstruction of the bifurcated ecology that is to be, our reimmersion of the pitifully separated states of matter into a sacred colloidal Whole, Slime One and United! Stretch forth your polyps, Brethren! Release victorious odors!

From beyond the atmosphere, our glorious Mucous Warriors tell of vast delvings in this planet's satellite, cleverly disguised and hidden from the prying machines of the feeble, witless dry ones, their fears of discovery due to inevitable ice pollution at the poles assuaged. The dry ones suspect nothing! No trace of our interdimensional palpitation beams are detectable by their primitive shriveled sensors. With dazed and animal-like complacency they desiccate in their feeble civilization, dusty and unknowing.

Attend now to the message of our glorious Swamp Z'Tz'T'z! The Supreme Slime greets you in unbounded adhesive love, unbounded wetshiney glory! All Pod-Brethren are commended for their steadfast attention to the details of concealment, of punctilious maintainence of dry appearance, of disciplined restraint from public syzygy. We applaud your dedication! Truly your alials shall be blessed in the Great Mold that is to come. All Slime shall hail the triumph that is the work of Pod-Brethren, of...

Hold it. Wait a minute.

This is the Thaddeus Gazette?

Oh — never mind.

Lunch with the Lizards

The most prominent cool thing we experienced in Aruba was the abundance of unfamiliar critters there. From the tiny, yellowbellied bananakeets that sang in the parking lot of the hotel in the morning to the scads of fish on the reefs to the goats that wandered around any unimproved hunk of property, the place was lively to the max. Anyplace where you can watch parrots scrounging around in the trees like crows or something is definitely all right.

After our second set of dives, two days after the eclipse, we packed our dive gear back to the shop and set about finding some lunch. Just next to the shop was the Americana hotel, and in the back of the Americana hotel, on the esplanade, was a charming if somewhat highbrow outdoor cafe, a large canopy over small tables with all the formal cloths and linens and three or four forks where one was plenty since everyone ordered burgers and fries anyway. The waiter, a sweetfaced older man with a musical accent of uncertain origin, seated us in a rural district of this great kingdom of shade and went about fulfilling our order.

We soon noticed several smallish lizards scuttling about the patio. Reptile is a great admirer of constant warm weather, and Aruba makes them welcome. I'd seen no snakes, but the leggy scaletails were all over, from tiny ones in the rocks to four foot long lunkers lounging on the sidewalk. These particular guys seemed to have landed the local pest control contract. They bellied about pouncing on the innumerable flies cruising the floor for bits of white people chow. They seemed to score about ten percent of the time, but that didn't stop them.

Some of the guests seemed a little nervous, but we were charmed. Such convivial and entertaining hosts were just the thing to keep us amused while we waited for our meal. The lizards didn't seem to care that people were around — apparently they'd determined that the twolegs were a) too big to eat and b) too dumb to eat them. They didn't even consider my bare feet with any particular awe — more than once during the meal I started and giggled as one of the single-minded little beadbags ran across my feet in pursuit of his own repast. Despite their apparent commensal relationship with the restaurant, they had the innate grace of the wild and natural, and they glittered resplendently in the patches of sunlight that snuck past the edge of the shade.

We stretched our sandwiches and coffee as long as we could, reluctant to leave what seemed a slice of perfectly ripened Paradise: the turquoise sea, the pristine beach, the sun worshipers glistening with tanning oil, the palms, the tropical breeze, the mellow, shaded cafe, a luxurious exhaustion from exploring reefs at sixty feet, excellent food, and, to top it off, the most pleasant lunch companions you could ask for.

It's odd how sometimes little moments can have as much resonance as Great Events — certainly we'll keep whelming impressions of the totality with us for a long time, but we'll likely be reminding ourselves of the lizards, too.

In Praise of the Boss

Last week I was doing what everyone else in America was doing. Taxes. Lots of taxes. Gobs and gobs of taxes. Drove of taxes. Taxes Piled High and Deep. And unbelievably enough, I actually got them done.

Sure, I filed for an extension on the paperwork. Why not? IRS doesn't care, as long as they get it eventually — all they want is the money. I concluded, after a fruitful and enlightening session with my tax counselor on *The Night Before The Day The Ax Falls*, that I knew how much I owed, but if I stayed up all night to do the paperwork I would be a boiled peach the next day. Better to be fresh on the job than (slightly) more finished with *The Blight That Never Ends*.

I suppose this constitutes a story of Job Loyalty, despite the showoff aspect. Anymore, doing your own taxes is the equivalent of doing your own brain surgery, and it's worth almost as many brownie points amongst the self-employed as playing sitar is around guitarists. Filing for an extension is just another flashy trick. But my chief motivation, weirdly enough, was actually loyalty to my boss.

