

Part 2 & Last

“The river is not always a road that takes them where they want to go.”
a quote by Serres in an essay by Bonnie J. Isaac, “Notes on Michel Serres and Mallarmé’s ‘Un Coup de des’ ”

My buddy Rick Duelley came into the house with a cd copy of James Lee Burke’s new novel *Robicheaux*, holding it out to me, saying “I’ve got it for another week.” I said, “Does Clete die?” All he said was, “Great new character. Chester. Look out.”

[To be fair to any readers, I need to stop almost before I start. I nominate Burke for the Nobel Prize for Literature. A hell of a better choice than a folk singer turned rocker turned crooner who can’t put together two prose sentences without cribbing from Cliff Notes. Perhaps being baptized in Pat Boone’s swimming pool rattled his brains. I don’t know or care. You, dear reader, can stop now. I thought you might appreciate the warning. I don’t have to give permission. Oh. And also: Fuck You Steve Earle. (Curious? See the Addendum)]

First an explanation & poem

QUESTion

Joseph Campbell reminds us that in the stories of the quest for the Holy Grail, it is the knight who asks the question who attains the grail; the knight with the answer gets the wound.

Every quest is an attempt to answer a question. The demand of every question that it be answered implies a quest.

This word is obviously not a pun; both words have the same root. They are too closely related for us not to see the relationship, and hence there is not the necessary distance between the two meanings revealed by exaggerating the quest in question.

But the word has, like many, its qualities as a mantra, for the quest in question is also an inquest, an interior journey as well as an investigation of something dying.

QUESTion

The quest is a guest
coming in from out
side from the quest
shuns the easy
way in.

So before questing toward Mallarmé there is another question. It's one that seems like a clue coming from this: *Is The Tower of Babel* a detective novel? I've already asked the question but not adequately answered it.

Here, to repeat, is my first attempt, suggesting that Spicer thought it was a detective story:

Am I admitting to leaving clues and then not trusting the reader to see the clue that they are clues and to where they point? I must not be trusting enough, even though it is claimed (and perhaps even Spicer intended) that *The Tower of Babel* is a detective story.

If he did, is the author's intention reliable evidence? I haven't seen any conclusive evidence that he did intend it, though Robin Blaser could probably have supplied some. But again, so what? Even if Spicer did think of it as a detective story, does that matter? Did it matter then? After 50 years, does it matter now? And if it does matter at all, then the more interesting question remains: What kind of detective story?

There are questions raised by the question of whether or not the novel is a detective story. If we consider it a detective novel, then that determines how we read it. We can no longer read Poe, for instance, in the manner of "The Murders of the Rue Morgue" first published in 1841.

The preponderance of evidence points to it not being, or that it was ever intended to be, a traditional detective novel. More significantly, it is not an unfinished attempt at writing a traditional detective novel. It is most likely a complete novel, but incomplete textbook of poetry. We do not have to wish that Spicer would have completed the novel, for what we have is the best guide to accompany the reading of his poetry.

Robin Blaser : **From 1957, following the narrative of *After Lorca*, Jack tended to write in books.** According to Ellingham and Killian he began *The Tower of Babel* in the the spring of 1958: the novel appears less of a detective story in imitation of Hammett and Chandler, than what they suggest as an alternative—a **Textbook of Poetry** (not to be confused with Spicer's Book of poetry called A Textbook of Poetry. Knowing that his novel came after *After Lorca*, writing in books rather than stand alone (Oh the Lonely) poems, the novel as a textbook of poetry is suggestive and perhaps accurate but it is also incomplete. And it is here in its incompleteness that it becomes a real detective story.

Ralston in the Birdcage overhears the conversation at the poets' table.

And so Sonia said, "You're the kind that never really makes it, the kind who can't stand for there to be a great artist, the kind that killed Bird..."

