

# CHANGE

*An occasional magazine dedicated to the memory of Richard Brautigan*

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Issue No. 2—Fall 2006

### Inside *CHANGE*

The second issue of *CHANGE* is filled with international contributions, proving that Brautigan's appeal circles the globe. Interviews, essays, poetry, and a short story—it's all here. Enjoy!  
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## Inside *CHANGE*



This second issue of *CHANGE* reflects on Brautigan and his writing from an international perspective.

For example, in an interview with Walter Franceschi of Italy, French writer, editor, translator, and critic Marc Chénetier talks about his work to translate Brautigan's last novel, *An Unfortunate Woman*, into French several years before it was first published in English.

Brian T. W. Way, a Canadian scholar, examines other aspects of the same novel in his essay "Brautigan's *An Unfortunate Woman*: Of the Journey and Grace."

Jeff Foster, from Connecticut, contributes an essay, "Richard Brautigan's *Utopia of Detachment*" that provides some very interesting insights into Brautigan's characteristically detached, uninvolved, even unemotional narrator using insights from both *An Unfortunate Woman* and *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away*.

Foster also contributes some fine poetry inspired by his reading of Brautigan, as does Christopher Turner of Liverpool, and Martin Crane. James Abercrombie of California contributes a memoir called "The Short Story."

Denis Robillard of Canada is the featured poet. His poetry is inspired by Marcia Pacaud, another Canadian and Brautigan's girlfriend. She appeared on the front cover of *The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster*.

So, this second issue of *CHANGE* is quite interesting in scope and content.

Future issues of *CHANGE* could feature your contributions. Contact me with your ideas and suggestions. Let us work together to create a literary magazine of which Brautigan would be proud.

— John F. Barber

[Contact me with ideas for CHANGE](#)

# Interview with Marc Chénétier

by Walter Franceschi

President of European Association for American Studies and author of the book *Richard Brautigan* (London: Methuen, 1983), French writer, editor, and critic Marc Chénétier also translated several of Brautigan's books, including *An Unfortunate Woman*, first published in France in 1996. In this interview with Walter Franceschi, Chénétier talks about Brautigan and his work.

## What problems did you encounter translating Brautigan's novels for French-speaking readers?

I translated *Dreaming of Babylon, So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away* and did a re-translation of *Trout Fishing, In Watermelon Sugar* and *A Confederate General*, later on, in one volume that was supposed to be the first of an entire re-translation of his works, being much dissatisfied with the existing translations. I also retranslated *The Tokyo-Montana Express*, but that never came out. My translation of *An Unfortunate Woman* into French came out before the original version was published in the United States. Roughly at the same time, I wrote my little Methuen book on Brautigan. This was translated into French, with an additional chapter on Brautigan and Vian (after an article I had published in the *Stanford French Review*), but both are out of print. Translating Richard presented difficulties commensurate with the particular economy of his writing. The temptation to overdo it had been succumbed to before. Being made out of very tiny things, his work does not bear overtranslation because it easily collapses if one is missing a mere match-stick in the construction of each sentence. The acceptable "loss" one has to face and accept when translating more syntactically and lexically complex prose is one that would destroy his sentences. So, keeping every tiny element and making sure nothing is overblown make for a narrow path to follow. A very delicate balance must be respected if the whole effect is not to be jeopardized.

## Do you have a favorite Brautigan book?

I still like *Trout Fishing in America* the best, even though *The Tokyo-Montana Express* and *An Unfortunate Woman* come close. These books is where, to my mind, his literary talents show best. The rest is also dear to me, however, for different reasons.

## Why did you choose to write about Brautigan?

It was the imagery in Brautigan's work that struck me as poetically interesting, that and the way in which it encapsulated and generated the metafictional reflex in the books. His closeness to Boris Vian also interested me. I was tired of the fan-club reactions to the "hippie" image and chummy critical

send-ups and wanted to place him as an important writer for literary reasons, doing away with the sentimental, period reactions. Brautigan was much read in France, shortly after he rose to fame in the United States, but for obviously dissimilar reasons.

## You were friends with Brautigan in his last years. His books were not selling. He had trouble finding a publisher. How was he as a friend?

Difficult. His drinking problem was massive and brought out his violent sides. He would call me in the middle of the night and talk for hours—literally.

## The *Greek Anthologies* and Euripides were in your conversations with Brautigan. Was his knowledge of these works apparent? And, did you ever talk about more daily-life topics?

Richard was much better read than has been surmised. But most of our conversations had to do with other things, daily things, the contents of garbage cans in the Jardins du Luxembourg for example. Movies also, and childhood memories.

## Have you a memorable story regarding Brautigan?

I organized, at his request, a dinner with French movie-maker Jean-Jacques Beneix (author of *Diva*, which Richard greatly admired), who was kind enough to share dinner at my home with Richard and a few other friends. The evening turned out to be catastrophic, even though most interesting, as Richard, having, as usual, drunk too much, became abusive to everyone. He had to be literally carried back to his hotel by my hosts. Many other such memories are in my introduction to the three-novel volume in French I mentioned earlier.

## How do you view Brautigan, as an American author, all these years after his death?

I think he is not a mere "period piece," but a writer whose work had a profound impact on American literary creation in the 1960s and 1970s. He has also influenced writers elsewhere (Philippe Djian in France, in particular). I still teach his work and re-read everything with great enthusiasm.

# Poetry by Robillard

The Marcia Pacaud Poems, and others

*by Dennis Robillard*

## A Meditation on A Photograph

I  
 Frozen in a haze of watermelon syrup  
 you sit arms crossed, feet bare  
 confronting the Shea lensman with the  
 enigma of your smile  
 A half hearted smile it would appear  
 whose incompleteness  
 is a blueprint made of broken flowers  
 attached to a rusty bicycle peddled  
 too far back in time.  
 Perhaps the blueprints to that smile  
 lie somewhere in the blown up  
 California landscape we see cresting  
 over your young shoulders.

II  
 Wristwatch coal mine  
 where did your smile go?  
 Shaftspeak rubble blur  
 where did your mind drift?

III  
 The world is always only seven digits away from ever knowing someone,  
 a corny slogan old Brautigian used to say back on the farm,  
 Well how about it Marcia?  
 When will you rise from the ashes of the Photo Phoenixed Rubble Co.  
 and show the world your true numbers once again?

IV  
 This famous book of yours is a mirrorbook  
 where I always see the name ROBILLARD  
 in bright red neon lights  
 always concealing, always revealing  
 the last message  
 of running with the cryptic postscript of  
 the Salt Creek Coyotes.

V

I couldn't wait for you to write anymore.  
 December has already reared its white fleeced head.  
 It was such a December when all the maps of your body  
 were delicately burned.  
 Like a nightmare the 60's left us.  
 From now on there will be no more sawmill operas  
 no more mackerel skies  
 no melancholy melon sugar baby  
 sapping up the technicolor drainpipes  
 no trout colored winds blowing through  
 these veins waiting for release.  
 All the Cheeseman-Robillard  
 Vistas I could muster  
 have all gone brittle and monochromatic since you left..

VI

"It has been raining here now for two days  
 and through the trees, the heart stops beating.  
 Wasn't it always like this for you Richard?  
 At all the corners of Lafayette and Lafayette  
 all the dreams came to a sudden screeching halt?  
 Time gets drenched over like too much  
 old fashioned maple syrup encoded in Dali talk  
 Now there is nothing left to say or do.  
 The nubile nudes await their fate in cold dark rooms  
 and confront the dueling tactics of clocks  
 the wrist-watches watch quietly on the sidelines.  
 Things are getting itchy back in Montana.

