

The
TRIGGERING
TOWN

Lectures and Essays
on Poetry and Writing
by Richard Hugo

W · W · NORTON & COMPANY
New York · London

I

Writing off the Subject



I OFTEN make these remarks to a beginning poetry-writing class.

You'll never be a poet until you realize that everything I say today and this quarter is wrong. It may be right for me, but it is wrong for you. Every moment, I am, without wanting or trying to, telling you to write like me. But I hope you learn to write like you. In a sense, I hope I don't teach you how to write but how to teach yourself how to write. At all times keep your crap detector on. If I say something that helps, good. If what I say is of no help, let it go. Don't start arguments. They are futile and take us away from our purpose. As Yeats noted, your important arguments are with yourself. If you don't agree with me, don't listen. Think about something else.

When you start to write, you carry to the page one of two attitudes, though you may not be aware of it. One is that all music must conform to truth. The other, that all truth must conform to music. If you believe the first, you are making your job very difficult, and you are not only limiting the writing of poems to something done only by the very witty and clever, such as Auden, you are weakening the justification for creative-writing programs. So you can take that attitude if you want, but you are jeopardizing my livelihood as well as your chances of writing a good poem.

If the second attitude is right, then I still have a job. Let's

pretend it is right because I need the money. Besides, if you feel truth must conform to music, those of us who find life bewildering and who don't know what things mean, but love the sounds of words enough to fight through draft after draft of a poem, can go on writing—try to stop us.

One mark of a beginner is his impulse to push language around to make it accommodate what he has already conceived to be the truth, or, in some cases, what he has already conceived to be the form. Even Auden, clever enough at times to make music conform to truth, was fond of quoting the woman in the Forster novel who said something like, "How do I know what I think until I see what I've said."

A poem can be said to have two subjects, the initiating or triggering subject, which starts the poem or "causes" the poem to be written, and the real or generated subject, which the poem comes to say or mean, and which is generated or discovered in the poem during the writing. That's not quite right because it suggests that the poet recognizes the real subject. The poet may not be aware of what the real subject is but only have some instinctive feeling that the poem is done.

Young poets find it difficult to free themselves from the initiating subject. The poet puts down the title: "Autumn Rain." He finds two or three good lines about Autumn Rain. Then things start to break down. He cannot find anything more to say about Autumn Rain so he starts making up things, he strains, he goes abstract, he starts telling us the meaning of what he has already said. The mistake he is making, of course, is that he feels obligated to go on talking about Autumn Rain, because that, he feels, is the subject. Well, it isn't the subject. You don't know what the subject is, and the moment you run out of things to say about Autumn Rain start talking about something else. In fact, it's a good idea to talk about something else before you run out of things to say about Autumn Rain.

Don't be afraid to jump ahead. There are a few people who become more interesting the longer they stay on a single subject. But most people are like me, I find. The longer they talk about one subject, the duller they get. Make the subject of the next sentence different from the subject of the sentence

you just put down. Depend on rhythm, tonality, and the music of language to hold things together. It is impossible to write meaningless sequences. In a sense the next thing always belongs. In the world of imagination, all things belong. If you take that on faith, you may be foolish, but foolish like a trout.

Never worry about the reader, what the reader can understand. When you are writing, glance over your shoulder, and you'll find there is no reader. Just you and the page. Feel lonely? Good. Assuming you can write clear English sentences, give up all worry about communication. If you want to communicate, use the telephone.

To write a poem you must have a streak of arrogance—not in real life I hope. In real life try to be nice. It will save you a hell of a lot of trouble and give you more time to write. By arrogance I mean that when you are writing you must assume that the next thing you put down belongs not for reasons of logic, good sense, or narrative development, but because you put it there. You, the same person who said that, also said this. The adhesive force is your way of writing, not sensible connection.

The question is: how to get off the subject, I mean the triggering subject. One way is to use words for the sake of their sounds. Later, I'll demonstrate this idea.

The initiating subject should trigger the imagination as well as the poem. If it doesn't, it may not be a valid subject but only something you feel you should write a poem about. Never write a poem about anything that ought to have a poem written about it, a wise man once told me. Not bad advice but not quite right. The point is, the triggering subject should not carry with it moral or social obligations to feel or claim you feel certain ways. If you feel pressure to say what you know others want to hear and don't have enough devil in you to surprise them, shut up. But the advice is still well taken. Subjects that ought to have poems have a bad habit of wanting lots of other things at the same time. And you provide those things at the expense of your imagination.