The poem that Spicer and anyone could have written through the noise of the prose if they could have heard it dictated might go something like this:

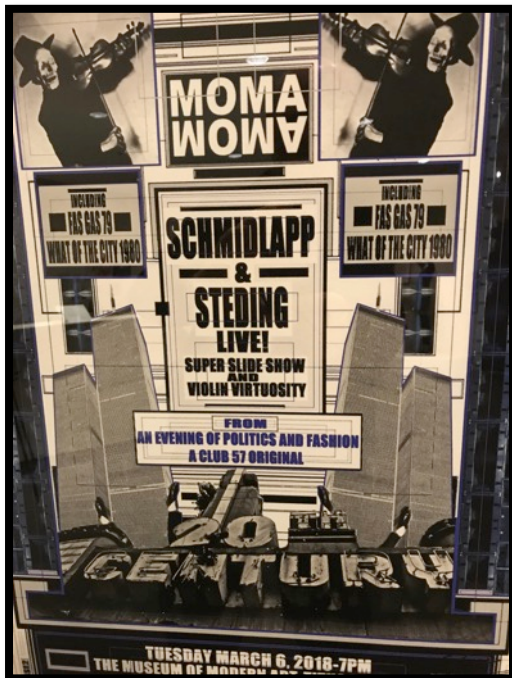
From the Birdcage

Charlie Parker was a yardbird
All birds sing all the words

They play high and
they play low

An angel in every band
A saxophone to blow

No cage can stop an angel's hymn
Charlie Parker was an angel. Him.



What is most remarkable about this **Textbook of Poetry** isn't this unremarkable poem, it is that it suggests questions, leaves clues, to all of Spicer's poetry even before he wrote (most of) it.

Another digression, or not. I won't know until the quest is over. And it might never be. A theme, major, minor, you determine, is the clash between what is real poetry and what is not.

The Academy and The Renaissance

While in New York to see [and hear, both, an event] my brother-in-law's performance at the Museum of Modern Art, I visited a small gallery near his home, a co-op in the Lower East Side. The gallery featured Revolutionary

Posters from the Sixties. I couldn't afford to buy any, but I liked the ones by the three professors: Clayton Eshleman \$100, Charles Olson \$500, Amiri Baraka \$250. (Sorry Clayton, Olson is the bigger commodity.)

On page 86 of *The Tower of Babel*

Ralston could remember a few years ago when the University of California invited an inoffensive Southern poet (a friend of Tate and Ransom) to read in a lecture series what a storm Slingbot managed to cause. The man, inappropriately named Philander Greene, was a Fascist, was a defender of lynching (in fact, Slingbot implied, had himself probably participated in several), was furthermore a very bad, very academic poet....

This page is a miniature rendering of the whole book's major theme, not only the personal relationship between Slingbot and Ralston, but those between the Eastern Poetry Academic Establishment and the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, the poetry that uses the social to validate the poem. Outlaw poetry and, to use Robin Blaser's term, the Practice of Outside.

Spicer connects Southern Agrarian poetry with the KKK. And academic poetry as shit. Slingbot to Ralston: "Your book's on the second shelf of the third bookcase. Most of them are university professors and crap like that ...".

The Committed poetry & Academic poetry aren't opposites but are more like William Blake's False Contraries.

Madelaine: "Echoing Slingbot, to Ralston, "You're becoming one of those magazine poets."

Ralston: "He [Slingbot] publishes in magazine too."

Madelaine: "Yes. But they really don't want to print him."

The excuses for not being an academic / university poet: "I'm no academic" (said Ralston's friend Henry). The narrator in parentheses: "They both knew that he had been protected from becoming a college professor by his inability to face crowds". Being academic means bad poetry. Being an outlaw ensures validity, value. Another example, Clayton Eshleman claimed that even though he was on the faculty of Eastern Michigan University, he wasn't really an academic poet since he was hired after age fifty, and after fifty you just who you were, who you are.

Us Outlaws, Us Academics

Slingbot explains to his Buddhist guest that "The artist is an outcast." He compares them to monks: "a bit crazy", "a little holy". The monk is not impressed. If a bit crazy. Hit him with a stick.

The English Department:

Spicer in Admonitions: I learned from the English Department (and from the English Department of the spirit—that great quagmire that lurks at the bottom of all of us) and it ruined ten years of my poetry."

The root of the difference between Slingbot, the poet committed to poetry as a vehicle for social reform, and Ralston, the poet committed to poetry as a quest, a quest where the poet risks everything, the difference, to use Gregory Bateson's insight, is the difference that makes a difference. Slingbot needs external validation in the form of separation from the poetry establishment, the academic, the university, the English Department. Ralston knows that this opposition helps not at all. Defining oneself in opposition to some other is a denial, not of the self but of how the opposition creates a false self. Ralston's most telling criticism of Slingbot is "Do you really believe what you were saying." [p. 107]

Slingbot's failure to integrate his life with his poetry isn't because his knowledge of Buddhism didn't lead to practice, all talk and no act. It's because he was demanding a union of life and poetry where the social, in opposition to the Academy, becomes the guarantee of what is genuine and what is not. He can throw together a poem (**the combination of hydrogen bomb and St. Augustine**) and be certain that though it may not be a great poem, it will still be a poem because he can force it to be relevant.