### Postscript for Marcia Pacaud

The mailbox has been silent  
 for 4 months now Marcia.  
 All the money trees are dead  
 and lie prostrate and bankrupt along  
 the window sill.  
 The nigh ploughman comes early  
 to wipe away the darkness now  
 and mourning doves, morning  
 harbingers,  
 survey the landscape  
 you chose to live without.

Over here, the media may begin to call  
 you  
 Queen of the holdouts  
 an enigma lost in time

Oh Marcia, what blackbird has clipped  
 your wings  
 What painted stork has eaten your  
 tongue  
 and buried it in the mud of  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 Has the lantern of \_\_\_\_\_  
 really been extinguished?  
 You're a long way from there -----to  
 here  
 Oh brittle one when will the Sacred  
 Scrolls  
 of Frisco be un-raveled?

## Pine Creek Clocks

by Denis Robillard

Pine Creek, 1976.

In a far off place  
I hear dueling clocks  
in a room on a ranch  
The burdens of the day  
lie deep and heavy  
inside the entrails  
of these clocks.  
Breathing, expanding,  
exhorting themselves in  
slingshot time.  
Above the scene  
a gun totting Brautigan is  
taking pot shots  
at these dueling clocks,

His poem bullets splitting their target  
like a rotten log,  
his mind dangling metaphors  
splitting the amnesiac veil  
of Xanadu's waters  
He,s always looking  
to find another blackberry motorboat,  
or watermelon waterfall trapped underneath  
shooting out springs and shards of time  
making a harsh  
contrapuntal ballet  
fall forward  
spring back

even these delicate innards-  
with hair-line fractures  
do not betray  
their own history

## AND The Lions of Jealousy Roared

by Denis Robillard

And my jealousy was like a Hemingway lion  
tearing into flesh  
making a four piece dinner out of limbs.  
It was like KFC for savvy lions  
who were hell bent on jealousy  
inside their day book planner.

Why only the limbs of jealousy?

Because the head and other appendages  
 were left as an after dinner treat.  
 Something this savvy lion could sit down with,  
 for example, a nice aperitif  
 and enjoy its bouquet of fresh flesh,  
 one sinewed fragrance at a time.

That's how far down the lion of jealousy  
 had roared upon my psyche.  
 It was surprising feeling  
 this intense drive from the camp to the hotel  
 where I was about to meet Youki  
 whom I had not seen for over 2 months.  
 It was a natural famine.  
 Our eyes had not met.

She was raw weather  
 and I was ready to eat her whole.

Our voices had not criss-crossed the wires of telephone, since pioneer days.  
 And it seemed as if our flesh,  
 our souls had gone from cubs  
 to full-fledged bear-hood  
 through this wilderness of shadows.  
 It was that long and this is where we were now.

Me in my car hump humping over hills bitten by the insane yellow fanged beast of jealousy.

Bleeding perfuse jealous thoughts  
 all over the passenger seat  
 speeding mad havoc wise  
 towards the Great Falls Montana hotel room where I thought you would be.

When I arrived, the cupboard was bare.  
 Room #12 was as silent as a coat hanger  
 in a one horse town morgue.  
 I walked up to the reception area and retrieved my key to get into the unit.  
 I was hoping she would be there but Youki wasn't.  
 Shards of aloneness were reflected in the mirrored silence  
 as I bled into the muffled pillow all my red raw tears.

# Brautigan's Unfortunate Woman

## of the journey and grace

by Brian T. W. Way

The University of Western Ontario

excerpt from: *Of fiction, film and fish: Richard Brautigan's metafictional romance* (in progress)

Kathryn Hume says of Brautigan's writing, "It looks simple. Simplicity rarely is though" (89). *An Unfortunate Woman* is a book that looks simple, a text written in a personal diary format routinely recounting day-to-day experiences. It is a novel which Richard Brautigan could not get published; by most accounts a dispute about its worthiness was the root cause of Brautigan's split with his long-time literary agent, Helen Brann. (There may have been another book in the mix in this final dispute as well; the content of the manuscript that Brann rejected reportedly had a lot to do with Brautigan's divorce from his second wife, Akiko, which *An Unfortunate Woman* in its published form does not. There is some evidence that Brautigan may have been working on another prose manuscript during this time; Greg Keeler mentions that he had started a novel entitled *American Hotels* and suggests that this manuscript scribbled on yellow legal pads is still "lying under wraps somewhere" (92).) While the posthumously published *An Unfortunate Woman* does not seem to be Brautigan's best work in spite of the praise given it by the likes of Tom McGuane and Jim Harrison on the book's jacket, it is nevertheless an interesting book and most certainly more than "mainly a curiosity" (5) as H. J. Kirchoff claims or without "any real insight" (12) as Andrew Gard adds in dismissive reviews. At the very least, although Brautigan's timing may seem hesitant or somewhat off, *An Unfortunate Woman* continues to chart out the course that Brautigan's fiction of the 1980s had set; at most, it takes his hybrid form one step further and, in the process, casts some reflective light upon the redemption which *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away* seemed, temporarily, to have achieved.

The book begins with a personal preface by Brautigan about the shock caused by the death of a long-time female friend (Nikki Arai) from cancer and then contains a series of diary-like entries, date by date from January 30 until June 28, 1982. As Brautigan's works of the 1970s examined various genres of writing, so here, ostensibly, he turns to explore one more genre, the diary, but the book is more than just another genre experiment and the diary that he creates is certainly a curious one. The entries are progressively dated from January 30 in a present time but most deal with past events. If the word "diary" means a daily allowance or daily record then this is a daily record but, as such, it is a daily record of the writer's past, of his memory. As he claims, "one of the doomed purposes of this book is an attempt to keep the past and the present functioning simultaneously" (64). And that becomes a challenging task as he admits: "Yes, it is difficult to keep the past and the present going on at the same time because they cannot be trusted to act out their proper roles. They suddenly can turn on you and operate diametrically opposed to your understanding and the needs of reality" (66).

A further complication informs this work, as well. The unnamed writer of this fiction has the initials "R. B." and event after event, from the itinerary of trips taken to Japan and Chicago and Toronto and Alaska to a teaching sabbatical at Montana State to outrage and anger at his daughter's marriage and subsequent estrangement from her to reflection on his birth date, exactly coincide with the details of Richard Brautigan's own life:

With this auspicious beginning, I'll continue describing one person's journey, a sort of free fall calendar map, that starts out what seems like years ago, but has actually been just a few months in physical time. (2)

The phrase "free fall" is an ominous oxymoron, of course, implying an opening up of possibilities on the journey but hinting also of an imminent crash (foreboding images of death and cemeteries saturate this book). In speaking about one interesting person he has met who could have become a potentially "memorable character" in "a normal book, unfortunately not this one" (46), "R.B." comments: "What a selfish writer I am, using him only as a mirror to reflect my own ego, and no one to play the part and no movie" (47). From the outset, this is not to be "a normal book." As R. D. Pohl suggests, it is a novel that "seems to advance by digression and misdirection" (7) and as Simon Hall says: "It rubbishes the notion that narrative should be streamlined and proceed with a minimum of digressive hindrance towards some sort of conclusion. It is heavy with introspective reflection..." (22). Greg Keeler notes that an early working title for the book was "Investigating Moods" (148). In effect the voice which narrates—investigates might be the better word—the events of *An Unfortunate Woman* is fundamentally "introspective," not just "semiautobiographical" as the anonymous reviewer in *Publisher's Weekly* suggests; in effect, it is the voice of Richard Brautigan—he is his own narrator, he is his own fiction. In briefly considering *An Unfortunate Woman* in "Brautigan's Psychomachia," Kathryn Hume suggests that "Brautigan's observations are as sharp as always, but he finds no actions that can block awareness or create a distance between himself and the temptation of nothingness" (88-9). The point may be that he does not want to. Ostensibly, he is now involved in a complex hybrid form of writing in which the writer consciously writes himself and this comes with its own acknowledged challenges:

