

2001

As Part of the World: Letters from Sherman Paul

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Sherman Paul

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Recommended Citation

Bartlett, Jeffrey and Sherman Paul. "As Part of the World: Letters from Sherman Paul." *The Iowa Review* 31.2 (2001): 1-22. Web.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.5376>

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Jeffrey Bartlett

AS PART OF THE WORLD: LETTERS FROM SHERMAN PAUL

I was a doctoral student in English at the University of Iowa from 1974 through 1980. One of my strongest motivations for choosing the university was to study with the distinguished Americanist Sherman Paul. His wise guidance and encouragement of my interests (and tolerance of my idiosyncrasies), as well as his own example as a scholar, were indispensable aids to my completion of the Ph.D.

Friends who also studied with SP agreed with me that he seemed to have a series of steps through which his graduate students had to pass, which corresponded to the quality of their work and progress toward their degree. For example, if you did well in his courses, you might move on to an independent study, in which you would meet periodically at his home rather than his office. For me (and no doubt for others) the greatest unanticipated boon of the long effort of achieving the Ph.D. was the chance it gave me to come to know Sherm and be accepted as a friend whom he would stay in contact with for life if I held up my end of the relationship.

My postal correspondence with him began in 1979, as I was finishing my doctoral dissertation, which he directed. As usual, he was spending the summer at his second home.

Cass Lake, Minn., 23 July 1979

Dear Jeff:

I don't suppose you could find a reader more likely to relish this chapter than me. It took daring to do, and you have done it well. It is fine on the matter of Americans in Mexico, often sharp on individual texts, original, and always interesting. I read it in one sitting. . . . This chapter and the one on [Henry] Miller . . . strike me as more memorable, more vivid and exciting, than the WCW [William Carlos Williams] you sent me this summer. And I have been thinking ever since that that chapter is not incisive enough, that it needs improvement: is it focus? As you wrote me then, it is the derivative/scholarly/eclectic aspect that dis-enables you. You never get the idea of love really out there, clear & sharp in your own forceful terms. Maybe you should try again?

[. . .] You must look up the [Robert] Duncan chapter I noted. I was amazed, 1961, 1964, when he set out in the HD Book to do—and justify—open criticism! I am now at that point, having pretty much stumbled along

into it, or more truly followed out the necessity of the ideas that I find particularly mine (kindred).

I have not worked (at writing) for two weeks but will resume soon. My mother died on the 11th. The universe is still wobbling a bit but I realize now that she endowed me with cosmic trust and that my concern with the organic/green had its source in her. See you in four or so weeks. . . .

A DIOS, Sherm

The week after I successfully defended my dissertation, I wrote to SP, thanking him for his years of help. He invited me to visit him and his wife Jim at the lake, which I did.

Cass Lake, Minn., 6 May 1980

Dear Jeff:

[. . .] I find myself writing a book about being here so I won't say anything to you or anyone all summer about what I'm up to! Except that after a wonderful hot week, so perfect you couldn't imagine summer, it's going to snow tonight. Your letter ends, "see you." How can you do that unless you come up? Then you can indeed see what we are up to.

I've been reading [Christopher] Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, just so I won't forget the world out there. He endlessly remarks that in such a culture there is no respect for the past and no concern for the future, that each generation cares only for itself and not for the idea (and fact) of generations. Teaching requires that kind of faith; so does generativity, which is so much of teaching and "adulthood" (can't come up with a better word) I have been fortunate to have that faith confirmed, to have found students who confirm it. That's part of my debt to you. . . .

Ever, Sherm

In the fall of 1981 I moved from Iowa City to Berkeley, California. At the lake, the Pauls now had indoor plumbing and electricity.

Cass Lake, Minn., 30 December 1981

Dear Jeff:

8:30 AM, just beginning to get light, temperature at -30°F. I've been up since 7, getting up the fires, which I now let burn out at night: the temperature [inside] falls to 60°F, last night 50°F. So it's no hassle & we're perfectly comfortable. Everything runs nicely here; opening up was a matter of flicking

switches & letting the water flush out the anti-freeze. Mel [a neighbor] was on hand, the place clean (as Jim left it), the fires going; a neighbor down the road had shoveled the drive and path to the cabin. It is nice to be able to sit warmly on the john & look out at the cedars in the snow, & nice to do the same soaking in a hot tub. There are some good things money can buy, especially if one's tastes are as simple as mine. Also the car has a new battery & a motor heater, and this restores its efficiency & our confidence. The boy scouts are right: be prepared. But for what? (The little bastards.)

Plenty of time to read. So I have finished a thorough "reading"/glossing of the works of George & Mary Oppen & will probably teach "Discrete Series" or "Of Being Numerous." Then I sat down to [Susan] Friedman's *Psyche Reborn*, a feminist study of H. D., which I have now written a long review of. Now I'm reading [Paul] Radin's *The Trickster*, & you can tell how much pleasure I get from writing you from the fact that I'm not at my reading.

[. . .] In re [two articles I had written recently on Gilbert] Sorrentino. Both of your pieces are fine, & I learned a great deal from them. . . . But of the two, your note is richer, more incisive, & better written. Your journal style is far superior to the style you adopt for the review. If I may say so, always use your journal style; it reads better, hears better. . . .

All quiet, here, on the northern front.