I suspect that the true or valid triggering subject is one in which physical characteristics or details correspond to attitudes the poet has toward the world and himself. For me, a small

town that has seen better days often works. Contrary to what reviewers and critics say about my work, I know almost nothing of substance about the places that trigger my poems. Knowing can be a limiting thing. If the population of a town is nineteen but the poem needs the sound seventeen, seventeen is easier to say if you don't know the population. Guessing leaves you more options. Often, a place that starts a poem for me is one I have only glimpsed while passing through. It should make impression enough that I can see things in the town—the water tower, the bank, the last movie announced on the marquee before the theater shut down for good, the closed hotel—long after I've left. Sometimes these are imagined things I find if I go back, but real or imagined, they act as a set of stable knows that sit outside the poem. They and the town serve as a base of operations for the poem. Sometimes they serve as a stage setting. I would never try to locate a serious poem in a place where physical evidence suggests that the people there find it relatively easy to accept themselves—say the new Hilton.

The poet's relation to the triggering subject should never be as strong as (must be weaker than) his relation to his words. The words should not serve the subject. The subject should serve the words. This may mean violating the facts. For example, if the poem needs the word "black" at some point and the grain elevator is yellow, the grain elevator may have to be black in the poem. You owe reality nothing and the truth about your feelings everything.

Let's take what I think is a lovely little poem, written in 1929 by a fine poet who has been unjustly ignored.

Rattlesnake

I found him sleepy in the heat
 And dust of a gopher burrow,
 Coiled in loose folds upon silence
 In a pit of the noonday hillside.
 I saw the wedged bulge
 Of the head hard as a fist.
 I remembered his delicate ways:
 The mouth a cat's mouth yawning.

I crushed him deep in dust,
 And heard the loud seethe of life
 In the dead beads of the tail
 Fade, as wind fades
 From the wild grain of the hill.*

I find there's much to be learned about writing from this excellent poem. First I think it demonstrates certain truths that hold for much art. The poem grows from an experience, either real or imagined—I only recently found out that this particular experience was real. The starting point is fixed to give the mind an operating base, and the mind expands from there. Often, if the triggering subject is big (love, death, faith) rather than localized and finite, the mind tends to shrink. Sir Alexander Fleming observed some mold, and a few years later we had a cure for gonorrhoea. But what if the British government had told him to find a cure for gonorrhoea? He might have worried so much he would not have noticed the mold. Think small. If you have a big mind, that will show itself. If you can't think small, try philosophy or social criticism.

The need for the poem to have been written is evident in the poem. This is a strong example of the notion that all good serious poems are born in obsession. Without this poem the experience would have been neither validated nor completed.

The poem has elements of melodrama. All art that has endured has a quality we call schmaltz or corn. Our reaction against the sentimentality embodied in Victorian and post-Victorian writing was so resolute writers came to believe that the further from sentimentality we got, the truer the art. That was a mistake. As Bill Kittredge, my colleague who teaches fiction writing, has pointed out: if you are not *risking* sentimentality, you are not close to your inner self.

The poem is located in a specific place. You don't know where, but you know the poet knows where. Knowing where you are can be a source of creative stability. If you are in Chicago you can go to Rome. If you ain't no place you can't go nowhere.

* From Brewster Ghiselin, *Against the Circle* (New York: Dutton, 1946), p. 60. Reprinted with permission of the author.

The snake is killed gratuitously. The study of modern psychology may have helped some of us become better people. We may treat our children better because we have gained some rudimentary notion of cause and effect in behavior. But in art, as seemingly in life, things happen without cause. They just happen. A poem seldom finds room for explanations, motivations, or reason. What if the poem read

Because I knew his poison
Was dangerous to children
I crushed him deep in dust . . . ?

The poet would be making excuses for himself, and the fierce honesty with which he faces his raw act of murder would be compromised. Nothing in the drama *King Lear* can possibly serve as explanation of the shattering cruelty of Regan and Cornwall when they blind Gloucester. From a writer's standpoint, a good explanation is that Shakespeare knew a lot of creeps walk this earth.

But there's more to be learned from this poem than just artistic principles. They are always suspect anyway, including those I think I find here. Let's move on to the language of the poem.