The process of being this book only accentuates my day-to-day helplessness. Perhaps the task I have chosen with this book was doomed from the very beginning. I should have begun with the word "delusion." Anyway, I'm not giving up. (59)

As the narrative structure of *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away* toyed with the quasi-autobiographical relationship between the author and the narrator and the blond boy, here such barriers are intentionally (perhaps courageously) eliminated. In *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away*, the fiction is fiction—although there is a sketchy biographical rumour that Brautigan as a boy may have been involved in a shooting accident, it was a non-fatal event. Richard Brautigan as a child did not shoot and kill a best friend; in *An Unfortunate Woman* Brautigan's actual life, at least over a limited period of time, unfolds as a kind of raw reality. No distinction is attempted between what is real and what is fiction. *An Unfortunate Woman* as "free fall calendar map," a kind of labyrinthine recording of time and place, emerges then as autobiographical fiction, or fictional autobiography, in the process suggesting, perhaps, the true fictive nature of all such texts, of all writing. The book is not subtitled "a novel," as *Trout Fishing in America* was, but "A Journey." And in so many ways this is the logical extension of the disappearance of the boy in *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away*; what we now have is the disappearance of the narrator, himself. It is the ultimate baring or stripping away of the fictive process, metafiction pushed to the max. Appropriately, near the end, even the authorial voice here often seems tentative, wavering, unsure of its own ontological role:

At this point you know more about what has gone on now than I do. You have read the book. I have not. I of course remember things in it, but I am at a great disadvantage right now. I am literally in the palm of your hand as I finish. ...

Because my plan was to write a book following like a calendar map the goings-on of my life. I can't return to the beginning and what followed after that. I wish I could. It would make things a lot easier. I know there are so many loose ends, unfinished possibilities, beginning endings. ...

I sense this book to be an unfinished labyrinth of half-asked questions fastened to partial answers. (107).

As a journey that is a self-admitted "free fall calendar map," the book takes on the quality of a labyrinth. At several moments, the speaker reminds us that he will "get back" to some detail or event that he has mentioned. The full accounting of most events in *An Unfortunate Woman* is never told in an ordered or unitary way but offered to the reader as fragments scattered achronologically through various places in the text. The story of the Japanese cemetery in Maui, for instance, is told in fragments across several pages (23, 27, 33, 34-38) as is the recollection of the fake totems in Ketchikan (12, 21, 46, 47), the plan for writing the book (51, 57, 83, 85, 86, 92, 104), the death of the hanged woman (3,



43, 44, 51, 52, 57, 58, 74, 75, 78, 108), and a host of other events. This is the route of a calendar map and, among other things for Brautigan, it represents the scattered nature of reality and of the way memory contains that reality. And, most important of all, of the challenge for a writer trying to record or respond to the world—as with the systems for communication in *The Tokyo-Montana Express*, failure always seems imminent, meaning always seems in doubt. This is the dark serendipity of occurrence.

On numerous occasions in *An Unfortunate Woman* phrases such as "no reason" or "no sense" are repeated. From the beginning, there is "no apparent reason" (1) for the lone brown shoe to be lying in the Honolulu intersection, no purpose in having a photograph taken with a chicken in Hawaii, no reason for the building to be burning in San Francisco on a Sunday morning, no cause given for the creation of fake totem poles in Ketchikan or for the deterioration of the Japanese cemetery in Maui. Its lights have been shut off because the caretakers have "decided that there is no reason for the cemetery to be lit at night" (33). In preparing for a newspaper interview in Ketchikan, R.B. emphatically exclaims "I had to make sense" (49) and then, self-defeatingly it would seem, talks about some crows and a hot dog bun. As one who has allowed temporal disorder to reign in his book, R.B. is tried in an imaginary courtroom for his misuse of time and neglect of writing dates: "I am considered a human monster by a lot of people who are devoted to and depend on time" (54). About the only timepiece in *An Unfortunate Woman* is an insomnia-inducing cuckoo clock (63). R.B. tries to "create a system to try and sort out" the events of his life by organizing his thoughts by numbers but a "contemporary interruption" and a two month gap doom his attempt. Reminiscent of Cameron, the gunfighter in *The Hawkline Monster*, R.B. initially resorts to counting the number of words in his journal because, as he says, "I wanted to have a feeling of continuity, that I was actually doing something, though I don't know exactly why counting words on a piece of paper served that purpose because I was actually doing something" (77). He gives up this futile activity and, at one moment, he simply realizes and admits "that sometimes we have no control over our lives" (51). And along this thematic line of thinking in the novel, darker concerns emerge—there is also no reason for the random violence of the world, for rape, for deaths by cancer or demise by suicide. There is no reason for the events or dates of one's existence or for the way the labyrinth of the speaker's mind operates. The structure of this fiction emerges as an attempt to acknowledge, to represent, these conditions. As R. B. says:

I've just turned 47 and I can't go back into the past and realign my priorities in such a way as to create another personality out of them. I'm just going to have to make do with the almost five decades sum of me. (22)

As the book develops, the fiction itself disintegrates at times and the writer claims not to know where it has gone (51, 57, 59, 64, 70)—the last of these being the most dramatic when the writing loses over two months of its life (this gap emphasized by listing a long paragraph of lost dates, that list reprinted on the book's back cover). As R.B. comments: "It becomes more and more apparent as I proceed with this journey that life cannot be controlled and perhaps not even envisioned and that certainly design and portent are out of the question" (59). Arguably, in keeping with a theme consistent through most of Brautigan's writing, here is a writer encountering the fiction of writing fiction in a text that, accordingly, enacts its own attempt to avoid fossilization, to avoid the death on a page that fictionalization produces, to achieve a kind of flexibility and renewal, even resistance or denial, as each new page is turned, as each new word appears. In observing that deteriorated cemetery in Hawaii, R. B. comments: "The pile of forgotten tombstones made no sense at all to me. I guess it is a part of everything else, including this" (37). The text that is being written, like the pile of tombstones, may make no sense; conversely, of course, and ironically, it is the only text that can be created in a world and for a life that makes "no sense." Gaps and interruptions and fragments and randomness and the absence of meaning are integral to the fiction as they are, in Brautigan's vision, integral to living. Literally, the author, one with his text, and the reader are along for the "journey."

As sense seems rarely to be found in the things of the world, neither is perfection:

But, also, we must not forget that this is the route of a calendar map following one man's existence during a few months' period in time, and I think that it would probably be unfair to ask for perfection if there is such a thing. Probably the closest things to perfection are the huge absolutely empty holes that astronomers have recently discovered in space.