Love, Sherm

Iowa City, 2 April 1983

Dear Jeff:

If I had written yesterday you'd have thought I was joking about the snow. Well, we have it, though the grass is green and things are in bud and the plastic beer glasses are back on the lawn [thrown there]. I was going to go down to the art building to hear some lectures on dada and attend a performance of [Kurt] Schwitters, but it was raining heavily and I stayed home. But mach nichts. Comes the morning paper and I find out that the whole school was blacked out, some guy, badly burned, having touched a hot wire at the power plant. Dada?! Anyway, about a week before I heard Jean-Paul Curtay, who works in S[an] F[rancisco] but hails from Paris, perform all the great dada poems and on into the Lettrist movement; and then in the evening he showed slides of the visual aspect of all of this. My God, he was good, such sounds, such body poetry: but a little goes a long way, like herring before dinner?

I haven't attended many readings, who knows why (you probably do) and I even passed up Tillie Olsen in order to see [Werner] Herzog's incredible film version of *Woyzeck*. But mid-April I'm going to attend a week of lectures by Stanley Cavell, or as much as I can take. Meanwhile I go off this coming week to give three lectures at Auburn [University], down there in the South, to demonstrate and explain, and explain a final time, my meditative critical practice. Seems people have found out about it. Even got invited to do an installment for a book on [Robert] Lowell in that mode, can you imagine that? . . .

So Lute Olson goes to Arizona! Did I tell you they made me an offer last fall? But they didn't give me two Mercedes, a ranch and a jet, so I said shove it and they did.

Love, Sherm

Cass Lake, Minn., 6 June 1983

Dear Jeff:

[. . .] Tomorrow I take the Jeep in for body repairs, and what a hassle such things are up here. Be thankful you are in Berkeley. Shopping in Bemidji the other day, I realized that K-Mart is the Nieman-Marcus of the place: see what I mean? Don't ever, not that you are likely to, sentimentalize the boondocks. You've been to Texas; you know.

Well, the place looks good, everything now beginning to break ground, get thick and green. Found some wonderful morels under the aspens, so you see we've had plenty of rain—and the season is behind and slow. Haven't yet got down to the water.

Having so many months ahead of me [a sabbatical] makes me take work here more slowly, I mean the maintenance, and this allows me to go right to work in the study. I have written a longish essay on the fifth volume of the [Charles] Olson/[Robert] Creeley letters, and very good they are; I've already written an essay on the *Mayan Letters* [by Olson]. . . . [W]hat I planned to do has been upset (as I was, believe me) by a letter from the president of the university asking me to give the first annual Presidential Lecture, something he's dreamed up, a big academic affair, to encourage the intellectual life and foster intellectual community, etc., etc., etc. I tell you my mind dropped to my stomach, where I had acute mental indigestion, and couldn't for the life of me think of what I could possibly say to such an audience. But when I relaxed a bit, I began to find that I had things to say. I forgot to add that an

honorarium of some size goes with the honor, and that the text gets printed and distributed, and that, holy cow, there's a reception for the speaker. Well, if you live long enough—and just when I was going about the house, having been reading the *N[ew] Y[ork] Times*, pissing and moaning about the people who get honorary degrees, including a basketball player, and some of my fine political academic friends who keep getting grants for the same single book. That's what comes of sour grapes. Be satisfied you're not (yet) famous.

[. . .] Meanwhile, you, clean the back yard and write your books and go to the ballgames. And if at all possible come this way. Jim has use for you.

Love, Sherm

In September 1984, my partner Bernadette Breen and I left the U.S. for Bilbao, Spain, where I was to teach American literature on a Fulbright grant, for which SP had written a recommendation.

Iowa City, 21 October 1984

Dear Jeff:

Your letter made good time, and I hope this letter will. We are glad to know you got there and have so wonderfully settled in. I have just now located you in the atlas: up there at the top of Spain. Your letter suggests to me how much you are learning and will learn—just by being there—and I am glad for you, even if it requires that you lecture on the Puritans. Here, it is autumn, for sure, the leaves fallen and falling, the almost constant rain bringing them down. The new big factory of a hotel, the Holiday Inn, has opened downtown, here in football city, where we play good ball. Shut out Michigan yesterday and are numero uno in the Big 10. Otherwise nothing momentous except for the departmental search for a head . . . and, of course, tonight's [Reagan-Mondale election campaign] debate (?), which has already, this A.M., set my teeth on edge.

I have been finishing up my reworking of Williams for next term's course on Oppen and WCW, and right now am doing some new lectures for [his lecture course on American] cult[ure] and crit[icism], so as to end the course where the action is, in feminist thought. After that I'm a free man and will get to my agenda, mostly some poets who await my attention.

Most impressive in your letter was the account of your visit to the Prado, which reminded me of the day I walked into the museum in Vienna and saw 16 Brueghels, each on an easel in one room! But let's not get carried away by

CULTURE. Here, in our local museum, we have a fine exhibit of Amerindian art, past and present.

Jim's been up to camp [at Wolf Lake] for ten days and has brought back a load of carrots and squash.

[. . .] As you can see, there isn't much news here. Or nous. We don't even have a good place to eat, and no seafood, and our wine is ordinary. So eat for all of us, and enjoy the sea, and basque in the sun. . . .

Our best to both of you, Sherm

In the spring of 1985 I renewed the grant for a second year.