Generally, in English multisyllabic words have a way of softening the impact of language. With multisyllabic words we can show compassion, tenderness, and tranquillity. With multisyllabic words we become more civilized. In the first four lines of the poem, seven of the twenty-six words, slightly better than one out of four, are two-syllable words. This is a fairly high count unless you are in politics. The snake is sleepy. He presents no threat to the speaker. His dwelling is that of a harmless creature, a gopher. It's almost as if the snake were a derelict, an orphan, a vagabond who sleeps wherever he can. The words "noonday hillside" suggest that the world does not have rigid topography but optional configurations. At 4 P.M. it might not be a hillside at all. We take our identities from our relationships, just as the earth takes its configurations from the time of day, the position of the source of light. This is a warm, fluid world.

With single-syllable words we can show rigidity, honesty, toughness, relentlessness, the world of harm unvarnished. In lines five and six, the snake is seen as a threat, the lines slam home heavy as the fist the poet sees as simile for the head of the snake. But of course, men, not snakes, have fists, and so we might ask: where does the danger really lie here?

The speaker then has a tender memory of the snake in lines seven and eight, and we get two three-syllable words and a long two-syllable word, "yawning." You might note that the poet is receptive to physical similarities of snakes and domestic cats—they look much alike when yawning—just as later he sees and hears the similarity of rattlesnakes to wheat (grain), the way the tail looks like the tassel, the way the rattle sounds like wind in the grain.

In the final five lines the poet kills the snake, faces himself and the moral implications of his act without a flinch or excuse, and we get no multisyllabic words in the entire passage. All single-syllable words, and the gaze is level, the whole being of the speaker honestly laid out, vulnerable on his private moral block. If one acts on the rigid prejudicial attitudes expressed in lines five and six (which the speaker did), and not on the fluid, tender, humane attitudes expressed in the first four lines and lines seven and eight, then in return one is faced with the fully developed, uncompromising picture of what one has done. Forever.

In this poem the triggering subject remains fully in view until late in the poem, whereas the generated object, what the poem is saying, just begins to show at the end but is nonetheless evident. The snake as such is being left behind, and attitudes about life are starting to form. The single-syllable words in the last five lines relentlessly drive home the conviction that all life is related, and that even if life isn't sacred, we might be better off if we acted as if it were. In this case the poet got off the initiating subject late.

I mentioned that one way of getting off the subject, of freeing yourself from memory if you will, is to use words for the sake of sound. Now I must use four lines from an early poem of mine, simply because I can't verify any other poet's process. I know what mine was at the time. These are the first

four lines of the fourth stanza of an early poem called "At the Stilli's Mouth."

With the Stilli this defeated and the sea
 turned slough by close Camano, how can water die
 with drama, in a final rich cascade,
 a suicide, a victim of terrain, a martyr?

When I was a young poet I set an arbitrary rule that when I made a sound I felt was strong, a sound I liked specially, I'd make a similar sound three to eight syllables later. Of course it would often be a slant rhyme. Why three to eight? Don't ask. You have to be silly to write poems at all.

In this case the word "cascade" fell lovingly on my ear and so, soon after, "suicide." I wasn't smart enough to know that I was saying that my need to see things dramatically was both childish and authentic. But "suicide" was right and led to "victim of terrain" and "martyr," associative notions at least, but also words that sound like other words in the passage, "martyr" like "drama" and "water," "victim" like "final" and "Stilli" (Northwest colloquial for Stilliguamish, the river). Instead of "suicide" I might have hit on "masquerade," but that would have been wrong and I hope I would have known it. I might have simply because "masquerade" sounds *too much* like "cascade," calls attention to itself, and to my ear is less interesting. What I'm trying to tell you is that by doing things like this I was able to get off the subject and write the poem. The fact that "suicide" sounds like "cascade" is infinitely more important than what is being said.

It isn't of course, but if you think about it that way for the next twenty-five years you could be in pretty good shape.

The Triggering Town



YOU HEAR me make extreme statements like "don't communicate" and "there is no reader." While these statements are meant as said, I presume when I make them that you *can* communicate and can write clear English sentences. I caution against communication because once language exists only to convey information, it is dying.

Let's take language that exists to communicate—the news story. In a news story the words are there to give you information about the event. Even if the reporter has a byline, anyone might have written the story, and quite often more than one person has by the time it is printed. Once you have the information, the words seem unimportant. Valéry said they dissolve, but that's not quite right. Anyway, he was making a finer distinction, one between poetry and prose that in the reading of English probably no longer applies. That's why I limited our example to news articles. By understanding the words of a news article you seem to deaden them.