Ralston knows that poetry is not autobiography. When asked by Slingbot if he had met some of the San Francisco Beat poets he replied, [A little irony here.] **"I'm looking forward to. From their poems they sound like they've led very interesting lives."**

Blaser recounts a little story about when Allen Ginsberg visited Spicer. As if poetry was religion, Ginsberg said that **he'd come to save Jack's soul. Jack replied that he'd better watch it or he'd become a cult leader rather than a poet.** Blaser, much more knowledgeable and more generous than I, calls this **a very limited view of Allen, doubtless.** Perhaps. I have doubt. Spicer, in whose Gallery 6 Ginsberg did his first reading of *Howl*, knew precisely what was at stake when the personality took over the poem.

The poem, the Book of poetry, doesn't depend on being an outlaw, being against society, the politics, the cult of personality, religion, psychology, the whole structure of repression and misdirection. Blaser : **A few weeks before he died, in a lecture entitled Poetry and Politics, he argued that no poem had ever influenced the political realm.**

George Oppen

I didn't believe in political poetry or poetry as being politically efficacious. I don't even believe in the honesty of a man saying "Well, I'm a poet and I will make my contribution to the cause by writing poems about it."....If you decide to do something politically, you do something that has political efficacy. And if you decide to write poetry, then you write poetry, not something that you hope, or deceive yourself into believing, can save people who are suffering.

Dominick Knowles, *Viewpoint Magazine*, August 15, 2018: "A Spectre in Every Street: George Oppen and the Poetics of Communism"

And, then there is Spicer's and Ralston's admiration for Auden: "poetry makes nothing happen".

What is a political poem?

Jung Chang's and Jon Halliday's *Mao, the Unknown Story* opens with this sentence:

Mao Tse-Tung, who for decades held absolute power over the lives of one-quarter of the world's population, was responsible for well over 70 million deaths in peacetime, more than any other twentieth-century leader.

Yeah. Okay. And I remember when my friends at college had copies of Mao's little red book. Or LITTLE RED BOOK! He was a poet; therefore, he couldn't have been that bad. Eliot was a big C conservative, a neo-fascist, whatever. How long is it going to be before literature escapes politics? Certainly not in Trump's America. Pound, a fascist. Frost, somewhere in between? And Stevens an insurance executive. Hirschman? Stalinist. Oppen a Communist. Olson's Mao, the death of how many? Innumerable poets somewhere on the Left taking responsibility for the Soviet Gulags? Innumerable poets somewhere else on the Left taking responsibility for My Lai? For the Contras? For Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, those wars? The US as Us?

Then, and when, the poetry is long gone or turned into something else. Spicer had more in common with Eliot's extinguishing of personality than with personal theatrics that justified the poetry, making it relevant, interesting, important. Doesn't every reach into biography signal a failure of the poetry? The inflated ego, whether of The King of May or a Maximum Man means leaving no room for the transmission from the outside. It's as if the source of the poem is hijacked. What seems to come from out is actually from within. To counter this reliance on what ends up finally as propaganda, Spicer uses the Radio analogy. The poet must be open to the message from outside, able to hear through the noise, but being an Outlaw increases the noise, shuts down that possibility.

The poet who can perform the heroics of the fourth quarter quarterback has to renounce the "noise" of what has come before. There's a reason why Spicer gives over a big chunk of his novel to stories from a guest at Slingbot's party, a Zen master. Renunciation of self not self-aggrandizing, personality, not biography, not charisma.