Iowa City, 28 March 1985/Spring Break

Dear Jeff:

Your letter was especially good, perhaps because you've elected to stay and are settling in, getting a car, planning trips, all that. Europe, after all, isn't negligible, so much for the eye; and at the moment, for the present, "America" is lost, not even an idea, going down the road, not even creeping, I fear, toward what [Norman] Mailer in his first novel knew then to be the course of this century. The daily news is simply incredible. And here in rural America it's the 1930s again, with the same impersonal response (response?) to suffering. We run now to service industries, not productive ones, as if wealth can be created out of air (it can: polluted air); and we've created two classes beneath the terribly rich: the experts and the K-Mart checkout class without any benefits, polyester legions everywhere with very little besides cable TV for solace. At least in Europe you can still see the evidence of what passed (in two senses) for civilization; but after the Golden Day, that remarkable balance of the 1940s, what civilization have we had? What idea of polis, of how to be civil, of how to have/lead a civic/social life? Every day the woods look better and I feel the comfort of living with trees and animals. But even that must be predicated on investments! Which is not where you are and I, belatedly, am.

[. . .] Spring is here, on and off, sometimes 70°F, usually 40°F, birds back, buds pushing, all the signs, thank God. I take notice of this. It makes my day. We've been doing the necessary yardwork, sweating a little, getting some suntan and a few aches and pains. Armand Schwerner, I'm told, called last night and laughed when he heard that I was already in bed. How did he know I've spent the break doing more work on his poetry, getting ready, finally, to do

an essay on him, when I get to camp? Too much to do here; a full calendar of exams next month and into May. So I've done my library work, collected material, read and reread. I've also done considerable of the same in the work of James Hillman, an archetypal psychologist who goes beyond Jung, the analytical psychologist with whom he worked for 20 or so years. Hillman belongs to the generation of [Allen] Ginsberg and Creeley (and Paul), and must be considered along with N. O. Brown and [R. D.] Laing; and he's very useful for literary study. You might enjoy reading him because of his amour with Europe, especially Greek and Roman myth. He provides a voyage to pagany.

Among other things I'm getting ready to do is a lecture (essay) on Aldo Leopold, who wrote *A Sand County Almanac*. His centenary is coming up, and Knox College just bought the mss. of the book; so they want a celebration and invited me to give a lecture. This gives me a good reason to get back to nature writing and to speak my piece on it. Leopold, of course, did pretty much on his sand what we have done on ours, so there's that aspect; and who, besides me, would think to pair him with Lorine Niedecker, who lived not far from him and wrote the best poetry of any woman since Emily D[ickinson]. I'm not sure that [a friend of mine's] view of the job situation [as improving for English professors] is substantially so. Usually when someone retires these days the job (the line on the budget) simply vanishes; there is no replacement, not even at the asst. prof. level. This is one reason I haven't retired yet; it wouldn't help to make a place for another generation. We haven't done well this year in placing people—maybe 5 so far, out of 30. . . .

[. . .] OK. Enjoy yourselves. Don't forget that. We are well.

Love, Sherm

Iowa City, 24 December 1985

Dear Jeff:

Greetings, seasonal and otherwise, from this northern fastness, where we are staying put this year. Minnesota has come to us.

[. . .] As for *In Search of the Primitive* [his book of critical meditations on David Antin, Jerome Rothenberg, and Gary Snyder], I've been over the copyedited mss. and it's now at the designers, and maybe it'll be out in spring, a big maybe. As follow-up to that (you could call it the fourth section) my meditation on Schwerner may be (again uncertainty) published as a supplement to the summer *N[orth] D[akota] Q[uarternly]* I have also recently reviewed [Robert] von Hallberg's canonizing book on recent poetry (centrist

and imperialist) and a book equally bad, called *Imagining the Earth*, and like others (see *The Nation*, 16 Nov.). I'm up in arms against the canonizers like [Helen] Vendler, who leave out all the poets who genuinely matter. So I may (ah may) edit an entire edition of *NDQ* on recent poetry, to redress matters.

We had a fine week with the Rothenbergs in October; they livened the place up with news of performance and the actual thing. Followed by Barry Lopez, whose book on wolves I got and read (useful in re our Siberian Husky: yes, Barney died of cancer, and we brought this sled dog down from the woods, a poor abandoned creature, and very lovely). . . . Meanwhile, my enjoyable teaching was the tutorials on Olga Broumas and Lorine Niedecker (one of these days I'll teach a course on woman poets; I'm pretty knowledgeable in re feminist matters, and can hold my own with the ideologues in class). Also the big lecture course on the 20th century, which I do better each time, this time having made the issues so clear not one of the graduate papers I read last week missed them. I ended with [Leslie] Silko's [novel] *Ceremony*, which is wonderfully resumptive of what I was saying all term. . . .

[. . .] Now time to brave the subzero weather, the icy walks—time for a swim, the 9 AM hour reserved for us senior citizens.

Love, Sherm

Iowa City, 28 March 1986

Dear Jeff:

[. . .] We're just back from Madison, where I saw things pretty much from [former student, now professor] Tom [Schaub]'s perspective but had my own work to do: the Aldo Leopold papers, down in the basement, in the archives, where there was (o Melville) a veritable sub-librarian, who made us coffee, gave us the run of the place, and after a while confided in us and told us his "radical" views of our present culture. (Sort of fits in with the WCW poem you sent, "The Suckers"—hear that voice, he's got it right.) I'm going to give a lecture on Leopold and *A Sand County Almanac* next year and wanted to see, among other things, the journals he kept at the shack; and I wanted to see the shack, which we got permission to do and drove north to Baraboo to find—marshland on the Wisconsin River, running high and flooding.