In the news article the relation of the words to the subject (triggering subject since there is no other unless you can provide it) is a strong one. The relation of the words to the writer is so weak that for our purposes it isn't worth consideration. Since the majority of your reading has been newspapers, you are used to seeing language function this way. When you write a poem these relations must reverse themselves. That is, the relation of the words to the subject must weaken and the relation of the words to the writer (you) must take on strength.

This is probably the hardest thing about writing poems.

It may be a problem with every poem, at least for a long time. Somehow you must switch your allegiance from the triggering subject to the words. For our purposes I'll use towns as examples. The poem is always in your hometown, but you have a better chance of finding it in another. The reason for that, I believe, is that the stable set of knowns that the poem needs to anchor on is less stable at home than in the town you've just seen for the first time. At home, not only do you know that the movie house wasn't always there, or that the grocer is a newcomer who took over after the former grocer committed suicide, you have complicated emotional responses that defy sorting out. With the strange town, you can assume all knowns are stable, and you owe the details nothing emotionally. However, not just any town will do. Though you've never seen it before, it must be a town you've lived in all your life. You must take emotional possession of the town and so the town must be one that, for personal reasons I can't understand, you feel is your town. In some mysterious way that you need not and probably won't understand, the relationship is based on fragments of information that are fixed—and if you need knowns that the town does not provide, no trivial concerns such as loyalty to truth, a nagging consideration had you stayed home, stand in the way of your introducing them as needed by the poem. It is easy to turn the gas station attendant into a drunk. Back home it would have been difficult because he had a drinking problem.

Once these knowns sit outside the poem, the imagination can take off from them and if necessary can return. You are operating from a base.

That silo, filled with chorus girls and grain

Your hometown often provides so many knowns (grains) that the imagination cannot free itself to seek the unknowns (chorus girls). I just said that line (Reader: don't get smart. I actually *did* just write it down in the first draft of this) because I come from a town that has no silos, no grain, and for that matter precious few chorus girls.

If you have no emotional investment in the town, though you have taken immediate emotional possession of it for the

duration of the poem, it may be easier to invest the feeling in the words. Try this for an exercise: take someone you emotionally trust, a friend or a lover, to a town you like the looks of but know little about, and show your companion around the town in the poem. In the line of poetry above, notice the word "that." You are on the scene and you are pointing. You know where you are and that is a source of stability. "The silo" would not tell you where you were or where the silo is. Also, you know you can trust the person you are talking to—he or she will indulge your flights—another source of stability and confidence. If you need more you can even imagine that an hour before the poem begins you received some very good news—you have just won a sweepstakes and will get \$50,000 a year for the rest of your life—or some very bad, even shattering news—your mother was in charge of a Nazi concentration camp. But do not mention this news in the poem. That will give you a body of emotion behind the poem and will probably cause you to select only certain details to show to your friend. A good friend doesn't mind that you keep chorus girls in a silo. The more stable the base the freer you are to fly from it in the poem.

That silo, filled with chorus girls and grain
burned down last night and grew back tall.
The grain escaped to the river. The girls ran
crying to the moon. When we knock, the metal
gives a hollow ring—

O.K. I'm just fooling around. (God, I'm even rhyming.) It looks like the news I got an hour ago was bad, but note the silo replaced itself and we might still fill it again. Note also that now the town has a river and that when I got fancy and put those girls on the moon I got back down to earth in a hurry and knocked on something real. Actually I'm doing all this because I like "l" sounds, "silo" "filled" "girls" "tall" "metal" "hollow," and I like "n" sounds, "grain" "burned" "down" "ran" "moon," "ring," and I like "k" sounds, "back" "knock." Some critic, I think Kenneth Burke, would say I like "k" sounds because my name is Dick.

In this case I imagined the town, but an imagined town

is at least as real as an actual town. If it isn't you may be in the wrong business. Our triggering subjects, like our words, come from obsessions we must submit to, whatever the social cost. It can be hard. It can be worse forty years from now if you feel you could have done it and didn't. It is narcissistic, vain, egotistical, unrealistic, selfish, and hateful to assume emotional ownership of a town or a word. It is also essential.