If there's nothing there, how can anything go wrong? (15)

The proposition is intriguing. In an artistic sense, how can the diary of a man who sees his life and universe with "nothing there" in any way be flawed? How can the writing be anything but what it is, "an unfinished labyrinth of half-asked questions fastened to partial answers" (107)? The structure of the book then accordingly fluctuates wildly from one recollection to another: the book begins with its preface about the female friend who has succumbed to cancer, then moves to an image of a lone shoe in a Honolulu intersection, then mentions in order a wide ranging series of topics unrelated except that they enter one after another into the speaker's memory: a rented house in Berkeley where an "unfortunate woman" has hanged herself, the writer's birthday, a trip to Toronto, the taking of a photograph with a chicken in Hawaii, a bus ride and burning building in San Francisco, a visit to see fake totem poles in Ketchikan, an imagined love affair in a grocery store, a Japanese cemetery, a vacation in Mendocino during which "R.B." is ill, back to the Japanese cemetery, a trip to Buffalo, the excursion to Toronto again, San Francisco and the hanged woman and two telephone calls, back to Ketchikan, back to the rented house in Berkeley, and so on, and so on. The book, as a calendar map, resembles a labyrinth, but a kind of labyrinth which never ends, with no designer and no real entrances or exits or centres, no meanings. If there is a monster, it is the labyrinth itself. R.B.'s comment about the random events of his life most certainly applies to the fiction written: "I guess this is just the way it happens if you have lost control of days, weeks, months, and years" (21). As it confesses, the text is a collection of "loose ends, unfinished possibilities, beginning endings" and simply seems to be what it is, the notation of those curious and random ideas and events that crossed through Richard Brautigan's experience in the fall of 1981 until he had filled the 160 page journal during the first six months of 1982. As *Trout Fishing in America* was completely revised seventeen times over a period of six years, one senses that *An Unfortunate Woman* was never revised. It exists essentially as it was written, the raw material of Brautigan's often raw encounters with the world in which he lived during that time, a mirror reflection of that world as seen through his own troubled condition.

Brautigan has been quoted as saying: "Nobody changes, I don't believe in change" (Manso 65) and as seeing "the past [as] a marble replica of breathing life" (Abbott 132). From beginning to end, his writing is a confrontation with the moment, a delicate encounter with the ineffable now, and, conversely, a rejection of all that would freeze perception or imagination, through ritual or structure or tombstone or word, as a substitute for existence. *An Unfortunate Woman* moves as close perhaps as writing can to the moment and to the real. It is a record by a living hand—including good days, bad days, gaps, banalities, absurdities, insightful observations, humour—of the living experience of the writer by the writer. Always he is on the immediate edge encountering his life's and his writing's "loose ends, unfinished possibilities, beginning endings" and never looking back, never reading back, never re-writing. It is what this book is, or at least tries to be (it might be likened to a extreme version of that spontaneous confessional style promoted by Kerouac and several of the Beats).

In spite of its idiosyncratic nature, perhaps because of it, *An Unfortunate Woman* is a book clothed in self-referentiality, inordinately conscious of the act of its own writing. Often R.B. talks directly to the reader for, as he says: "When people are talking directly to you, it takes an added and more uncomfortable effort to ignore them" (4). He discusses his plans in the book for the writing of the book:

Well, what happened is that sometimes we have no control over our lives. My plan was to stay at a hotel in the Japanese section and finish this book and then go to Chicago, come back to San Francisco to take care of things, and then on to Denver, spend a few days in Boulder, Colorado, and afterwards fly to Montana to spend the spring. (51)

Another time he talks of sitting in a San Francisco coffee shop, "writing and still determined, well, anyway, sort of, to roughly describe what happened during the February days when I interrupted this book by not writing and moved myself back to the house in Berkeley where the woman hanged herself" (57). At another point R.B. comments on "this notebook that I am writing in" (75) and counts the words that he writes on each page, calling it a "minor numerical theme" (77). He constructs a numbered list and tries to "create a system to try to sort out, and I might add in no particular order or priority other than the random selection of memory operation on its own retrieval system, some of the things that were or happened during my week and a half in the Midwest" (61). R.B. auto-analyses the content and

structure of his writing:

I'm actually writing something quite serious, but I'm doing it in a roundabout way, including varieties of time and human experience, which even tragedy cannot escape from.

To put it bluntly: Life goes on. (75)

In talking of his lover and his life, at one point, he is also talking of his fiction: "...how random and accidental this journey together is, almost like flipping a coin" (82). Turning his arm and turning the page of the journal in which he writes are the same thing (103)—he is his fiction. He notes that a man with some pastries did "cause me to have to dramatically alter a paragraph" (69), reflects on a gap in his writing when "a passage of over a hundred days between the words" (70) occurs, and concludes that "this book I'm writing will be over before anything is proved one way or another" (83).

Much of the book unveils snippets of an ongoing discussion between the writer and an assumed reader, or between the writer and himself. R.B. will provide textual road signs for the reader as when he remarks: "Oh, yes, I forgot to mention there's been a change in the calendar map" (15) or "Before I wrote that last paragraph, I had planned to mention that a Japanese man at another table is eating a doughnut..." (66) or "Now I'll get back to the rest of this book, whose main theme is an unfortunate woman" (74) or "Don't worry: I'll get back to it" (77) or "I'll tell you what: I'll flip a coin to see what comes up next. ... I'll be back in a minute and flip a coin: heads chores; tails love life" (79) or "Oh, yes, we're back on the same porch with no electrical storm in sight and the sun and the birds shining away in the sky..." (86). Toward the end, he talks of "using up the few remaining pages in this notebook" (106) counting down the number of lines and words left (109-110). On several occasions he tells the reader that he is "Back again" (98) or "I'm back" (109) or will be "Back in a moment ..." (91) and emphasizes the physicality of the text when he reminds the reader that he has just "returned to this place we have been meeting sporadically since January 30 of this year" (99). The text asks questions of the reader: "Have I mentioned that there is a creek nearby..." (79) or "Where was I before I noticed the spider setting up house-keeping on me? (104) and makes assumptions about questions the reader might have: "There has probably been a question that you have wanted to ask almost from the beginning of this little revelation of mine" (85). And a dramatic script concerning the incident of the broken leg is included with Author and Reader as the *dramatis personae* (74) and a question and answer session is created interrogating R.B.'s practices of disrobing (86).

The book often seems aware, perhaps fearful, of its own limitations, its potential failure as a text. As the book moves towards its conclusions, present events and interruptions increasingly seem to disrupt the account of past recollections and the writing becomes even more fragmented, struggling to a laboured conclusion, almost accounting for each line that is filled, and acutely aware of all that has not been accomplished. R.B. comments:

What about all the things that are not here and how little did I do with what is here?

So many inconclusive fragments, sophomoric humor, cheap tricks, detailless details.

Why did I waste so much of these 160 pages in a notebook costing me \$2.50 bought in a Japanese bookstore on my birthday? See, I'm doing it again. Perhaps I'm a helpless case and should accept my fate. With so little space left, I'm writing about how much this goddamn notebook cost. ...

I'm going to get up and walk around this Montana landscape for a little bit. A terrible sadness is coming over me. I'll be back in a while to make this book gone. (109)

In the final journal entry of his "free fall calendar map" R.B. speaks with a former writing student on the telephone. He gives her the following advice:

... I told her that she was writing too far away from her own experience and that in this stage in her writing, she should stay a little closer to the things that she knows until she has the technical tools to make a bridge, a longer bridge, away from her own life.

In other words, I told her to write about the things she knows about.

There would be plenty of time to write about what she doesn't know about. (107)

*An Unfortunate Woman* is a book written about the things he knows, about the day-to-day observations and emotions

and events of R.B. during a six month period of his life in a certain place and a certain time, or as he puts it, it contains "all the tumbled machinations that are a man's mind and his experience" (108). In this sense of reality, it is the only book that can be written. As R.B. declares about his writing: "I will finish as I started toward no other end than a human being living and what can happen to him over a given period of time and what if anything, it means" (107).