The Radio

from Ralston's letter to his wife Anne:

I have never understood why people always assume that artists do not have common sense merely because they usually reject its dictates. It is very much like assuming that someone does not have a radio simply because he does not buy the products advertised on it. If I could only continue my sales-resistance, my refusal to listen to the annoying voice of the announced in my skull, I might even become the poet I have dreamed of becoming. I might even, past becoming the poet I have dreamed of becoming, write some good poems. (p103)

The next paragraph:

Certainly San Francisco is neither as good or as bad as I had pictured it. I have met some fools and no angels. The announcer of common sense discloses the cast. But if I could force myself not to listen to him, there is a station underneath trying to get through (like those Mexican stations that make a ghostlike interference to the programs I listen to on my portable radio here)—a mysterious bit of almost unheard music or five words uttered in a strange tongue—and I will not believe that good or bad, the sounds are merely static I could not afford to believe that.

Clues

Early in the novel, page 6, Ralston extends his football analogy to the eight-man line that protects the quarterback, allowing him to do his seemingly hopeless dance that saves the game, the only game worth playing with such abandon, with such risk.

Ralston: Football doesn't have anything to do with it. I mean pitting the energy, the chance-taking, or even a fraction of it against the eight-man line of language.

Eight & Line. Eight-man line. And not with but against language. The question is, is this a clue? Is there, perhaps, in Spicer's poetry poems of eight lines anything that can help us to understand, accept, realize, what will help the quester to find the way into real poetry?

The 8 word phrase "I Love You" may or may not be a clue. It may or may not be the realization of the search of the 8 line poems.

It's time to take a break and go to Mallarmé.

Why? Why not? Ralston invokes Mallarmé early in the novel. Reading Quentin Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren, a decipherment of Mallarmé's Coup De Dés* helps explain both the novel and the *Collected Poems*. A slight but long way round to Spicer and Mallarmé. Quentin Meillassoux has established, minimally, that the number 12 is significant to appreciating Mallarmé's poetry. But this is no clue. The 12 line alexandrine had attained establishment status, the Academy, in contrast to free verse, the outlaw poetry. Mallarmé's was the way of the middle. Meillassoux: "Writing is rule-governed, but oralization is free. And so it is fixed meter that succeeds in combining *both* the rule of tradition *and* the freedom of the moderns" (page 183). USAmerican poetry had not the gift nor the burden of the official alexandrine. In the Fifties, that vague term, Academic verse, that vague term, was the rule over and against the free, that vaguest of terms. And there is no Unique Number in the novel, though I haven't exhausted myself with counting as did Meillassoux. But what about the number 8?

Robin Blaser hints at what might be a clue, even a key, to a felt understanding of what it means for Ralston to be on a quest, a quest to be a Poet, even though he had been published in respectable, academic, magazines. On page 308 of *The Collected Books*, he quotes a Spicer 8-liner. It ends

How can you love that mortal creature
Everytime he speaks
He makes
Mistakes

Speech, the oral, necessary, reach of sound to surround, to bring the "other half" in, is fraught with problems, the big one being that the dictated becomes fuel for the dictator. Think of Ezra Pound believing that if only he could sit down and talk to Hitler and Roosevelt then he could settle that silly little war. The open mouth as vampire. [Do you ever watch vampire movies? I did recently and am convinced that like the Catholics' confessional, USAmerica's obsession with the living dead who suck blood from the

innocent is a way for the people to absolve themselves from the guilt of the wars done in their name, with their permission. This is my Body, this is my Blood. Eat, drink, party.]

A look at the 8-liners in Spicer's *Collected*

Poetry & Pound

When the house falls you shiver
In the vacant lumber of your poetry.
Beauty is so rare a thing. Pound sang.
So few drink at my fountain.

Spicer took from Pound's Villanelle: The Psychological Hour
Beauty is so rare a thing / So few drink of my fountain

While at St. Elizabeth's Pound gave comfort to many neo-fascists. Committed poets can be fascists. Many of the good one were. Spicer's was a different kind of commitment. We know that he lost a job for refusing to take a loyalty oath. To repeat: "Beauty is so rare a thing."

Here's another aside. I know that I risk losing the reader's attention. But I doubt I have it. So I risk little. But the mention of Ezra Pound's sojourn in "the Bug House" reminded me of a poem I wrote yesterday for my Book called JACKS. I've mentioned that book-in-progress before (or above, time & space). It's clear, or becoming more so, that the two things are connected, this little essay on Jack Spicer's novel and my book on the word *jack*.

The House That Elizabeth Built:
"Visits to St. Elizabeths"

It's all about how the line breaks
the man or the poem
or the refusal of the poet
to see and speak of what
is true and truly sad
and true and truly serious.