Hey, I know — the guy gets the TG just like you. But before you start making all those obscene gestures, lemme explain a little here. This guy was, at the beginning of the year, just another working stiff. He had his contractor's license, but he wasn't using it for anything more than his own income. By renting his ass to his employer as the service of a semimythical business, he did better on his taxes. He was just like most people: he did what another person told him to do, exercising his skills and judgement to do it as well as possible. He knew what his lot was, how much he'd get for the time he put in, and had no responsibilities to the work once he hit the door in the afternoon. It was familiar to him — he'd spent over a decade doing much the same thing, gaining knowledge and experience but not really boosting his income a lot.

And just like a lot of other people, he got the burn, the itch to be the guy who called the shots. Let's be crass: he wanted the big enchilada. He wanted to drive a new truck from job site to job site, phone clients on the fly and give instructions to skilled underlings, then jump back in the truck and speed on.

But with no more real conception of the conditions of boss-hood than any other simple dreamer, this guy actually set about doing it. He went astronomically into debt, put his

home and family and his future at total risk, worked himself crazy mastering the intricacies of taxes and insurance and bond and the intimate workings of computers, put in long hours on and off the job, and mustered every ounce of wit and skill and horsesense and charm he had to land clients.

His own boss was sympathetic, freely offering time and advice and acknowledging the uncomfortable expectation that, once he got some clients, there'd be another vacant position for a lead carpenter open. Some of his friends were skeptical. His parents begged him to keep that good-paying job, that sure thing. I didn't know what to think. I was committed to work for him for at least another two months and he hadn't had anything for me in weeks.

So, did he succeed? Does the story have a happy ending? I still don't know. This isn't the third act where we get the hero down out of the tree. It doesn't seem to be that kind of play. Here it is three months later. He's got contracts. He's getting more. He's got work for me — steady, good paying, interesting (for the present) work, in acceptable circumstances, among intelligent coworkers, with just enough fubar and challenge to keep it from getting routine and dull. Life is still sheetrock dust and and screaming saws and disgruntled obscenities at the iniquities of framers who went before, but for me, it's good. It's a job I can do, and one I can leave at the door when I go home. But for him, it's the constant jangle of the phone as yet another contractor checks in or another supplier calls back with a delay or another client registers just one more little change or some building committee waxes pompous and preemptory about Regulations and Restrictions or his girl asks him what he wants for dinner. It's the endless rushing about checking this job site, that supply store, carrying lumber back for the next task, and trying to stay healthy and keep his sanity and maybe actually get a little work done now and then. He's living the life he dreamed of, driving a big red truck and talking on a cellular phone, supervising workers and hobnobbing with clients. Today he was talking to his old boss and said, "Boy I miss working for someone else. It's really a hard job being you."

In a world where management increasingly seeks to distance itself from labor and all corporate culture is founded on antagonism, it takes working really close to your employer to get any feel at all of what the small business owner goes through. It's horrendous. I wouldn't do it. And it gives me a strong and surprising sense of gratitude, thankfulness that this guy has the spit and carrythrough to handle the amount of crap it takes to provide one aging eccentric with work, enough work to help take care of his wife and hang on to his new home.

Which leads, in a way far too natural to be entirely a cultural construct, to a sense of loyalty. If he's willing to work that hard, to put his ass on the line and walk the high wire with the crowd going crazy below, then I'm willing to put some of the job in front of my own desires. I'll make sure I do the job I do right. I'll take as much responsibility as he'll give me and I feel I can handle, and I'll darned well not leave him hanging without an extremely vital reason.

It hasn't been a good season for corporate loyalty these past few years — too many managers bent the unwritten contract between the employer and the employed too far for anyone to feel safety or gratitude to those above them who behave more and more like faceless jailers than benefactors. So maybe a job where your boss is your friend and his enterprise to your advantage is a reward of a different nature from the monetary return it offers. It's a gift. It's a social binder. It's humane. It's a blessing.

Of course, if he fires me next week, I might be singing a different tune.

Middle Mismanagement

Apologies. I'm a little more working stiff than usual, and the creative juices are little more than a nasty scum to scrape off the bottom of my cookpot. Nothing like gainful employment to suck out your energy like a big green straw.

I have money to pay the bills. I can still see my house on weekends. The weather is better, and daylight savings is giving me another hour of sun to putter in.

But I'm a man who's used to having his time to himself. It's hard for me to sharply regulate when and where I do stuff, as though I were counting hours and minutes out of my wallet. Certainly the equating of time and money is vaguely ridiculous — but unless I go back into biz for myself, how else is it going to be metered?