Madison—hadn't been there in 30 years—is an impressive place and unquestionably as good a place as Berkeley. I was impressed, enough to imagine what difference being there would have made in my life (if not in yours), and I even caught the excitement of the students and had the curious feeling of

wanting to start all over again, as a student! But then, having noted in the library that they had all of my work, some even in triplicate, I decided otherwise, for I suppose I'd have to read such things and write papers, etc. There are better things to do, which is why we are thinking of retirement—and anyway you should begin to think of it, money-wise, from day one. I'll teach next year, but after that who knows? Iowa is eroding under the pressure of lack of funding, and the students too often don't provide the satisfaction I want from teaching (a few do, of course). There are other things I want to do, maybe teach in other ways. But we'll talk about it. Nothing settled, but "hurry up please it's time." And time for your generation to get in there and do your work. . . .

Right now I'm putting together a double issue of *NDQ* on poets left out of the Vendler canon. I've got commitments from lots of good people on lots of good poets (you know them all), and I hope in this way to talk back and remind people that there are, as Olson said, some others. Should have it out in 1987.

If you can find Robert Hass's essays (in *20th Century Pleasures*) by all means read them; some of the best examples of how to engage poetry that I've come on; and his poetry is coextensive with the essays. Also, Ronald Blythe's *Characters and Their Landscapes* is a wonderful book of essays. (It's work of this kind that I'm drawn to doing now.) Otherwise, we had a long cold winter, and two long enfeebling bouts of flu. Belated greetings on your 36th birthday.

Love, Sherm

That summer Bernadette and I returned to Berkeley, stopping on the way to visit the Pauls at Wolf Lake in August.

Cass Lake, Minn., 14 February 1987

Dear Jeff:

Your packet was forwarded here, where we will be for the next six months. Just got back, a week ago, after a two-week interval at Iowa City—just long enough to do such things as income taxes, stock up on books and xerox, see to routine health matters, prod my graduate students, and run over to Knox College to lecture on Aldo Leopold. The good weather we had over the holidays still holds, 40°F weather, balmy, clear and bright, with enough snow (up here) for skiing, which we have been doing on the lake, where the dogs like to run and as a result have become sleek and beautiful. I've scooped snow

only twice (it's snowing now, so it'll be thrice), with a marvelous invention, a fiberglass bucket on oak runners you simply push and dump; no lifting, no straining, and there's a money-back guarantee if you get a heart attack. I do in an hour what took me five before. The chores are simple and easy, about like brushing your teeth. We are warm and comfortable, and busy with little householding diversions (from the real work, reading and writing and thinking?) like, just now, making a "California" arrangement in the walk-in closet, you know, all sorts of pigeon holes so that everything is in its place. I've done a respectable job on my side, and next week will do Jim's (having had the practice, you see). I've some other things lined up for the weeks ahead: planting 1200 trees, finishing the interior of the extended study, helping to build a garage, bringing in some of the wood Jeremy [his son] cut when he was up, and so on. I have plenty of time to do the reading and writing I've a mind to do, and to put together a book on poetry and poetics. My essential concern is to be out, out there, like Oppen says, and [John] Muir, too.

I thought your review of Ginsberg [*White Shroud: Poems 1980-1985*] granted him all that could be granted him, and buried him in his shroud. I don't know why people think they have to be old at 60, though I know the pains that flesh is heir to; Jesus, Creeley has been writing about age since he was 50, and when I saw him last fall he was as hale and hearty as he's ever been. You get at the factor that accounts for such books: celebrity, the marketing of the self, the need to keep appearing in print for fear you'll drop out of sight (and mind). Snyder sent me his *Left Out in the Rain*, another case in point, not worth the acid-free paper it's printed on, useful only in a scholarly way, for the record (maybe ten poems should have been saved). . . .

[. . .] Good to know that Bernadette is soundly employed (you are gainfully) . . . OK. Jim and dogs are fine.

Love to both of you, Sherm

SP responded to the announcement of our wedding in April 1987.

Cass Lake, Minn., 1 May 1987

Dear Jeff and Bernadette:

Hurrah! We are delighted with your news, and we send our excited congratulations. You know, of course, that marriage is about the only "institution" we believe in, and, like you, we found/find its sacraments genuine and impressive. Today, as a matter of fact, is our 44th anniversary. We were

married in California, at the chapel at Mather Field [near Sacramento], with only my fellow cadets in attendance, but when I got leave we honeymooned for ten days in San Francisco. . . .

Now I bet you don't know that I've been characterized as a "marital" critic. This seems to be the occasion to mention it, even though it has nothing to do with the case in hand. In a recent issue of *American Poetry* on the situation in poetry (always bad when you have such symposia) Nathaniel Tarn sets up the binary terms incest/marriage to cover what hitherto was covered by paleface/redskin, academic/avant garde, etc. Incest, then, is what the academics are about, and marriage, as established by Whitman (and the America of love), is what my guys are about. So there you are, like [Richard] Silberg in *Poetry Flash*, someone who knows what I'm doing. Many thanks for the review, which was heartening. . . .

More later about our wonderful warm spring here. Also something (some thing) will follow in due course to commemorate your marriage. Hip, hip, hurrah!

Love, Sherm

Iowa City, 27 February 1988

Dear Jeff:

[. . .] Did you see the big *NDQ* I edited on poets? It's making a local stir, but I don't know how well it will countervail the Vendler-directed TV series on poets. . . .