This gets us to a somewhat tricky area. Please don't take this too seriously, but for purposes of discussion we can consider two kinds of poets, public and private. Let's use as examples Auden and Hopkins. The distinction (not a valid one, I know, but good enough for us right now) doesn't lie in the subject matter. That is, a public poet doesn't necessarily write on public themes and the private poet on private or personal ones. The distinction lies in the relation of the poet to the language. With the public poet the intellectual and emotional contents of the words are the same for the reader as for the writer. With the private poet, and most good poets of the last century or so have been private poets, the words, at least certain key words, mean something to the poet they don't mean to the reader. A sensitive reader perceives this relation of poet to word and in a way that relation—the strange way the poet emotionally possesses his vocabulary—is one of the mysteries and preservative forces of the art. With Hopkins this is evident in words like "dappled," "stippled," and "pied." In Yeats, "gyre." In Auden, no word is more his than yours.

The reason that distinction doesn't hold, of course, is that the majority of words in any poem are public—that is, they mean the same to writer and reader. That some words are the special property of a poet implies how he feels about the world and about himself, and chances are he often fights impulses to sentimentality. A public poet must always be more intelligent than the reader, nimble, skillful enough to stay ahead, to be entertaining so his didacticism doesn't set up resistances. Auden was that intelligent and skillful and he publicly regretted it. Here, in this room, I'm trying to teach you to be private poets because that's what I am and I'm limited to teaching what I know. As a private poet, your job is to be honest and to try not to be too boring. However, if you must

choose between being eclectic and various or being repetitious and boring, be repetitious and boring. Most good poets are, if read very long at one sitting.

If you are a private poet, then your vocabulary is limited by your obsessions. It doesn't bother me that the word "stone" appears more than thirty times in my third book, or that "wind" and "gray" appear over and over in my poems to the disdain of some reviewers. If I didn't use them that often I'd be lying about my feelings, and I consider that unforgivable. In fact, most poets write the same poem over and over. Wallace Stevens was honest enough not to try to hide it. Frost's statement that he tried to make every poem as different as possible from the last one is a way of saying that he knew it couldn't be.

So you are after those words you can own and ways of putting them in phrases and lines that are yours by right of obsessive musical deed. You are trying to find and develop a way of writing that will be yours and will, as Stafford puts it, generate things to say. Your triggering subjects are those that ignite your need for words. When you are honest to your feelings, that triggering town chooses you. Your words used your way will generate your meanings. Your obsessions lead you to your vocabulary. Your way of writing locates, even creates, your inner life. The relation of you to your language gains power. The relation of you to the triggering subject weakens.

The imagination is a cynic. By that I mean that it can accommodate the most disparate elements with no regard for relative values. And it does this by assuming all things have equal value, which is a way of saying nothing has any value, which is cynicism.

When you see a painting by Hieronymus Bosch your immediate impression may be that he was a weirdo. A wise man once told me he thought Bosch had been a cynic, and the longer I thought about this the truer it seemed. My gold detector told me that the man had been right. Had Bosch concerned himself with the relative moral or aesthetic values of the various details, we would see more struggle and less composure in the paintings themselves. The details may clash with each other, but they do not clash with Bosch. Bosch concerned himself with executing the painting—he must have—and that

freed his imagination, left him unguarded. If the relative values of his details crossed his mind at all while he was painting, he must have been having one hell of a good time.

One way of getting into the world of the imagination is to focus on the play rather than the value of words—if you can manage it you might even ignore the meanings for as long as you can, though that won't be very long. Once, picking up on something that happened when I visited an antique store in Ellettsville, Indiana, I wrote the lines

The owner leaves her beans to brag about the pewter.
Miss Liberty is steadfast in an oval frame.

They would have been far harder lines to write had I worried about what's most important: beans, pewter, or liberty. Obviously beans are, but why get hung up on those considerations? It is easier to write and far more rewarding when you can ignore relative values and go with the flow and thrust of the language. That's why Auden said that poets don't take things as seriously as other people. It was easy for me to find that line awhile back because I didn't worry about the relative importance of grain and chorus girls and that made it fun to find them together in that silo.

By now you may be thinking, doesn't this lead finally to amoral and shallow writing? Yes it does, if you are amoral and shallow. I hope it will lead you to yourself and the way you feel. All poets I know, and I know plenty of them, have an unusually strong moral sense, and that is why they can go into the cynical world of the imagination and not feel so threatened that they become impotent. There's fear sometimes involved but also joy, an exhilaration that can't be explained to anyone who has not experienced it. Don't worry about morality. Most people who worry about morality ought to.

