

T H E U N K N O W N P O E T



J E A N R O S S J U S T I C E

His letters were usually written with a dull pencil on rough tablet paper or ruled notebook paper. Sometimes a poem was included in the body of the letter, sometimes enclosed. Even when there was no poem, there were likely to be poetic descriptions. “I am as light as some kind of water bug now, just skimming a surface, but eventually I’ll pull out of it and write you an intelligent letter. In the meantime, write to me, it is fine to have one sane voice breaking through” – this from the Virgin Islands in the 1950s. The letters to my husband, Donald, date from the late forties to the late fifties. After that there were a few telegrams asking for money, though the money requests often came by phone, collect.

Young, Robert Boardman Vaughn was a skinny guy with a thin, sharp-chinned face, a high mound of hair, and an affectedly soft voice; he wore black-rimmed glasses and, customarily, a white dress shirt open at the neck, the sleeves rolled up a few inches. (He had firm notions about dress, as about poetry; his friend Eugene’s everyday black shoes pained him.) Though he’d been born in Alabama, his family had come down to Miami from one of the industrial towns in Michigan, probably Flint; in Miami, his father ran a small, not very successful wholesale grocery business. Bob

said once that his father had been in the diplomatic service somewhere in the Caribbean – already the draw of the Caribbean! – but that story is quite likely in the same category as his claim to have played with Georgie Auld’s band, which he was obliged to take back when the band came to Miami. I don’t want to say he was a chronic liar, though late in his life he told wild stories of his past which were often believed. He was a mythmaker, with too much pride and too rich an imagination to leave the commonplace past unembellished.

This was in the college years – the happy college years. There was a small cluster of bright, talented people at the University of Miami in the early forties that included Bob and my husband-to-be, Don. They listened to jazz, they wrote poems and plays, and acted in one another’s plays. Bob’s play was called *A Grail of Laughter: A Tragedy of Jazz*. Bob was one of the four people called “my teachers” to whom Don later dedicated *The Sunset Maker*. When they first met, Bob may have read more widely than Don, and he had strict notions of what was good and what wasn’t. Both were day students; Bob was living at home, as he did for months at a time much of his life. His parents lived in a small house at the foot of a sloping, barren yard; later Bob, the only child, sometimes occupied the attached garage. Don and I visited the house in the late forties and sat on the small screened porch; it must have been winter, for his mother offered cocoa. She was a kind, nervous woman who looked older than her years, her hair already more white than gray, a tooth or two missing. I saw her only once more, a few years later, in the small Coconut Grove post office, buying a money order to send to Bob somewhere in the islands. “That kid might get sick down there and not let me know.” Bob would have been close to thirty then.

After the good college years, the good Greenwich Village years. Once Bob and Don contracted to drive a woman tourist back to New York in her car; Bob stalled the car on a railroad track somewhere around Jacksonville, and the passenger demanded that Don drive the rest of the way. Bob and Don sometimes shared an apartment in the Village; once they disagreed over some literary judgment, and Bob, the original renter, told Don that if *that* was his opinion, he’d better move out, which he did. Bob worked in a bookstore, Don at Paramount Pictures. They lived cheaply; they

went to museums, to hear jazz, and to an occasional play, they savored the Village life, the Village characters – Jimmy the Greek, Joe Gould. Bob formed an alliance with Nancy Banks, a beautiful woman from Cleveland who had an African American child from a former alliance. Bob never quite left the Village, though for ten years he was batting in and out of places in the Caribbean.

In the late forties and early fifties, he was sometimes in Miami, sometimes in New York. (Don had left New York for graduate school.) A Miami friend who played the piano at a Catskill resort one summer found him working there as a waiter; he was organizing the waiters, not for collective bargaining, but into a group to read *Waiting for Godot*. In the fifties he married a drug-addicted and sometimes suicidal painter named Iris; he believed that marriage would give her life some stability. They occupied the Vaughn garage for a time, but the pull of drugs was too strong, and the marriage seems to have lapsed almost at once.