She visits St. Elizabeths
it's the place he inhabits
along with young Nazis,
Jew haters, thugs, poets
of a diversity of beliefs all
united for the love
of this man.
"This is the man
that lies in the house of Bedlam"

This is the man that lies

in the house of Bedlam.

*The tragic man that lies
The talkative man that lies
The honored man that lies
The old, brave man that lies
The cranky man that lies
The cruel man that lies
The busy man that lies
The tedious man that lies
The poet, the man that lies
The wretched man that lies
when she visited Ezra Pound
then wrote a nice little poem
she called The House That **Jack** Built*

That wasn't so bad, was it? I mean the time it took to read the poem. Or skip over it. Not the poem itself. It's neither good nor.

Spicer's Book called *A Red Wheelbarrow* is about Significance. He does not copy or quote Williams' most famous pronouncement from *Patterson*: "No ideas but in things". [It's important that in William's poem, the quoted, most quoted, passage is part of a saying.] It is significant that he didn't since "The Red Wheelbarrow" is likely the most anthologized twentieth century American poem. Not saying is saying.

[The last line of the book, titled Love 8 is a delicious pun:

Love ate the red wheelbarrow.

From the book *Heads of the Town*
Several Years' Love, about Love and Writing:
Two loves I had. One rang a bell (sound, oral)
Connected on both sides with hell

The other'd written me a letter (sight, writing)
In which he said I've written better

Car Song

Away we go with no moon at all
Actually we are going to hell.
We pin our puns to our backs and cross in a car
The intersections where lovers are.

This is so much like a poem from Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* that I'm throwing in not the towel but a poem. [A fight metaphor. Our language, USAmerican, is infected with violence.]

Hate is a Good Critic

(a translation from the English of William Blake's "A Poison Tree"
by Henry David Thoreau For Ralph Waldo Emerson)

I had a friend, I wrote a book,
I asked my friend's criticism,
I never got but praise
for what was good in it—

my friend became
estranged from me
and then I got
for all that was bad, —

While my friend was my friend
he flattered me,
and I never heard
the truth from him,

but when he became
my enemy
on a poisoned arrow
he shot it to me

There is much hatred
as love in the world.

Back to the 8s.

Wrong Turn

...

Stepping up to poetry

Demands

Hands.

Sometimes, like Poe's purloined letters, a clue is in the plainest sight, and site.
The importance, necessity, of the physical, stepping, hands & demands.

The Territory Is Not The Map

The hint of the schizophrenic divide, the oral and the written.

Ralston's wife is a child psychiatrist: **She treats children. Mostly schizophrenic children.**

It's very interesting work. Why interesting? Like all writers, Ralston resides within the oral and literate divide. Part of his quest is to write, like Mallarmé (and Poe, his master), from that middle place.

When You Go Away You Don't Come Home

On the mere physical level

There is a conflict between what is and what isn't

[For the writer, the audience is a ghost. Mallarmé's search for Presence within Writing.]

Sheep Trails Are Fateful to Strangers

Dante would have blamed Beatrice

If she turned up alive in a local bordello

...

What I mean is words

Turn mysteriously against those who use them

[It's the Babel, the one that towers over all. Listen to the Radio. The question, how to extract the poem from the noise?]

Dillinger

The human voices put the angels

Pretty far away.

[Bird. Charlie Parker, out of the birdcage. The Voice (orality), dictation engendering the Dictator. Perhaps music. Mallarmé's quest: "Can poetry take back its gift – song – from music..." (Meillassoux).

Crabs

Daughters of memory

...

Keep us warm while the night grows

Too cold to bear

Or too hot to carry

A single light.

The novel begins with Ralston in The Birdcage searching his memory, memory of a different kind of light, a memory that gives him hope for a light that will shine on the way, his way, to the real poem. And yet. In spite of the delight, for me, of concentrating on Spicer's 8-lines of language, it is a fruitless search for any unique number. No Grail, no key, no number to explain Ralston's search (or Spicer's).

Perhaps. Yet he gets it: The Social Muse, the labyrinth of puzzles and pleasures in which all the artists he had met here were so happily turning, *bugged* him. He was himself and his poems were his poems and they had no connection and would not be improved by kind of games other people were playing. (p. 153)

How does he get it?