In keeping with his advice to his student writer, as his diary closes, R.B. comments: "So I now find myself bringing to an end this book, which is basically about all I know about, so painfully evident" (107). He then lists a series of unanswered questions and characterizes the book as the home in which he has lived since the day of his 47<sup>th</sup> birthday. The book resembles the life of its author and he regrets its haphazardness, its incompleteness as he or anyone else, one supposes, might have regrets about the unfolding of one's life:

I am haunted, almost obsessed, by all the things that I have left out of here, that needed at least equal time, who is to champion their cause as with each stroke of my pen I consume this space, precious perhaps only to me, but precious, anyway. (108)

Through its immediacies and self-conscious sensibilities, *An Unfortunate Woman* often reflects upon its own failure as a text to capture or express that which it is trying to do. It is a book filled with foreboding images—the death by cancer, the suicide of the unfortunate woman, ruined cemeteries, forgotten and underdeveloped passages, missed days, unfulfilled opportunities, indolence and idle time, the abuse of alcohol, and a desperate need to fill the pages of a journal, the days of one's life, for the mere purpose (it often seems) of filling those pages, of completing that life. The references to Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* (vii, 75, 110) remind one of the sacrificial and epic waste inherent in life across all ages—Brautigan's book was first published in France with the title *Cahier d'un Retour de Troie*—although we are also reminded that, whether Iphigenia or Brautigan or ourselves, it is life and, no matter how treacherously betrayed, no matter how fulfilled or unfulfilled, it is all that there is, and it is all that can be captured and immortalized in art. In art and in life, it would appear, the trick is to learn the trick.

Writing is not an easy thing, R.B. seems to be telling us, as life is rarely an easy thing. Not much may really make sense. The elusive nature of writing, exploring, capturing, explaining, expressing one's place and time is a pervasive theme of *An Unfortunate Woman*—"one of the doomed purposes of this book is an attempt to keep the past and present functioning simultaneously" (64). To write, at most, is to write oneself, one's personal history and as R.B. has reminded us "it is difficult to keep the past and the present going on at the same time because they cannot be trusted to act out their proper roles" (66). One's sense of reality can be "fooled" (69). Which is to say, "Life goes on" (75). Obladi. Oblada. The challenge of the writer, through imagination and courage, is, like life, to keep going on and not succumb to the forces that would destroy be they cancer or suicide or sacrifice or fake totems or bad reviews or memory or ideas fixed in stone and statue and ritual. One must seek to attain a state akin to that which R.B. describes in the voice of his friend who is about to die from cancer:

I guess what I am trying to say is that her voice was gently clear like a small candle burning in an immense darkened cathedral built for a religion that was never finalized, so no worship ever took place in there. (91)

It is a "gently clear" voice that exists in a place of rituals "never finalized"; ultimately to arrive at such a state of becoming, to engage at least in "an attempt to keep the past and the present functioning simultaneously" (64), may require an act of courage, of grace. R.B. comments:

... I looked forward to arriving at a period of grace in my life, and my late forties might be a good place to start. What I meant by grace was a more realistic approach to the process of living to arrive at perhaps some tranquillity and to place a little more distance between the frustrations and agonies in my life, which are so often my own creation.

It is interesting that I used the word "realistic." (46)

To use the word "realistic" is interesting, indeed. For what could be more realistic than the writing of *An Unfortunate Woman*, random and rambling, insightful and banal, fluid and awkward—from doughnuts to hot dogs to mythic sacrifice to personal estrangement, so real that at the end one is not sure what one has read. Perhaps 'experienced' would

be the better word. For the book is a record of experiences and throughout one senses a grit and a courage in its writing, a kind of grace under pressure to which, I suspect, even that writer whom Brautigan most admired, Hemingway, would have had to give some respect. As much perhaps as any human can do, perhaps all a human can do, Richard Brautigan's final words in this book are a fit summing up: "But I did try" (110).

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# Reader Contributions

*Poetry by Robert W. Birch, Martin Crane, Jeff Foster, and Christopher Turner. Also a story by James Abercrombie.*

## Empty

by Robert W. Birch

A cheap hotel room,  
decorated in loneliness and despair.\*  
Coarse sandpaper towels  
hang above a clogged toilet bowl.  
The dripping faucet out of synch  
with the loud ticking of the bedside clock.  
An empty Kleenex dispenser  
hints of a history of hot encounters.  
I am missing my honey,  
crying tears into a foam pillow.  
The porn flick on TV offers little comfort  
for a broken heart.

\*A description by Richard Brautigan in Sombrero Fallout, 1976.

## Three Beat Poets

by Robert W. Birch

Have been reading the poetry  
of three "beat" poets.  
The two men shot themselves.

The woman wrote of sex,  
her first book banned in the '60 –  
too hot even as the sexual revolution was breaking out.

She is still alive, and I understand,  
for there is more energy in desire  
then there is in depression.

Lew Welch 1926 -1971  
Richard Brautigan 1935 -1984  
Lenore Kandel 1932 -

## In a Dream

by Robert W. Birch

In a dream  
I saw this girl  
Three wire coat hangers  
In her mouth.

I wondered  
How she did that

## With a What?

by Robert W. Birch

Loading Mercury with a Pitchfork  
arrived last week,  
poems by beat author, poet  
Richard Brautigan.

A used book,  
once on a shelf,  
poetry section  
of the Ann Arbor Public Library.

November 1, 1976

stamped inside the back cover  
on the card pocket.

Today is November 6, 2004.

I missed the feel and smell  
of a new book  
by just 28 years,  
remarkably the poems are still fresh.

Loading Mercury with a Pitchfork

Richard Brautigan, Simon and Schuster, 1971

# Richard

by Robert W. Birch

I met him in a dream.

He saw me though squinted eyes.

I admired his mustache,

but he ignored mine

and almost smiled.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Richard," he replied.

"Richard what?" I asked.

"Just Richard," he answered.

"Why just Richard?" I had to inquire.

"I'm dead now," he said in a matter of fact way.

"So?" I wondered aloud.

"So no one would know me now," he said.

"You would be surprised," I countered.

His head tilted as though to gauge my words.

"There are many people today who love you," I stated.

A look of disbelief crossed his face.

"Really," I added to make my point,

"Your books still sell . . .

And there are even fan clubs."

His expression did not change.

"I should have waited," he said.

"For your fame?" I asked.

"No," he replied in his somber tone,

"For trout season."



# Richard Brautigan

by Martin Crane

Richard Brautigan,  
You, beautiful man/child/author/Father/enigma...

To us all...

I mourn your death every day...

In between...

The personal mournings of my family

Because...

You meant THAT much to me, and helped me...

Every day in my relationship...

To San Francisco.

So, and however ephemeral...

This day of anticipating the BIG earthquake, 2006...

I gave MY daughter a copy of

"Trout Fishing in America."

She liked it, but said it was weird.

Well, sure... who wouldn't say it was weird...

And... we're all silly... I know that...

But, I went to the Benjamin Franklin statue

not too long ago...

...and wept for me/you...

because I missed the thought of you giving us more writing.

If there had been a way for you to reach us, we would have bought all of your books, and made you and your family happy and rich.

Now you are gone, and we just cry because we miss you....

## Chicken Wire Hair-Do

by Jeff Foster

Her hair fell like chicken wire  
around her banty rooster face.  
I didn't dig that look too much:  
I prefer fish over poultry.

## Smoke Detector Divorce

by Jeff Foster

My old lady got pissed because I forgot to change  
the battery in our smoke detector  
for twelve years.

## Telephone Homicide

by Jeff Foster

My telephone rang for six hours straight.  
I didn't know who could be calling me.  
Frankly, I didn't care.

I finally tore the phone off my kitchen wall  
and violently dragged it by its cord to my Ford Pinto.  
I drove to the Malibu coastline  
and heaved the telephone into the sea.

Right now, an octopus is probably making a toll-free call  
to a manatee in Biscayne Bay.

## Please Don't Plant This Book

by Jeff Foster

I watched my 10 year-old son planting seeds in our backyard.

"What is he planting?" I asked my wife.

"Seeds."

"What kind of seeds?" I asked.