Over the years then, if you are a poet, you will, perhaps without being conscious of it, find a way to write—I guess it would be better to say you will always be chasing a way to write. Actually, you never really find it, or writing would be much easier than it is. Since the method you are chasing involves words that have been chosen for you by your obsessions,

it may help to use scenes (towns perhaps) that seem to vivify themselves as you remember them but in which you have no real emotional investment other than the one that grows out of the strange way the town appeals to you, the way it haunts you later when you should be thinking about paying your light bill. As a beginner you may only be able to ally your emotions to one thing, either triggering subject or word. I believe it will be easier right now if you stick to the word.

A man named Buzz Green worked with me years ago at the Boeing Company. He had once been a jazz musician and along with a man named Lu Waters had founded a jazz band well known in its day. Buzz once said of Lou McGarrity, a trombone player we both admired, "He can play trombone with any symphony orchestra in the country but when he stands up to take a jazz solo he forgets everything he knows." So if I seem to talk technique now and then and urge you to learn more, it is not so you will remember it when you write but so you can forget it. Once you have a certain amount of accumulated technique, you can forget it in the act of writing. Those moves that are naturally yours will stay with you and will come forth mysteriously when needed.

Once a spectator said, after Jack Nicklaus had chipped a shot in from a sand trap, "That's pretty lucky." Nicklaus is suppose to have replied, "Right. But I notice the more I practice, the luckier I get." If you write often, perhaps every day, you will stay in shape and will be better able to receive those good poems, which are finally a matter of luck, and get them down. Lucky accidents seldom happen to writers who don't work. You will find that you may rewrite and rewrite a poem and it never seems quite right. Then a much better poem may come rather fast and you wonder why you bothered with all that work on the earlier poem. Actually, the hard work you do on one poem is put in on all poems. The hard work on the first poem is responsible for the sudden ease of the second. If you just sit around waiting for the easy ones, nothing will come. Get to work.

You found the town, now you must start the poem. If the poem turns out good, the town will have become your hometown no matter what name it carries. It will accommodate

those intimate hunks of self that could live only in your hometown. But you may have found those hunks of self because the externals of the triggering town you used were free of personal association and were that much easier to use. That silo you never saw until today was yours the day you were born. Finally, after a long time and a lot of writing, you may be able to go back armed to places of real personal significance. Auden was wrong. Poets take some things far more seriously than other people, though he was right to the extent that they are not the same things others would take seriously or often even notice. Those chorus girls and that grain really matter, and it's not the worst thing you can do with your life to live for that day when you can go back home the sure way and find they were there all the time.

3

Assumptions



ASSUMPTIONS lie behind the work of all writers. The writer is unaware of most of them, and many of them are weird. Often the weirder the better. Words love the ridiculous areas of our minds. But silly or solid, assumptions are necessary elements in a successful base of writing operations. It is important that a poet not question his or her assumptions, at least not in the middle of composition. Finish the poem first, then worry, if you have to, about being right or sane.

Whenever I see a town that triggers whatever it is inside me that wants to write a poem, I assume at least one of the following:

The name of the town is significant and must appear in the title.

The inhabitants are natives and have lived there forever. I am the only stranger.

I have lived there all my life and should have left long ago but couldn't.

Although I am playing roles, on the surface I appear normal to the townspeople.

I am an outcast returned. Years ago the police told me to never come back but after all this time I assume that either I'll be forgiven or I will not be recognized.

At best, relationships are marginal. The inhabitants have little relation with each other and none with me.

The town is closely knit, and the community is pleasant. I am not a part of it but I am a happy observer.

A hermit lives on the outskirts in a one-room shack. He eats mostly fried potatoes. He spends hours looking at old faded photos. He has not spoken to anyone in years. Passing children often taunt him with songs and jokes.

Each Sunday, a little after 4 P.M., the sky turns a depressing gray and the air becomes chilly.

I run a hardware store and business is slow.

I run a bar and business is fair and constant.

I work in a warehouse on second shift. I am the only one in town on second shift.

I am the town humorist and people are glad to see me because they know I'll have some good new jokes and will tell them well.

The churches are always empty.

A few people attend church and the sermons are boring.

Everybody but me goes to church and the sermons are inspiring.