I've read the awful book by [Alan] Bloom on the American mind, but I didn't think [Russell] Jacoby [*The Last Intellectuals*] had much to tell me, nor any of the other books on what is happening (or not happening) in academe now. You can guess the state of things from the fact that the state legislature chastised a nutrition researcher at ISU who said red meat wasn't good for you and that ISU proposes to phase out environmental studies because of waning interest! . . .

[. . .] Thanks for the notice of Duncan's death [in the *San Francisco Chronicle*]. *The N[ew] Y[ork] Times* didn't do that much, or well; and the paper here simply noted that he was a "homosexual poet!" I'm glad I wrote what I wrote about him, and I'm glad that I've been told by someone who studied with him that he found Duncan in that meditation. There's a great remark in an article on [Olson scholar] George Butterick's achievement (in the current *Sulfur*) that distinguishes between academics who have only careers (they are

legion) and the few, like George, who are changed by what they study and write about. Well, I've been changed by Duncan, and I miss him, miss having him alive, as part of the world that matters to me. And I will miss George, with whom I talk on the phone these days. He's had the last of his ineffectual chemotherapy treatments, and the pain is getting to him. But he works on, regretting that the pain makes this harder to do. Just this past week I made the fact of my retirement official: I wrote the letter and sent in all the forms for my pension and went to social security, etc., ETC. (It's a complex business, let me tell you.) So come June 30 I'll be free to live one of the other lives Thoreau sd we have to live (tending trees, most likely). . . .

[. . .] Like Prufrock, just to play it safe, I fast and pray. We'll see.

Love to Bernadette and you, Sherm

In 1986, a group of scholars who were former students of SP, under the editorship of H. Daniel Peck and including me, began without telling him to prepare a festschrift. We contributors presented a nearly final copy of the volume, which also included unpublished poems by Olson, Duncan, Creeley, and others about whom SP had written, to him as a surprise at a retirement party given by the UI Department of English in Iowa City in November 1988. It was published as The Green American Tradition by LSU Press in 1989.

Iowa City, 18 December 1988

Dear Jeff & Bernadette:

I'd have written sooner if, following the celebration (a bona fide, efficacious ritual occasion, let me tell you), we hadn't sold the [Iowa City] house in two days. So almost as soon as we got to Cloud 9 we had to come down to 7, turning our thoughts and energies to moving, or what the movers (unaware of the ominous sound) call "relocation." We sold the house to an Argentine painter (an exile of sorts) and his American playwright wife; so the developers don't have it, and now it will be refurbished from top to bottom and become (remain?) an Iowa City showcase. It was always known during our tenure as the Erbe house; now, who knows, it may be thought of as the Paul house. We have the inevitable misgivings and are doing some griefwork, but Kierkegaard says we live forward, and I believe him; all that retrospection, looking at all the old papers and letters, began to make me ill. And I am glad the book you helped make for me is anything but valedictory, and that I have a book of my own to follow it, right on its heels, in the very same year [*Hewing to Experi-*

ence: Essays and Reviews on Recent American Poetry and Poetics, Nature and Culture; University of Iowa Press].

Kierkegaard also says that we find the meaning of what we have lived (forward) by looking back, and in doing this I realized that the present decision is the result of having read the “Laws of Menu” when, years ago, I was working on Thoreau: there I learned that the stage I’m in now is that of the forest sage, and though this sage isn’t very wise and his woods not much of a forest, this is what he’s (she’s) opted for. Of course, Leopold helped to confirm this, and Snyder, and [Wendell] Berry, with all that he says of margins. You will have noticed (even in your salubrious climate) that birds travel in the fall, before the cold sets in, and it’s the business of moving in mid-winter that gives me the fantods, not the move itself. So be it.

Perhaps the most amazing thing is how all of you being so otherwise talkative kept the secret. I got wind of things from strange sources, but not being of a conspiratorial mind wasn’t suspicious. So I was surprised to see all of you—so many of you—and to revel in your presence, both of you, who had come such a long way. I never before laid store by such occasions (as my teacher Austin Warren always did), but, as I said, this was ritual, and it worked, transferring energy (eros), making the circle of gift exchange; enough! enough! (as Creeley might say) to last a lifetime. And then the book, which gives notice of the tradition in a way I was never able to do, which extends it from the angles of vision of a new generation and shows its viability and how critical work in its behalf fosters the living arts, these wonderful new poems. The generosity and generativity—cognate words, having eros at their heart(s)! Well, I needn’t tell you how happy I am that your essay on Williams (and eros! what else?) is in there, with all the other splendid essays; in there with Schaub and [Bruce] Wheaton and [Ed] Brunner, all your old friends. I was so glad that all of you, going back to the early Illinois years ([James] Guimond, [Jean] Yellin, [John] Callahan, [Robert] Lewis) could meet each other; that we had a family reunion. Lewis writes that we should have a college at Wolf Lake, but I’ll settle for reunions. Nothing gave me more pride (legitimately so) in my lifetime than having all of you answer Peck’s rollcall and stand up, all of you who stood by your word, who were good people as well as good scholars/critics, none, none having made concessions to career. ([UI colleague] Al Stone, whom I met a week later on the street, had tears in his eyes when he spoke of this; and someone else wrote to say they now understood the meaning of the profession.)

Well, you see that, among other things, I am a sentimental slob. So be it. Don't forget that we live in northern Minnesota, out there on the margins, thinking marginal thoughts. You must come to see us, any time.