"I think calendula."

"Oh," I said, immediately realizing, with horror, where he had discovered those seeds:

"My friends worry and they tell me  
about it. They talk of the work  
ending, of darkness and disaster.

I always listen gently, and then  
say: No, it's not going to end. This  
is only the beginning, as this book

is only a beginning."—Poem on Calendula Seed Packet in Richard Brautigan's Please Plant This Book.

"That little bastard," I said, wondering whether calendula was a flower or a vegetable.

# Whenever It's All Too Sad

by Christopher Turner

"I wrote this poem shortly after first discovering RB in a bookshop in north London, where the pink edition of *Trout Fishing in America* caught my eye. This poem is for Tom Smith."

I paint the world with a little Dylan  
 Or some Stones, Beatles, put 'em on loud.  
 Then, with the music playing,  
 I look out of the window, and watch  
 London passing by. Keith and Mick  
 Are walking down Carnaby Street in pink Flares.  
 John and Paul are recording in St. John's Wood.  
 And I think, 'Shit, exciting things are happening,  
 I must get out there!'  
 So I put on my shoes on  
 And take to the street.  
 I get on the tube, out into Soho,  
 And look for Keith and Mick.  
 But then, like the breeze around a tower block,  
 Or a fear of heights,  
 I get this block of something in my stomach.  
 I reach down into my gullet, and pull it out.  
 The block is the 1960's, wrapped up tight  
 Like a present.  
 I try and unwrap it, but it's made of  
 African hardwood or something.  
 It won't budge.  
 So I'm walking around London  
 But really I want to be a peaceful hippy  
 With a beard in the ironwood block.  
 Keith and Mick are in there, drinking coffee.  
 Dylan's in there, somewhere out in Minnesota,  
 Duluth or someplace. He's sitting there,  
 Thinking about hitching to New York.  
 I sit on the English curb, and watch corporate giants.  
 If only I could get inside the hard block,  
 I'd go with him, and we'd both make it big  
 In Greenwich Village.  
 But then, the corporate giants bend down  
 From their glinting buildings,  
 And gently prise my fingers from the block.  
 I tell them I'm sorry for wanting to be a hippy,  
 But they're mad with me, so I'm back feeling sad again.

# THE SHORT STORY

by James Abercrombie

## I. MY FATHER WAS A MINOR BEAT POET

my father was a minor beat poet  
he spent his entire adult life  
on the head of a needle  
around the corner from city lights

my father was a minor beat poet  
he wrote poetry about people he knew  
for people that never read it  
on all those endless winter nights

my father was a minor beat poet  
he was very young the day he died  
i never got a chance to know him  
so i write to him instead

## II. UNTITLED

My sister called today and asked how things were going. I told her I'd written another poem about dad. She was silent for a moment and then she changed the subject. She and her husband live in Ponchatoula, Louisiana. They farm strawberries there. Ponchatoula is the strawberry capitol of America. She told be about the weather, and then she hung up.

I don't remember my dad very well but I have a book of his poems. The slim collection was published decades ago by Four Seasons Press. There are a couple of other things he wrote collected in an anthology - I have that too.

Every poem I write about my dad is titled "Untitled." I don't know what else to call them.

## III. SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

I didn't start writing poetry until my mother passed away. She never remarried and stayed in North Beach. She remained friends with many writers there – I used to call Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "Uncle Spaghetti."

When I was twelve I wrote a poem about a gray day. I typed it neatly on dad's old typewriter and, without a word, handed it to mother. "I thought I'd seen everything your father had written," she said. "Where did you find this?"

"I wrote it, mom," I said. Mother didn't say a word. She just walked away and we never spoke of it again.

## IV. FALLING ANGELS

falling  
falling  
angels  
from the sky  
we carry on  
and wonder why

the good die young  
 and still we try  
 falling  
 falling  
 angels  
 from the sky

## V. RICHARD

Shortly after my father died, my mother moved my sister and I from our small North Beach apartment, to an even smaller, cheaper place not very far way. Several of her friends helped her move. One of those friends was the poet, Richard Brautigan.

Richard was a very distinctive looking young man: 6'4", 165 pounds, stoop shouldered and blond. He was rather unsophisticated and painfully shy. Richard did not in the least resemble the loud and sometimes obnoxious personalities that would keep my sister and I awake during those long but infrequent parties my parents liked to give.

After we moved, Richard began to visit my mother occasionally. They would sit in our tiny green kitchen for hours, drinking coffee and sharing the latest writer gossip. Mother always fixed sandwiches when Richard visited. "He doesn't have a lot money," she once told me. I got the impression that he was often hungry and that mother was looking out for him. People had a tendency to do that for Richard.

He lived alone in one of those typical turn-of-the-century apartment buildings on Geary Street, near the old Sears. Richard and his wife Virginia were separated and sometimes he would bring his daughter Ianthe when he visited. Richard never talked about his childhood or where he'd come from. It wasn't until after his death that I learned about the poverty and abuse he suffered as a child. He was indelibly marked by it for the rest of his life. The novelist Thomas McGuane once remarked that Richard grew up a goofy kid "whose only toy was his brain."

In October 1967, his novel "Trout Fishing in America" was published and literally overnight Richard went from obscurity to the hippie poet spokesman of a Generation. His fame and money infuriated his jealous friends, but he never forgot those that had had faith in him – like my mom. I have many wonderful late night memories of my mother and Richard dining at Enrico's.

In 1975, Richard's career had begun its long decline. By then he was dividing his time between his homes in Bolinas and Montana, and was beginning to spend time in Japan. His always heavy drinking was out of control. Mother passed away that year, but he didn't attend the funeral. Richard committed suicide in 1984 at the age of 49.

## VI. UNTREATABLE DEPRESSION

Was  
 is all  
 there is  
 anymore.

*for r.b.*  
 1935 - 1984



## Richard Brautigan's Utopia of Detachment

by Jeff Foster

(Originally published in *Connecticut Review*, Vol. XIV, No. 1, Spring 1992.)

For as long as there has been the quest for social order, there has been the quest for the perfect social order, or utopia. While this search for and development of the ideal community is not, of course, an exclusively American venture, the American contribution has been substantial and, at times, profound. From the settlements of the Shakers, Dunkards, and Amana Society of the Hutterian brethren to the utopian social experiments of the nineteenth century, such as Brook Farm and New Harmony, to the communal living popular during the 1960s and 70s, America has produced some impressive examples of the model community. Equally impressive are the studies into the aspects of utopia by such American writers and social reformers as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Greeley, Margaret Fuller, Robert Owen, Albert Brisbane, and B.F. Skinner. Notwithstanding the scope and fervor of the utopian experience in America and abroad, however, the search continues as it always will. Therefore, we must remain open to all theories concerning the establishment of the ideal society. And some of the more important and creative ideas can be found in an often overlooked work of American literature: Richard Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar*.