On Saturday nights everyone has fun but me. I sit home alone and listen to the radio. I wish I could join the others though I enjoy feeling left out.

All beautiful young girls move away right after high school and never return, or if they return, are rich and disdainful of those who stayed on.

I am on friendly terms with all couples, but because I live alone and have no girlfriend, I am of constant concern to them.

I am an eleven-year-old orphan.

I am eighty-nine and grumpy but with enormous presence and wisdom.

Terrible things once happened here and as a result the town became sad and humane.

The population does not vary.

The population decreases slightly each year.

The graveyard is carefully maintained and the dead are honored one day each year.

The graveyard is ignored and overrun with weeds.

No one dies, makes love, or ages.

No music.

Lots of excellent music coming from far off. People never see or know who is playing.

The farmers' market is alive with shoppers, good vegetables, and fruit. Prices are fixed. Bargaining is punishable by death.

The movie house is run by a kind man who lets children in free when no one is looking.

The movie house has been closed for years.

Once the town was booming but it fell on hard times around 1910.

At least one person is insane. He or she is accepted as part of the community.

The annual picnic is a failure. No one has a good time.

The annual picnic is a huge success but the only fun people have all year.

The grain elevator is silver.

The water tower is gray and the paint is peeling.

The mayor is so beloved and kind elections are no longer held.

The newspaper, a weekly, has an excellent gossip column but little or no news from outside.

No crime.

A series of brutal murders took place years ago. The murderer was never caught and is assumed still living in the town.

Years ago I was wealthy and lived in a New York penthouse. I hired about twenty chorus girls from Las Vegas to move in with me. For a year they played out all of my sexual fantasies. At the end of the year my money was gone. The chorus girls had no interest in me once I was poor and they returned to Las Vegas. I moved here where, destitute in a one-room shack on the edge of town, I am living my life out in shame.

One man is a social misfit. He is thrown out of bars and not allowed in church. He shuffles about the street unable to find work and is subjected to insults and disdainful remarks by beautiful girls. He tries to make friends but can't.

A man takes menial jobs for which he is paid very little. He is grateful for what little work he can find and is always

cheerful. In any encounter with others he assumes he is wrong and backs down. His place in the town social structure is assured.

Two whores are kind to everyone but each other.

The only whore in town rejected a proposal of marriage years ago. The man left town and later became wealthy and famous in New York.

Cats are fed by a sympathetic but cranky old woman.

Dogs roam the streets.

The schoolhouse is a huge frame building with only one teacher who is old but never ages. She is a spinster and everyone in town was once in her class.

Until I found it, no outsider had ever seen it.

It is not on any map.

It is on a map but no roads to it are shown.

The next town is many miles away. It is much classier, has a nice new movie house, sparkling drive-ins, and better-looking girls. The locals in my town dream of moving to the next town but never do.

The town doctor is corrupt and incompetent.

The town druggist is an alcoholic.

The town was once supported by mining, commercial fishing, or farming. No one knows what supports it now.

One girl in the town is so ugly she knows she will never marry or have a lover. She lives in fantasies and involves herself in social activities of the church trying to keep alive her hopes which she secretly knows are futile.

Wind blows hard through the town except on Sunday afternoons a little after four when the air becomes still.

The air is still all week except on Sunday afternoons when the wind blows.

Once in a while an unlikely animal wanders into town, a grizzly bear or cougar or wolverine.

People stay married forever. No divorce. Widows and widowers never remarry.

No snow.

Lots of rain.

Birds never stop. They fly over, usually too high to be identified.

The grocer is kind. He gives candy to children. He is a widower and his children live in Paris and never write.

People who hated it and left long ago are wealthy and living in South America.

Wild sexual relationships. A lot of adultery to ward off boredom.

The jail is always empty.

There is one prisoner in jail, always the same prisoner. No one is certain why he is there. He doesn't want to get out. People have forgotten his name.

Young men are filled with hate and often fight.

I am welcome in bars. People are happy to see me and buy me drinks.

As far as one can see, the surrounding country is uninhabited.

The ballpark is poorly maintained and only a few people attend the games.

The ballpark is well kept and the entire town supports the team.

The team is in last place every year.

People sit a lot on their porches.

There is always a body of water, a sea just out of sight beyond the hill or a river running through the town. Outside of town a few miles is a lake that has been the scene of both romance and violence.