I've been reading a book written by Chris Barron's friend Michelle Boulous Walker: *Philosophy and the Maternal Body*. [Chris is also my good friend, yet I've never met her and never will. She lives in Australia. I don't. Many of my friendships were established through writing, one of its greatest benefits. But there is always something missing, similar to what is missing when I read those poets whose work got me into this silly & strangeness, the big 3: Pound, Williams, HD. It's the lack, lack of Presence, the physical, what anchors the real, holds us in the embrace.] Michelle's book deals with how women's language has been silenced, directly through censorship and control and indirectly through a forced accommodation to the dominant language (male writing).

I've been fortunate as a writer for the friendships established, and that through the writing I've also met those writers whose works still mean so much to me. About 40 years ago I wrote a review of Meridel Le Sueur's novel *The Girl*. From that review began a friendship. I used her novel in my English composition classes because I considered it the perfect text, perfect for so many reasons but primarily because it is a novel that is written from oral stories told to her by women and attempts, in writing, to be one, a written oral story. She attempted to avoid what Ed Dorn referred to, what was Mallarmé's concern, that "trouble with literacy". Ed Dorn: "The trouble with literacy is that it enables you to predict which side to be on which means you are predicted before anything happens."

On page 48 of the novel, Ralston and Madelaine discuss **The Second Issue** of a poetry magazine. **And they had all referred to the bulge that kept growing larger and larger and more and more important until it became an actual baby in July as The Second Issue.**

We don't call her The Second Issue now, of course, Madelaine said a bit sharply.

In Meridel's novel, *The Girl*, the climax, not the death of some hero or the hero's antagonist, like nearly every other novel, no the climax is the birth, birth of the new Girl. In a slight way but like Mallarmé's *Coup De Des*, Meridel's novel relies on number (there are 40 chapters, 40 weeks in a woman's pregnancy) to make the writing inherent, integral, arising out of the immediate occasion of writing. It evokes Presence.

[The first paragraph of *The Girl* tells of the death of Clara (flawed beauty, flawed sight, the "old" Girl, flawed clarity):

I was glad to close her eyes over the horror they had given her and shut her silent screaming mouth. Butch's mother held the bucket while we washed her and brushed her golden hair. She was like a bird is when the life goes out of them, they seem so tiny, just bones and feathers.

The new Girl, named after Clara, means clear light, is the hope for the future and the model for the writer herself, no longer like a lifeless bird. And not one caged.]

[It's unfortunate that Michelle was unfamiliar with Meridel's writing, especially her novel *The Girl*. On the last page of her book she writes: I began by arguing that women are silenced because they are mothers. It is perhaps more correct to say, though, that women are silenced because they are considered to be mothers *only* of sons. *The Girl*

was first completed in 1939. I say “first” because it was completed again nearly 50 years later, 1978. The novel of 1939 was the product of taking notes of the stories shared with her by other women who experienced the Great Depression (and the great depression of that Depression). The novel of 1978 changed because of the dialogues Meridel had with other women. The child born in the first novel was a boy; in the second, a girl. Meridel and I talked about this and other changes. She smiled a lot at my questions then said “No one gets it right all the time, alone.”]

Near the end of his essay, Blaser brings up the question that he was often asked: **What killed Jack?** While this is an echo of who killed Washington Jones, the dead poet in the novel, the nearly forgotten dead poet, there isn’t enough known about Jones to claim that he too died of a broken heart. Blaser writes that Jack on his deathbed said **My vocabulary did this to me**. On page 271 Blaser (from a Spicer notebook, late, 1964) gives us this:

**With fifteen cents and that I could get a
subway ride to New York. My heart
is completely broken. Only an enemy
Could pick up the pieces.**

The novel, page 5, the Birdcage girl saying: **Because you want your heart back. Because you feel you lost something.**

Are there clues in work that Spicer may have read before writing the novel? Besides the obvious detective stories, influences?

Jack Kerouac *On the Road* 1957, not an influence, except maybe a negative.

Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart* 1958, too late, but possibly given its essential conflict between the oral native Africans and the literate White colonialists.

Samuel Beckett *Waiting for Godot* 1956, possibly if only for the mutual, and failed, quest.

Albert Camus *The Fall* 1956, perhaps, but only in the sense of Poe’s narrator in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*: “Words have no power to impress the mind without the exquisite horror of their reality.”