In *Watermelon Sugar*, a novel that sprung directly from the counter-culture of the 1960s, depicts a commune, iDEATH, which is based on the philosophy that man must lead a passive existence, remaining detached from strong emotional bonds to people and all worldly things. With this philosophy as its foundation, iDEATH proves to be a truly functional utopia. Some critics, though, insist that *In Watermelon Sugar* portrays a misguided and faulty society. But, in fact, iDEATH is a highly successful community in that each of its members, in acknowledgement and acceptance of man's intrinsic inability to understand or control the world, looks to nature for guidance. Each member becomes what Harvey Leavitt calls "an instrument of nature" (20). It is this understanding and acknowledgement and transformation which is the mission of iDEATH. So, when Patricia Hernlund states that "the delicate balance in iDEATH . . . is the delusion that they [the communal members] can maintain a neutral position disjunct from violence and death without also cutting themselves off from life's fullness" (16), I must disagree. Life, for the men and women of iDEATH, cannot revolve around a person's thoughts, emotions, and desires because these can only lead to deception, betrayal, and disappointment. Therefore, the denizens of the commune turn away from the temporal, illusory, and transitory world, looking instead to nature as the higher authority that will lead them into the perfect order and peace found only within the natural process.<sup>1</sup>

The narrator of *In Watermelon Sugar* is the quintessential member of the commune. In his character we see contentment, gentleness, honesty, and the detachment from extreme emotion that is the foundation of the iDEATH philoso-

phy. All these traits are possible because of the deliberate killing of the “I,” the self, as suggested by the name “iDEATH.” With this destruction of the self, the individual can “enter a finer existence” (Foster 86). This existence is a collective one, which includes not only all the other members of iDEATH, but everything carried by the flow of nature. A significant point of this philosophy is that individual death is not an issue because nature’s cycle of birth and death guarantees the regeneration of the species.<sup>2</sup> This regeneration of life is illustrated in the novel by the construction of the trout hatchery on the exact spot where the tigers had been burned to death: The walls of the hatchery “went up around the ashes” (109). So, the willful annihilation of the ego is not an act of destruction because at iDEATH, life springs from death.

The narrator demonstrates his allegiance to this philosophy by surrendering his name in the chapter titled, “My Name,” in which he says, “My name depends on you. Just call me whatever is on your mind” (4). He adds:

“If you are thinking about something that happened a long time ago: Somebody asked you a question and you did not know the answer.

“That is my name.

“Perhaps it was raining very hard.

“That is my name.” (4)

The narrator’s desire for anonymity suggests the objectivity with which he can recount the events of iDEATH. Because he remains emotionally detached from the world, and because he, like the others at iDEATH, does “not understand envy and hate” (Foster 81), he can be trusted as an honest and reliable narrator. Says Foster:

Thoroughly disinterested and detached from the confusion and expectations of our conventional world, he [the narrator] is able to see and record experience with an honesty few of us could match. And he has his reward, for if he experiences no great emotion and does not know the “meaning” of the events he reports, he is a genuinely contented man. (87).

Foster also writes:

Therefore, if we take him to be an honest narrator with nothing to gain by lying, we can believe all that he says about iDEATH, his life, and the lives of others. When he tells us that iDEATH “is beautiful” (1) and that the “delicate balance” there “suits” them (1), and that he has a “gentle life”(2), we must trust him. In believing that he and the other inhabitants of iDEATH are content with their “gentle” lives, we can only believe that they are both products and crucial elements of a utopia that “really works.” (80)

This gentleness, which is a reflection of man’s placid and peaceful acceptance of his place in the natural order, comes up often in *In Watermelon Sugar*: “The Gentle Cricket” (14), “sweet and gentle” (57), “a gentle fragrance” (33), “arms gently resting” (22), “a gentle life” (2), a very gentle statue” (14), and “cold and gently at rest” (145). And we see this gentleness when Margaret, after hanging herself from the apple tree, is “gently” lowered by Margaret’s brother and the narrator (144). So, when Patricia Hernlund suggests that the inhabitants of iDEATH are “devoid not only of pleasure but of all feeling” (16), I must respond with this statement: The gentleness that lies at the core of iDEATH is an expression of love toward all of existence. Gentleness arises naturally from man’s acceptance of his relationship to the universe, of his place in the cosmological order.

While gentleness represents a peaceful acceptance of the state of things, it does not necessarily mean that there is a profound emotional tie to the people or community. The members of iDEATH, while always tending toward gentleness, are still emotionally detached from the individual components of nature and the universe; their love is for the whole of existence—or for “commonplace and trivial things” (Foster 86), which don’t require an emotional element. Specifically, Brautigan focuses on food.

*In Watermelon Sugar* contains numerous food-oriented chapter titles: “Vegetables,” “Dinner That Night,” “Strawberries,” “Until Lunch,” “Bacon,” “Good Ham,” “Apple Pie,”<sup>3</sup> and “Meat Loaf.” We glimpse in the “Meat Loaf” chapter the lack of strong emotion that characterizes the people of iDEATH:

The waitress came over and asked what we were having for lunch.

"What are you boys having for lunch?" she said. She had been the waitress there for years. She had been a young girl there and now she was not young anymore.

"Today's special is meat loaf, isn't it?" Doc Edwards said.

"Yes, 'Meat Loaf for a gray day's the best way,' that's our motto," she said.

Everybody laughed. It was a good joke.

"I'll have some meat loaf," Fred said.

"What about you?" the waitress said. "Meat Loaf?"

"Yeah, meat loaf," I said.

"Three meat loaves," the waitress said. (129)

The repetition of "meat loaf" and "said" <sup>4</sup> may suggest to some that the people of iDEATH are extremely bored and unemotional. However, considering the peacefulness and contentment which they enjoy, boredom clearly isn't the issue. Besides, iDEATH, "[l]ike other utopias, . . . creates a sense of boredom or inaction" (Leavitt 24).

The danger of not keeping this distance from the world becomes obvious when we look at the lives and suicides of inBOIL and Margaret. Both of them reject the philosophical foundation of iDEATH by allowing themselves to become attached to a past they wish they could resurrect. inBOIL wishes he could "bring back iDEATH" (111), the true iDEATH when the tigers were alive, and Margaret, who cannot forget her love for the narrator, has a "broken heart" (130). Such strong bonds to the past can lead only to disappointment and, in these two cases, suicide.

Margaret's and inBOIL's attachment to the past is made clear by their obsessive interest in the symbolic Forgotten Works. It is here, where inBOIL lives and Margaret spends "a lot of time (77), that the dead past lay, a past which includes all of man's errors, all of his unkept promises to himself, all of his delusions of power and knowledge, and all of that wisdom that brought him nowhere. Harvey Leavitt puts all of this into biblical terms:

The original tree of knowledge led to a civilization remote from nature, but Adam II puts temptation outside his gates; the contamination cannot come from within, for a conscious act must be made to pass through the gates with the warning to the Forgotten Works. (24)

Leavitt adds that the Forgotten Works stand for "knowledge and curiosity," which can only lead to the destruction of iDEATH, just as they led to the fall of Eden (23). Man cannot profit from the junk in the Forgotten Works, and most of the people of iDEATH don't care to try: "Nobody knows how old the Forgotten Works are, reaching as they do into distances that we cannot travel nor want to" (82). Although inBOIL and Margaret often venture into the Forgotten Works, they always return empty-handed.

InBOIL believes that his suicide will bring back iDEATH – the true iDEATH. But his belief is based on a perverted sense of the philosophy of the commune. To inBOIL, the death of the self is physical, but to those who understand what iDEATH is really about, this death is psychological. When inBOIL kills himself by cutting off all his sensory organs except his tongue, he is saying, according to Patricia Hernlund, that "the people of iDEATH have cut themselves off from reality of the senses, except taste, to avoid being bothered by life" (12). While this certainly is part of inBOIL's message, the people of the commune, as we've discussed, are not trying to avoid life; they are merely attempting to avoid the extreme sensory stimulation that can lead to an attraction and addiction, as it were, to the temporal world. Emotion should not come from the excitement of the senses and the brain. Instead, it should flow from what Harry Leavitt calls "natural determinism" (23). That is, any emotion that rises from man's illusory abstraction of the world is forbidden. This includes man's foolish love of a past he believes he can somehow relive.