Soon after this, he began his Caribbean adventure. At the university, he had quoted much Hart Crane; perhaps Crane's ghost drew him there. He signed on to a cargo ship bound for the Virgin Islands and South America, then returned to Miami and persuaded the artist Dee Clark to come with him to St. Thomas, where he knew the bookseller Tram Combs. They arrived, Dee said, on "one of those sparkling West Indian days"; a funeral procession was going by in the street with mournful drums, and "Tram wrote a poem." They admired the Danish wooden houses with tray ceilings and shuttered windows. Later Bob wrote in a poem, "Remember kites we said / Were signals of the Caribbean dream / How we laughed in wooden houses at the night / With horses at the window, how we schemed / The revolution of beauty at the sight / Of torches by the railroad track in Medillin." Bob worked as a bartender; Dee had a brief career singing in clubs, but had really come to paint. He loaned her books, and they sometimes stayed up till the small hours discussing them. There were new friends: "Bob always found the interesting people everywhere," Dee said. And there was the beautiful island world around them. "Paradise, baby!" Bob said. They dived at Coki Point, where there were old cryptlike graves and goats. Bob thought of writing a novel about skin diving. He studied maps and reefs, and his dream

was to go to Anegada, where there was a dangerous reef with old shipwrecks around it. He wrote about all this in his letters to Don.

They made it to Anegada with the captain of a fishing sloop who was also a preacher. It was a barren island, with primitive living conditions; they were the only white people there. The captain preached with a goat on the step outside. They rode donkeys to beautiful and deserted Loblolly Beach, where fish crowded the water and there was the fabled reef.

Always, Bob was at work on poems. From San Juan he wrote in January, 1958:

I've had two months free in our house by the ocean and have finished three poems and have tried the novel again.

The island is still in the midst of "operation bootstrap" and presents peculiar and Audenesque images of donkeys and peons or manufacturers and Thunderbirds.

Eliot speaks here soon. There is a new Tamayo mural at the university (Prometheus, \$50,000) and the Casals festival coming on.

I have the use of the university library which is pretty complete. Read your poems and like them all, especially the sestina and the ode (maybe I don't like the last line of the ode).

There were trips back and forth to Miami; some time in Key West. He worked on another boat out of Miami, one with a thieving purser, which may have been when he began to drink. Then back to St. Thomas; on the way he stopped in Jamaica, smoked pot with the Rastafarians, and got his own stash. He worked as a waiter, while Dee was free to go on painting; it was not an ideal situation. He accused her of coming on to other people, and one night pushed her out of the jeep he was driving. When some publishing people visited the island, Bob showed them around and told them he had a novel nearly finished, which was not true. He was drinking, and apparently he could never handle drink; when their friend Skip warned him that Dee would leave if he didn't stop, he went home and knocked her down. She left and returned several times before the final breakup. There came to be a pattern of breakdowns – wild and occasionally abusive behavior, apology and even tears, loss of whatever job he was holding. Once in St. Thomas he fell in the street in a seizure. Then he would recover,

and things would seem normal for a while. There was always a nervous intensity in him.

During one of the sojourns in San Juan, they went to a meeting organized to raise money for the Cuban revolutionary cause. Bob was fired up, ready to go fight with the rebels in the mountains, and in the spring of 1957, he flew to Cuba. Later, speaking of this time, he said he'd lost an eye in the fighting, that it was cut out with a penknife by Ernesto Guevara, but in fact, soon after making it to Oriente Province he was arrested by Batista's men and thrown in jail. He was allowed to leave after he persuaded them that he'd come only to do a study of ancient churches. Probably he didn't consider the trip a total loss; he spoke later of something he'd written in jail in Cuba, and, in any case, it was *experience*.

After the revolution he made it back to Cuba. ("Cuba's story is the most involved and moving in my particular time.") Before one trip he wrote Don:

Look, only once before have I asked. Send me \$40 or \$50, and if you do, send it forthright. The reason: action in Cuba and a chance for prose.

As I said previously, if you can't, don't grieve. And write to me, without explanations of a minor regret.

Time is everything for me, without your \$40 I can work for it, but what work and what time. If I last, I'll write some prose that will repay.

Your acquaintance —

He yearned for Experience; it would be material. (One of the epigraphs for his poetry manuscript was "Experience is everything," from the jockey Bill Hartack.) He could work for the forty dollars but what work! From St. Croix he'd written earlier that he was now assistant manager of a hotel "trying to save loot for one more trip, but you can imagine what these jobs do to the dream." The dream was to let nothing stand in the way of writing.

He made it to Havana, and wrote from there in August 1959:

Many things, muchas cosas, and the rose unfolds . . . Fidel and Che are making what we once called history. It sings in the air like those wires that Leon Rapollo once thought he heard or heard.