Our love to both of you, Sherm

Wolf Lake, 27 November 1990

Dear Jeff & Bernadette:

[. . .] I like the idea of self-publishing, and almost reached that possibility the other day when, in a rare instance of impulse buying, I bought a word processor. Went over to Grand Rapids to look for a typewriter, my two old Sears machines having quit, and came home with the kind of fancy equipment you know all about. Well, I read the manual, thicker than one for an automobile, and the next day drove back and got this secondhand machine, a big, heavy office manual, German manufacture, excellent. Boy, that word processor wasn't, in my case anyway, user-friendly; it got in the way of my thinking. So maybe I agree with Wendell Berry who has a contentious piece on why he hasn't bought such a machine. And note that, after the fact, Jeremy tells me that these fancy machines don't operate well in a place as cold as my study.

[. . .] I've never thought of myself as a writer until the other day when the salesman (owner of the place) asked me if I were a writer and with maybe a second's pause I said yes. Now I'll put that occupation on my income tax form(s), though I get little income that way.

[. . .] I now have connections at the college and may even enter a classroom again as a guest lecturer—I'll blast them with the news of the "new" poetry since the guy who teaches poetry (I swim with him) told me he had never heard of the people I keep mentioning! and he was educated at the University of Minnesota! In the spring I'll go over to Grand Forks to talk about nature writing. . . . I've been reading about metaphor—a central matter in nature writing (and all writing)—and I've done some catching up in respect to the newer criticisms. I am struck by how much all of them discredit the idea of correspondence, which I do too; and this is important to me because my nature book, I find, has taken me back to Emerson and focuses (willy-nilly; it's where my meditations lead me) on this idea. I've come full circle. . . .

Love, Sherm

In April 1991 our son Jack was born, and SP responded to the announcement.

Wolf Lake, 20 May 1991

Dear Jeff, Bernadette, and Jack:

The photo of the threesome is right there on the side of the icebox with the other choice photos of like kind, where I, at least, can see it three times a day, when in the normal course of events I do the dishes. I mention this for the record, as an item of history, so that Jack, when he comes of age, or even before, will know his duties, have a proper role model, though I imagine that under the press of events that Jeff is shaping up. Somehow I never think of the author of *One Vast Page* [my book on the Beats, also published in 1991] doing dishes. Now doing the dishes (me among the tupperware) is best done solo, with everyone out of the way, as a time of working-meditation; or, if you prefer, you can listen to the news or see TV reflected on the front windows, through which at the same time you may see the resident eagle eating his fish, a cat stalking the birds at the feeder, or Rambo, the dog from next door, digging up the lawn (such as it is) for a cool resting place, sans mosquitoes. Someday, I keep telling myself, I'll do an essay, a personal essay, on maintenance, which I derive from the etymology of hand and now, for, God knows, maintenance (here, anyway) is the name of the game, and you'd better be good at it.

The latest item of the above, concurrent with the arrival of Jack (so we can keep tabs), is our tree planting. First 10 Colorado spruce, a gift from a student in Iowa City, which I got in the just-thawing ground, about the time of Jack's kicking; then 40+ balsam, spruce, and white pine, which we dug, trees about 3-4', out of the right of way of the road that comes to our sand road, for they are about to bulldoze the trees in the course of unnecessary widening; then 2000 seedlings, balsam and spruce, which we planted (we: Jeremy, mostly) not in plantations but helter-skelter in the woods to thicken the forest; then 500 white pine we went back for a week later. Yes, and last fall, 250 white cedar, which, like all these trees, are doing fine. Where we lost two large pines, we planted flowering trees that are flowering, and for good measure we put eight juniper around the base of the porch. Come to think of it, we should have planted some Jack pine, but didn't, for they do their own planting, volunteer, which are the best of all kinds. Trees and babies: sure signs of faith in the world. Talk of miracles! Talk of divinity!

Even Olson got excited by the birth of his daughter, and really talked, and even did the domestic chores; though within a few days he was ready to get

a cup of coffee and sneak off to his study. And like Jeff, he could include in the same letter news of the baby and other news, of books and such; but that's how it is, I know, and these days there could be no better role model. I am grateful for the reviews and article by [Tom] Clark, for otherwise, here in the boondocks, I would have missed them. Clark supplies a lot of information (that I'm sure Butterick already had and would have divulged differently) . . . I haven't seen his book [*Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life*, a biography], but I gather from his lecture that he treats CO as a cult figure and that, I think, diminishes his genuine intellectual importance: there's nothing hairbrained [sic] about CO's ideas. The push of more than one generation is there.

Babies and books. My long labor, not as hard as Bernadette's (but look what she delivered, something that lives and will one day speak! holy cow!), is over. I finished the Muir, and with him, the book—only a prefatory essay to write, but then the hardest part, the typing of the thing. I am thinking to call it *For Love of the World*, right out of Hannah Arendt, the great critic of world alienation and the great believer in natality.

Now that Jim has a typewriter—can you believe it, she never had a typewriter of her own though she has more than a room of her own, an entire bldg?—she'll also write. Can't keep her from her machine. When I can't find her, so to speak, I look for her there, where she's writing something, in secret. Expect a truly great book one of these days.

All of which is just to say that plums, even cold ones, are nothing to a warm baby, and that we are delighted for all of you, a happy family. Come to think of it, my father's name was Jack, a single syllable version of Jacob. Me, named after General Sherman, can you believe it? but that's another story.

Love, Sherm

In October 1992 we three visited the Pauls at Wolf Lake, where Jack saw snow for the first time. We afterward sent photos of the visit.