Allen Ginsberg *Howl* 1956, no influence, certainly though Spicer was instrumental in the success of *Howl* and of Ginsberg becoming the greatest American poet-personality since Whitman.

Jim Thompson *The Killer Inside Me* 1952, my best bet, though I have no evidence that Spicer read any of Thompson’s work. Even more than *Things Fall Apart*, *The Killer* expresses the orality & literacy schizo-split of writing as both curse and (possible) cure.

So in all of this, I have to resort to this, James Hillman’s most famous quote:
“I don’t have answers. I have questions.”

Perhaps the biggest one. Why (on page 153) does Ralston realize that he is a poet? That paragraph I quoted continues: **The fourth quarter, if the whole image were not a mare’s**

nest hatched by his *non*-poetic personality, could exist as well in the changing of one important word as it could in the summoning of angels. Beauty, after all, was beauty.

Earlier, a paragraph before: All of this crap, all of this searching and talk of Blake and football games, all of this having a fish slammed at you, was just the outer edges of the poem that you would really write. I am myself, Ralston thought with surprise, and my poems are my poems.

But what about that fish?

Karen Lovely's "Fish Outta Water"

Fish outta water
Running out of time
Bird with a broken wing
Caught on a wire
Got no words to sing

Why early in the novel while in the Birdcage does the poet Rue Talcott offer Ralston a fish with poems in its mouth?

Even though he dismisses the occasion of having the fish "slammed" at him, **Fish Mouth** could be the name of Ralston's poem, his last poem written in San Francisco, the one that offers him the realization that **I am myself** and that **my poems are my poems**.

The fish & poems are a gift from a young poet to an older one, one who had published in respected Academic journals. The young poet is also on the same quest as Ralston, but Ralston cannot see that. He experiences Rue's gift as an assault. A personal assault. And it is. And that is its gift. (That Buddhist monk who appears at the party 34 pages later: **At our monastery ... we hit visitors over the head with beanbags. That is, if they are truly seeking wisdom.**)

Spicer, as if imitating Poe: **Ralston, looked at the fish...One horrible open eye stared up at him.**

Rue tells Ralston to look in the fish's mouth. Since Ralston, at this time, doesn't, cannot, understand and accept Rue's fish, he reacts in anger and takes the poems from the fish's mouth and tears them up. [Sometimes the English language expresses itself in wonder with its puns, like Karen Lovely's name; the words "tears", rhymes with ears, rhymes with stares.]

The young poet **looked as if he were going to cry.**
He says **It was a poem.** And then, **You bastard. Oh, you bastard.**

Rue was attempting to integrate the written poem and the oral medium. It was in his way expressing his "inner Blake". Ralston, then, was unable to see, to see and sympathize. Later, near the novel's end, it's more clear that he would have seen it then: he states [thinks, or rather Spicer writes these words as thoughts of his character] that the Zen

monk, Mr. Hashiway, **would understand everything**. He expressed paternal sympathy for Rue but there was no expression of understanding. Ralston had torn up Rue's poems and had lost a notebook of them. He didn't need Slingbot, Madelaine, or Rue. He had escaped the Birdcage. He didn't need the San Francisco poetry "scene". The last line of the book: **Ralston left.**

Robin Blaser recounts Spicer's **sense of a "perfect poem"**. Jack:

A really perfect poem (no one has written one) could be perfectly translated by a person who did not know one word of the language it was written in. A really perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary.

[The final aside. The quote of this passage from Spicer's *After Lorca* contains a typo. His line that contains the words **a person who did not know one word of the language it was written in** (p. 15) becomes in Blaser's retelling, re-writing, of it **one word of the language** (p. 313). I don't know if it was Blaser or the editors of Black Sparrow Press who made the mistake. Sometimes a mistake in the copy makes the original less flawed.]

When I read Robin Blaser's telling of his last conversation with Jack Spicer I think of Barbara Mor. Barbara and Meridel Le Sueur, friends of 40 years, were the most important writers I've known.

As Spicer lay dying, he said to Blaser **My vocabulary did this to me. Your love will let you go on**. The week Meridel died she wrote to me a postcard: "Where have you been!" By the time I replied, she had died. When Barbara died I received from her son Caleb Miles a letter where he recounts the last word he got from his mother. When she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, she decided to indulge herself: not worrying about diet restrictions of fat and salt, she ate pork rinds. She sent her son her last, most minimal, poem:

O I N K