I'm writing on a quay-like porch that extends out over the sea. Sand green and then the blue that goes to Mexico.

They're publishing four poems in "Revolucion" which is a pretty big deal. There's special editing every Wed. por la arte. "Respecto Robert Vaughn" the poets here are saying and naturally it's a nice feeling after those blank days in Miami, but it's not home nor will it ever be.

I hope you are writing and that you will write to me and send some loot if you are straight. One can live on a dollar a day here but rent is high. I'm making ten a week one way or another.

There's a dog all wet in the sun and some kid floats below me on a inner tube.

Su amigo - .

In October he wrote from Key West:

I've been to Cuba four times in the last 6 weeks. Every trip was like some dream from day or night. But there's too much action there in Habana to think or write very much. I've finished several poems but hesitate to show them to you, not knowing how I feel about them myself. I've sent them off to Hudson, Big Table, and Contact. Who is the editor of Contact.

Did you see the new Lowell poem in Evergreen. After reading it, I'm fooling with the idea of breaking the meter, but I'm not exactly sure I have the nerve.

I'd like to see anything you've done.

I'll probably be at this address through the winter. It's a gray and somewhat windy, quiet town, where one can work . . . One remembers old reactions, on the edge here of a continent and chimerical space.

Keep writing, write to me, and hear the new Thelonius records if you get the chance.

Love,

Once he wrote, "I've been working on poems all day and actually haven't many words left in my head."

During one year in the fifties he spent time at the government drug treatment facility in Lexington, Kentucky. The drug he was

addicted to was probably heroin. Presumably he kicked the habit for the time being.

In the late fifties, after Don seemed to be settled or semi-settled at the University of Iowa, Bob began to speak of coming to work on a master's. He'd published poems in *Poetry*, *The Western Review*, and *The East Village Other* and won a prize in a Miami competition; he was entitled to a fellowship. He arrived in Iowa City in September 1961.

Our son had been born the month before, and we were not entertaining or going out much in the evenings; it was not like the old days in Miami or Greenwich Village. Bob made friends rather easily, and things seemed to be going well enough for him; then, after a few weeks, he told some friends – our friends, his new friends – that he was leaving, “but don't tell Don.” They told Don at once, but he thought there was little he could do; perhaps he'd already had doubts. Bob departed. He had drawn some of his fellowship stipend, and the director of the writing program was understandably angry and wanted to recoup the loss from Bob's family. Don assured him that it would be trying to get blood from a turnip. (This metaphor comes easily because the family dealt with fresh vegetables in the wholesale grocery business.)

With the fellowship stipend, Bob went down to Kansas City. There, in a tavern, he asked around for directions to the home of “the late Charlie Parker,” as his mother put it later. Some people volunteered to guide him there. Instead, they robbed and beat him badly; he lost an eye. In the hospital he was asked his occupation, and he replied, “Lyric poet.” This was reported in a newspaper story.

There were, off and on, wires for money or phone calls. Usually, when it was possible, Don sent the money; he was loyal to old friends, and he and Bob shared a dedication to poetry; he had learned from Bob. Once in the late forties there had been a desperate wire from Bob, and Don had sent him seven dollars; he was in graduate school, and that was what we thought we could spare. At the end of the month we found that this close calculation had been correct.

For several years after the Iowa fiasco, we heard from Bob less

often. But after we moved to Syracuse in the late sixties, there was a phone call one afternoon: Bob was at the airport, come for a visit.

He was a wreck. Always thin and rather frail-looking – he'd had rickets as a child, and there was the Kansas City beating, as well as years of haphazard living – he now had a caved-in chest; he was half zombie, half raving lunatic. Often he seemed scarcely aware of where he was; I remember him, alone for a moment in the living room, hunched over, crooning "Galveston" to himself. He had moments of rage, railing at Don, perhaps for "selling out." Don invited some poetry students over to meet Bob, but the distraction was not much help; their respect for Don irked Bob. Our son, six at the time, murmured to his little friend out in the hall, "Want to see a weirdo?" Poor Bob. It was with relief that Don drove him to the airport the next day and waved good-bye as Bob walked to the plane.

A couple of days later there was a call from the local police. Bob had been arrested and was in the hospital. He'd turned away from boarding the plane and gone looking for drink; I don't know whether he was arrested for causing a disturbance or simply for drunkenness. Don went to the hospital and found Bob clean and sober, and happy to be clean and sober. "I was filthy," he said. He was almost the Bob of twenty years earlier. In another few days, he walked toward the plane again and waved good-bye. This time Don waited till take-off.