Wolf Lake, 8 December 1992

Dear J/B/J: or is it B/J2?

It's been only about two months since you were here, and since then the dust of snow (in the pictures you sent) has accumulated some 15 inches and winter has come for sure, with a few days already below zero. Like Tom Paine sd, These are the times that try men's souls, and more likely their soles, if they are poorly shod, and also their asses, if they happen, as I did, to take a

fall—how do you take a fall, which in fact takes you? If we had to tell the weekly news from this lake, we'd sure be woebegone; when we can't find the local paper in our mail box, we know it's Saturday, and this alerts us to the fact that we might on Sunday find something good on Masterpiece Theatre to crown the week. Of course, out there there has been news, notably the election of our guys [Clinton and Gore], a sudden concern with neo-Nazis and genocidal purists and now, much too late, a military to-do in Somalia, this last, we think, as argument for keeping the military budget high and also to give Clinton some foreign policy to keep him too busy to enact domestic policy. Like the first World War: "democracy" abroad at the expense of democracy at home. Not that starving people shouldn't be fed, but that this should have been done many months ago; belated good works aren't good enough, no sir, Mr. Superpower.

Well, you see how it is, no end of stupidities in less than two months. What with Jim still reading Gibbon and reporting on stupidities galore and my reading intellectual history (just now the intellectual backgrounds of the interpretations of the Kabbalah) and finding, as always, the incredible absurdities produced by the human mind, there's not much to choose, and not much to go on if one has to rely on one's own experience and grossly impoverished mind. At least you have a little boy breathing on your neck. I've been wanting to do a big issue of *NDQ* on "restoration"—but since George Will just used that title, I've decided not to use it. Of course, since everything, it seems, needs to be restored (healed, made healthy, etc.) I don't feel competent to mastermind such an issue. I've suggested instead that we print [Vaclav] Havel's little one-page essay, "The Culture of Everything," and make that the armature of the issue, you know, address what might be called the deep cultural "infrastructure," the habits of the heart that we have long since not had the heart to follow. I mention this to show you that I am not hopeless.

We finally had running boards installed on the truck, one more step (up?) in protective coloration; in fact, during the day I waited in town for the work to be done (the ultimate test of how much is lacking in places like Bemidji) and went from cafe to cafe to drink coffee to pass the time, I happened to see myself mirrored in store windows and decided that I'm too well-protected, that I'm indistinguishable and that no one, nary a soul, would know that I was once a pretty dapper professor. (And you should see me now in my flannel-lined jeans and my plaid farmer's hat with the ear flaps! Even Jim protests.) Well, Jim finds the running boards useful, but I have yet to get the knack of them and step over them, and the first time I did this, in a mall parking lot, I

took a fall on the ice (maybe my new 8" boots with the neoprene soles added their bit) and I now know what it feels like to be sacked by six linemen, and even, by a stretch of the imagination, what that instant is when the trap on the scaffold opens. I landed on my ass (on my wallet) but apparently tightened every cord in my neck to capacity to spare my head, and that's where the pain decided to reside, for about ten days, Jeremy and swimming doing their best to relieve it. The moral: don't get running boards. Don't go to malls.

[. . .] OK. I seem to be in a period of reading, books on German poetry, on Wordsworth and Coleridge, on poetry (went back to Robert Hass's fine book, *Twentieth Century Pleasures*), on Central-Eastern Europe (then and now), on the Kabbalah (all these things fit: one of the sources of ideas on language that [Gershom] Scholem and [Walter] Benjamin turned to was also primary for Wittgenstein), and all of this seems to be focusing on what is piling up on my work table: my own mss. on Imagism and Objectivism and Oppen, and all the installments of Duncan's HD book (I read his correspondence with HD). It's rather disquieting not to have a project, but as the confidence man said, something will come of this.

Love, Sherm

Wolf Lake, 2 February 1993

Dear Jeff & Bernadette & Jack:

We have been having the equivalent of the fine weather you report: clear, balmy days, in the 40s, starting up the watery motions and sounds of spring (the springs of things), making the evidently pregnant squirrels more acrobatic and insistent on eating their way into the house to nest, and giving the birds every reason to sing. It's amazing how the snow, three feet deep, suddenly subsides, sinks away, and how the icicles drip to nothing. You can go out in a sweater and bare-headed, the comparable pleasure of going south and frolicking naked on the beach. But, sd this Minnesotan, it won't last, which is why over the weekend I did my arthritic-making task of hauling wood and filling the woodroom against the prospects of another month. When it's warm like this, a few sticks of wood will heat the house; but when it's cold twenty or more "logs" are needed to do the job. But to mark the halfway point, I've cleaned the chimneys again, made a clean sweep of it, better efficiency and protection against flash fires. Other signs: the snowmobiles are making a fast, last dash and the fish-houses are disappearing (and just in time, before they disappear vertically).

The weather, as you can see, is much on my mind because if this warm spell continues I must bury Rambo, and though it's warm the ground is still frozen. I plan to do this today: remove the snow, pick through the crust, and dig a proper grave. I am sure that Jack remembers Rambo, that misnamed gentle dog with the clown's sad face; our neighbors' dog, but for all that, very much ours. About a week ago, when Jeremy and I were going to town and had turned onto the highway, we found Rambo on the roadside, killed, most likely, by chasing a car. We brought him home and placed him in the box we had made for Tray, who seemed on the point of death this summer but who, every day since, suddenly revives, blind, hoarse, crippled but still alive.