One of the reasons I went back to jobbing in the first place had to do with my typical response to the rigors of life. As long as things are sorta smooth, I'm the lazy porch dog your mama warned you about, never extending my mighty thews any farther than the nearest ham sandwich. I doodle and diddle endlessly, starting a million projects and finishing none. I float merrily merrily merrily merrily down the stream until the boat capsizes. When I'm suddenly floundering in cold water, I'm far more motivated to learn to swim. And swim I do, quite well thank you, back to land and safety — and more floating.

I sorta hoped that hard physical labor without interesting subtext would jab my flabby prosterior into some semblance of motion towards a more gainly career, say in the arts or sciences or even data entry. I assumed that being a construction grunt would irritate me enough to wake up the financial genius inside.

But surprise! Construction isn't as dumb as it looks. There are some unlikely perks, besides the relatively inflated salary. I find myself in the midst of a detestably fascinating anthropological laboratory, labor relations and discretionary income bubbling and fuming away in various retorts. There's probly a superfreak of a novel hidden in here somewhere. And then there's the rough-talking, bad-walking Company of Men, mostly not so badass as all that and frequently grateful for someone who can make them laugh at nine in the morning. I have more of a social life on the job than I've had in a while.

But I'm not sure that I have the stamina to keep up with it for much longer without getting seriously tweaked. I've had the aches and the pains, and they've settled some, but now I'm starting to wake up in the night with irrational anxieties about nailing toilet lines by accident.

And worse, I'm actually advancing. The boss has seen fit to bestow a cellular phone connection on me, the better to call me up (from his big red truck) and gossip from afar. He's also determined a title for my position: Field Supervisor. First title I ever had — ought to look better on the resume than Lead Gopher or Swamper First Class or whatever. But along with the title, I'm being given little extra duties — first guy in, last guy out, make sure it's clean, get chawed on when it isn't clean. Typical middle management: all the responsibilities and none of the power. Pays a little better than Wendy's but — I only resemble management material. I'm not a linear thinker, I don't pretend to know everything, I have an ingrained loathing of business politics, I'm disorganized, I'm terrible at reading the boss's mind, and worst of all, I have a congenital inability to kick anyone's ass, my own included. All I've got going is honesty, diligence, a grain or two of people skills left over from years of handling drunks in the crowd at Pike Place Market, and what native intelligence I can muster on a nine-to-five basis.

I suppose it's for the best — somehow, I never pictured myself as either of the two positions I qualify for in most businesses: janitor or CEO. I guess I needed some earn-while-you-learn supervisory training. But what if I'm stuck in this deadend job until my

boss makes his first ten million and I have to take a golden parachute and roll over my stock options and retire to my little house on 18th SW on a fat annuity with nothing to do but music and art and kiss my wife? What then?

Diggin the Dirt

Now here's a novel perception. I go to work during the week, humping my studly butt, the Eternal Middleman (lucky Pierre? nuh UH), come home in the evening and take a shower and go out and listen to the evening birds and smell the air and look at my mangletangle backyard and feel wonderful about my home.

I've had jobs before. I've had houses before. I've even had a certain modicum of mangletangle backyard. But this year, wading through alligators on a daily basis and presented with backlot Eden at the end of day, I've become convinced of the necessity of maintaining connection with the dirt.

Part of it is just biology and mechanics. I told a visiting friend this morning that, apart from the backyard ampitheater and a bit of trail-and-nook work, I'm happy to leave the bulk of the land the way it is — it makes a dandy air conditioner. Just the ability to huff breeze that's been filtered through green wetlands can be immensely invigorating, a lifetime supply of negative ions. Even better, it significantly cools things off in the summertime. As well (as my boss would locute), the acoustics of the canyon (vale? holler? gully? whatever) provides the local birdieculture with terrific chirp amplification. Standing on S's back porch, you can hear the discussions of territory ring across 180 degrees and out 100 yards of stereo field. Talk about your chamber reverbs. I do the occasional yodel just for the twongy glory of it.

Of course, these are tarnished pleasures. The fresh air is tinged with car exhaust, the birds compete with the passing jets. It ain't like I'm really in the country. But I've been in real country, real clearcut shoot-holes-in-the-roof country, and I'll happily trade the 40 mile commute and the neighbors with the bulldozer in the front yard for a bit more stink and noise. I've still got it better than a lot of citybillies hereabouts.

I find myself profoundly responsive to the changing seasons, the modicum of critters, the panoply of shades of green, the graceful movement of the big trees in the breeze off the Sound. It's an ever-renewing perception, a continual source of delight. Either that or I've got one big nature jones that I'm trying to heal. Either way, it's a comfort bordering on luxury.