He made a joke of the visit, and in the following months sometimes teased us by saying, when he phoned, "I'm at the airport!" If we laughed, the laughs were forced and hollow. There were the usual calls for money, and we got an unlisted phone number.

He stayed in New York. He became a Village character – a gaunt man who looked far older than his years, wearing a black eye patch, talking of his time in Cuba with Fidel and his friendship with important jazz musicians. He was a master of the almost credible story – that he had been sent to Cuba to cover the revolution for the *Christian Science Monitor*; that he'd briefly had a job writing speeches for Kennedy, that he'd taken LSD with Timothy Leary and with Aldous Huxley. Possibly he'd begun to believe some of this himself.

Sometimes he rented a room, sometimes he crashed with friends,

sometimes he was homeless. Again, there was a sojourn at Lexington, the federal drug-treatment facility. Eventually he was on welfare. At the same time, he was able to take his new friends to a party thrown by the heiress Peggy Hitchcock, where they all zonked out on LSD.

Most important among his new friends were Fred Good, an artist who was running a project he'd founded called the University of the Streets, under the auspices of the Real Great Society, a nonprofit organization he'd set up, and Emilio Murillo, a Puerto Rican photographer. Emilio was a member of the Black Panther Party, and Bob had always been drawn to anything that smacked of revolution.

Fred and Emilio read and appreciated Bob's work. (Emilio, introducing Bob to Fred, said, "This is the second greatest living poet.") They tried to get the work published. It was read at Viking in 1971 but rejected. (Malcolm Cowley said, "I admired and envied his wealth of experience, but wished he would make that experience available to a wider circle of readers than those composed of his intimate friends.") Fred and Emilio looked out for Bob. "I respected him because he had been true to his ideal," Fred wrote later. Emilio once took him all the way to Key West (a trying trip, since they had to stop often for Bob to buy codeine cough syrup or paregoric). In Key West, he was in his element; people there remembered him, understandably. He lived there for several months with Emilio and his wife and baby, living on a shoestring; it was the occasion of a wire to Don asking for money.

Back in New York, Bob was in and out of the hospital often in his last years. Fred visited him in St. Vincent's Hospital at least half a dozen times. When Bob was released he would immediately buy a bottle of codeine cough syrup and swig it all down at once. In the late spring of 1972 he told Fred good-bye; he was off to Cartagena. However, the trip fell through, as many had, and they met at a bar a few days later. It was another few days after that that Fred received a call from St. Vincent's; Bob had been found dead in an alley in the Bowery.

In a poem, Don imagined the scene — snow, brutalizing boots — but the month was May, and there was no evidence of mugging; it required no outside help to bring Bob down. He was forty-seven.

Several weeks later, at midnight under a full moon, Fred Good cast his ashes into the East River.

Fred went on trying to get Bob's work published, but without success. Emilio, in touch again after several years, began work on a film about Bob as a school project at Columbia. In 2007, Fred revived a small press in New York, and planned to publish Bob's poems. Nothing has yet come of this.

I never felt that Bob was quite my friend. (He'd complained to his mother that I was around too much when he hoped to see Don alone; his mother explained that this was what happened after people married and unwisely mentioned it to Don's mother, who unwisely told me.) He got accustomed to my presence, however, and was always perfectly civil. Perhaps I feel guilty for once refusing to accept a collect call in the Syracuse days. But I give Bob credit. He kept the faith, through no money and decaying teeth and his various addictions.

Don wrote three poems about Bob: "In Memory of the Unknown Poet, Robert Boardman Vaughn," "Portrait with One Eye," and "Hell." Bob, Weldon Kees, and Henri Coulette are the subject of his essay "Oblivion: Variations on a Theme."

One of Bob's poems begins, "I hope I shan't be made into a fable." If his life is not a fable, it's at least a familiar story – talent, romantic notions about experience, and booze and drugs. There was the bad luck: his family's poverty, the rickets, the Kansas City beating and its permanent damage. Through and beyond it all, though, "he sought the immortal word," as the poem "Hell" says.

For twenty years, off and on, Don worked on another poem dedicated to Bob's memory, "The White Rose," full of details of the Greenwich Village life of the forties. The last line goes, "There is a light that reaches us only after a long time." I take that to be the light of understanding. The poem remained unfinished, like Bob's life.