In contrast to the tragic implications of being hopelessly entwined in the deceptive world, we see the benefits of remaining detached when the commune's members witness inBOIL's suicide. Pauline "was not afraid or made ill by this at all"; she only got "madder and madder and madder" (113). And all Charley has to say is that he doesn't think that inBOIL has "proved anything" (113). Other people of iDEATH, upon hearing the news of inBOIL's death "were re-



lieved,” and the air was filled with a “festive Spirit” (118). Everyone realizes that inBOIL was a threat to the security and peace of iDEATH. Patricia Hernlund notes the community’s lack of concern:

That Brautigan intended the reader to feel disgust as inBOIL and his followers mutilate themselves is obvious – the scene is memorable, particularly when juxtaposed to the inhuman lack of pity shown by the people of iDEATH . . . What we do not expect are onlookers with no response except anger. (12)

Respectfully, I must once again disagree with Hernlund. Brautigan has set up inBOIL as the antagonist of the novel. As Marc Chénétier puts it, “inBOIL preserves codified knowledge, violence, [and] perpetual reference” (38). Just what should our feelings be, then, no matter how bloody the end, when the enemy of a peaceful community gets what’s coming to him, especially when it is at his own hand? And why should we expect no response but anger? The entire novel supports the necessity of distancing oneself from those emotions which cause dangerous feelings of attachment to worldly things and events. It should be no surprise that the denizens of iDEATH react the way they do.

So, too, should we not be surprised when the narrator displays no emotion as he watches, via the Statue of Mirrors, Margaret’s suicide. The narrator’s unwavering ability to separate himself from the events of the world is witnessed not only in the matter-of-fact tone of his narration of Margaret’s hanging, but also in the fact that the suicide comes to us as just another event in a series of “normal” events at iDEATH:

One of the kids pitching had a good fast ball and a lot of control. He threw five strikes in a row. I saw Fred directing his crew in the making of a golden plank of watermelon sugar. He was telling somebody to be careful with his end.

I saw Margaret climbing an apple tree beside her shack. She was crying and had a scarf knotted around her neck. She took the loose end of her scarf and tied it to a branch covered with young apples. She stepped off the branch and then she was standing by herself on the air. (135)

The narrator’s lack of emotion should not anger us, and it should definitely not surprise us. Extreme human emotions only lead, as Margaret’s suicide tragically demonstrates, to disappointment and depression – which may well push one to suicide – But the detachment of the narrator and the other members of iDEATH protects them; it allows them to turn away from the deceptive and ephemeral world. They are then free and open to receive the guidance of nature. Again, it is this passive subordination to the natural process that is the basis of the iDEATH philosophy.

This philosophy is not just iDEATH’s; it is also Brautigan’s. His friend, Keith Abbott, tells us about Brautigan’s view of life:

Richard saw the world as populated with dead things, and the past a marble replica of breathing life. What sincerely perplexed him was how other people could worship these. He poked fun at such delusions, with a playful, Buddhist vision of the transitoriness of things. (132)

Indeed, this “transitoriness of things” is at the core of *In Watermelon Sugar*. Brautigan created characters who believe as he believes: the world is not for man; man is for the world. That is, man must subordinate his emotions, his desires, and his intellectual curiosity to the will of nature if he is to live harmoniously within the cosmological order, and if he is to face death with dignity and without struggle against the natural process.

Another important issue of *In Watermelon Sugar*, says Abbott, is the Buddhist “sense of the world’s endless capacity for misleading us” (172). Really, we mislead ourselves. Through our intellects, we foolishly believe we can understand and shape the world around us. But our minds are fallible; we are fallible. To demonstrate this intellectual impotence, Brautigan gives us the tigers. Harvey Leavitt explains their significance:

The tigers incorporate the human qualities of rational discourse and instinctive survival. The tigers symbolize the destructive ambiguity of man, his instinct for survival and the rational nature that allows him to explain his acts of violence in terms of survival(19-20).

One of man's problems, then, is feeling the need to create and destroy simultaneously, and he attempts to rationalize this but falls short because his mind cannot handle contradiction. So, man should not try to explain anything because his mind is faulty. The tigers, in explaining to the narrator that they had to kill his parents in order to survive (39), reflect man's need to explain away his violence in terms of self-preservation. Also, Brautigan uses the tigers to illustrate how man's brain can be in error, even concerning simple matters. When the narrator, as a child, asks, "What's eight times eight?" a tiger answers, "Fifty-six" (40). The only way to avoid making mistakes is to give up the self to determinism, to the flow of nature. This is one of Brautigan's main concerns in the novel. Man must accept his subordinate, passive role in the workings of nature; he does not have the power to create anything on his own but illusion.

This passive role will lead to a gentle and contented life. But some critics, as we've seen, see things differently. Brooke Horvath, for example, calls *In Watermelon Sugar* "a book that implicitly gives the lie to the utopian triumph over death this world seems to represent by showing watermelon sugar as the restricted, dehumanizing, hopeless, and deadly place it finally is" (446). And once again we have Patricia Hernlund who says, "Brautigan reminds us that a worse thing than violence and death could be a life without pity or joy" (16). Finally, Neil Schmitz believes that this "balance that suits them also stylizes them and the result is a disfiguring of their humanity" (120). My contention has been that Richard Brautigan's *In Watermelon Sugar* presents the view that there are benefits to distancing oneself from the world and, conversely, that there are dangers of becoming too attached to the past.

While one can identify Brautigan's philosophy as Buddhist in nature (as Keith Abbott states above), his vision may also be called Christian:

The road to Christian salvation, we are told, begins when we turn our backs on the world about us, and that is exactly what the good people in Brautigan's novel [*In Watermelon Sugar*] have done. They have taken all the violence, evil, and cruelty of civilization and shut it and its history away, forever, in the *Forgotten Works*. (Foster 88)

Whether or not *iDEATH* presents a religious statement or not, we can see that the members of the commune have willfully forfeited some part of what makes them human, and they have given up their individuality, in keeping with the tenets of *iDEATH*, in order to live a collective life with all people and with all things of nature. By detaching themselves from strong emotional ties to the world, they are protecting themselves from illusory enticements and accepting their place in the natural process. Because they are not struggling to alter the facts of life and death, they are at peace. Because they accept both life and death equally, the people of *iDEATH* lead gentle, placid, and contented lives unburdened by fear, denial, and guilt.

Such is Richard Brautigan's utopian vision. Although *In Watermelon Sugar* may never (unfortunately) have the impact of Thoreau's *Walden*, and although Brautigan may never (though he should) be considered a Thomas More or a Ralph Waldo Emerson, the value of Brautigan's novel should not be minimized. Indeed, as long as the pursuit of the perfect social order continues, and as long as man wishes to live in pure harmony with himself, the human race, and nature, no contribution should be overlooked.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, if we substitute God for nature as the "higher authority" here, we have a central theme of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

<sup>2</sup> For an illumination of this matter, see the "Garden of Adonis" canto in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*.

<sup>3</sup> From this title, we could begin a discussion of the novel as a biblical allegory. For one such discussion, see Harvey Leavitt's article cited in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> As far as I can tell, besides one instance of "volunteered" and one of "asked," "said" is the only verb of dialogue used in the entire novel. This repetition of "said" creates the atmosphere of ennui, which is a crucial ingredient in *In Watermelon Sugar* and other Brautigan works.

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## Contact the contributors to this issue of *CHANGE*

Walter Franceschi	<a href="#">Send email message</a>
Brian T. W. Way	<a href="#">Send email message</a>
Jeff Foster	<a href="#">Send email message</a>
Denis Robillard	<a href="#">Send email message</a>
Robert W. Birch	<a href="#">Send email message</a>
James B. Abercrombie	<a href="#">Send email message</a>
Christopher C. Turner	<a href="#">Send email message</a>
Martin Crane	

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