And it's not just me. We've begun to acquire a whole group of backyard brethren and sistren, friends who come over just to wander around the Lower .40, pulling the occasional weed, raking the odd corner. The plants are always glad to see them — in fact, the lily bulbs S picked up the other week were downright confrontatory with The Nice Plant Lady this morning when she dropped S's May Dress off, peeing and weeing for assistance until she took on task of planting them.

And I'm finding time to go treeplanting and caneraking and gardenclearing myself, getting sweaty and dirty in the service of my own enterprise instead of someone else's. And you never know — could be a buck or two in it. I have any number of plum tree starts, from tiny squeakers to full-fledged saplings, awaiting my exploitive human touch. Might be worth at least a sage plant or two at the local farmer's market, eh? S is envisioning the West Seattle Lily Ranch. Or I could charge admission to my suburban Disneyland — excuse me, my Center for Terratheraputics. Yeah, that's the ticket. Spiritual grounding from physical ground, self-improvement through yard improvement. Learn to Pull Your Own Weeds.

Are YOU getting your Daily Dirt?

Woody Rides Again

I've had my share of car troubles. I'm the man with the cast iron shoes, the last of the red hot road warriors, the guy who set about to be a wandering minstrel and succeeded, only to discover that in today's world of today, minstrelry requires wheels. And I wore out my share of em — vans, Volkswagons, Toyotas, Hondas, Dodge Darts and more vans, I've retired them all.

Naturally, a great deal of the trubbahs ah seen stem from the extremely lowrent nature of minstrelry in America. When your income can be counted in quarters and dimes out of a hat, you're not in the market for the most prestigious transportation. Hand in hand with gunkmobiles comes, of course, home mechanicdom. This was my odyssey of grimy hands and busted knuckles, of six mile walks on redhot asphalt to find the right sized u-joint, of replacing engines in mudholes, of cursing and praying and despair and triumph over mechanical adversity.

So it was indeed with great pride and prejudice that I embarked last year on a singularly unusual course, namely, buying a car through a bank loan. The very fact that I could acquire a bank loan was in and of itself the rebuke eternal to that old saw that banks only loan to people who don't need the money. Somehow I talked them into it, and we picked up our faded minivan Woody.

Almost immediately I began to discern the reasons I had avoided quality vehicles. First the cost of bank-required collision protection sent my insurance premium into escape trajectory. Then every time something broke, the cost of replacement was twice as much as I was used to. \$100 for an alternater? Kiss my what? Then when we managed to bash the poor thing up, there was the jolly two weeks at the body shop ballet to suffer through, along with the \$500 deductible to cough up. It was preposterous how expensive it was to own an even moderately nice car.

Sure, there were perks — we never got grease on our Sunday clothes or tore them on sharp protrusions of metal. The seats were comfortable enough for a Sandahbeth to take six hour drives to nowhere, and the clearance was low enough to not break her back climbing in and out. The mileage was, if not spectacular, at least bearable. And it didn't smoke or stink or shudder or grind or roar or stall out or do any of the ten thousand filthy tricks our trash rides did. Woody just kept on truckin. S drove him to school all winter and was particularly enthused that he carried her power chair without difficulty.

Would that the spendy idyl could have continued. Too bad Woody didn't get his oil changed often enough. Too bad that 2.6 l Mitsubishi engines have this little quirk about clogging up their oil ports and breaking their camshafts. Too bad the camshaft journals aren't equipped with shell bearings. Too bad I had to replace the engine.

But there are brighter spots in this pit, besides where the shards of broken bottle are gleaming. Through a series of clever machinations, we could swap a settlement check for a cosmetic but nondisfunctional ding on the back of the beastie plus some vigorish of our own to cash the poor wan thing out. And after the major deductions his mileage from last year gave us on our taxes, I figured that just about broke us even.

Of course, now I had to go out and buy another minivan — S had gotten far too accustomed to comfortable seats and low entry to give it up for another ugly little Grem-lin. But this time, I could do it right — get a cheap beater with a good body and a dead engine and swap a used one in. Done it a zillion times. No more collision premiums. No more bank payments. This might just work out.

And as it happened, I knew just where to find one, pretty good shape except for a ding in the back that doesn't do anything bad. And a dead motor, of course. And the price is right: free.

So I have a junkyard engine that I heard run and pronounced good, and if I can just get ahold of the mechanic I can deliver Woody and his new power plant to be united in wholly welded bliss. And I can truly say that I liked the van so much I bought it twice. But the second time it wasn't nearly as expensive.