The pine box sits on concrete blocks and is covered by a tarp, but even so, the warm air will get to it, and I must set to work. We informed our neighbors, but they have not responded, and I suppose the general attitude hereabouts is that of a fundamentalist I sometimes talk with at the gym (a preacher, I should add) who simply said that I should put (read dump) poor Rambo out back.

Did I ever tell you that when I team-taught a huge course on American Culture in Urbana, in the 1950s, one of my colleagues, sitting in the back of the room (we attended each other's lectures) heard a student say, "Here comes that fuckin' pessimist[?]" I had cause then (the 50s, during which I wrote *The Shores of America* [his book on Thoreau], which, I found on recent reading, already speaks for the 60s), and I have even more cause now. That book comes to mind because there's an off-chance that it may be reprinted. It's still listed in *Books in Print*, now by one of those books-on-demand outfits that charges \$85 for it. What's funny about the listing of my books in *Books in Print* is the presence of my earliest work on Emerson and Thoreau and my very latest, the publications out of Iowa, and all the rest no longer appear there, everything at Illinois sold out now, and everything at LSU delivered to the remainder people. I bought several copies of what I found in the catalog, and some copies of *The Green American Tradition* at \$1.95 a copy!

How do authors live, and how do publishers survive?

If all the reviewers (none so far) were as perceptive and generous as some of those who have read (read read) my book [*For Love of the World*] and written me about it I'd be in whatever an author's heaven is. Finally, of course, it comes to those readings; they are the ones that delight an author, who, for the most part, is seldom well-served in the public prints. . . .

So you see how much I appreciate your take on the book. I'm especially happy with your response to the [Henry] Beston, which most people pass by. (Put *The Outermost House* on your list.) I wrote that during the first months of

our settling-in here, four years ago this month; and I even now remember how I sat down before breakfast in my pajamas and robe and wrote out the first few paragraphs, which, it seems to me, establish the tone of all I wrote after that: the [Richard] Nelson, Muir, and [Loren] Eiseley. Like the sample of my journal, it also places me here, in a comparable rural situation, and, of course, it ties in with Thoreau (as all the essays do). . . .

[. . .] I agree with you that doing a journal of the kind I did in 1980 would be appropriate work now. So far I haven't done this for at least two reasons: in point of fact there is not much to report about life in the woods up here that hasn't been reported and, far more important, I haven't been able when I have sat down to the task to come into the authentic tone, to find myself working from the deep center of my being. I don't want especially to write about some other writer's work, I want, as [friend and colleague William] Rueckert said of me, to keep on writing the self. But that can't be willed, or is falsified when it's willed, and right now, it seems, I am not sufficiently at peace with myself (that is, un-self-aware) to find myself the fortunate recipient of ripe sentences. I will be ready when the time comes. . . .

[. . .] Time for lunch here. And time to dig.

Love, Sherm

Soon after the time of composition of the letter above, SP felt ill and began a series of medical tests, which could not determine the cause. His letters thereafter came less frequently, and Jim often answered ours instead.

*The week before Christmas 1993, I flew to Paris with other friends and family of Arlen J. Hansen, a former college professor of mine who had written his doctoral dissertation on Emerson under SP and had helped arrange for me also to study with SP at Iowa. He died in August 1993 after years of cancer. As a memorial to Arlen, author of *Expatriate Paris: A Cultural and Literary Guide to Paris of the 1920s*, we met to celebrate and remember him and to scatter some of his ashes in Pere Lechaise cemetery.*

Wolf Lake, 14 February 1994

Dear Jeff, Bernadette, and Jack:

Birdsong (again) this morning. But then it's already 10°F, the sun's been up for a couple of hours, and it's bright. Otherwise there are many signs of winter: deep snow on the roofs (removed once so far), paths that seem tunnels (well, three feet up), a white Whistler landscape, roads that increasingly

narrow (as our lane has, with the result that the postmistress dented the truck in trying to pass), and so on, not to mention the chores that must be done, maybe more urgently now that the snow is wet and heavy: snowthrowing (this weekend's chore); getting in wood and hauling out ashes (I use the phrase in its literal sense). Some of the chores, like making and maintaining the fire, have a pleasant routine aspect; most of the chores do except when it's cold (meaning -35°F or so, wind chill be damned), or when one's body is full of pain (like the poet sd, this is no country for old men). This winter, though not unusual, is the first in our five years here that finds us complaining and thinking of the tropics; we complain about the weather with the enthusiasm of the native Minnesotans whose conversation seldom gets beyond weather, maybe because then they have a good reason to drink, which is an option we deny ourselves. Why, I wonder, do we try to live the "pure" life when old age (let alone age) creeps up on us anyway (and all ways)?

But climate-wise, every place has its tradeoffs: floods, fire, quakes, mudslides, heat (imagine this), smog, impure water, people, criminals, congestion, noise, high prices, even more than two TV stations, which all we have to connect us to what we read about in the *NY Times*.

[. . .] I (I should always say we) was glad you went to Paris, and I'm glad for your report of the scattering of Arlen's ashes. Jim noted the other day that [George Bernard] Shaw's ashes were mixed with those of his wife, and I figure that's the thing to do, the way to go; unless I went alone, and then maybe no one would have to go to Paris, just to Mt. Auburn cemetery in Boston, or the cemetery in Concord, or to Paterson (where the ashes would be thrown over the falls of the filthy Passaic). The option here is Frohn Township cemetery, which I pass every time I go to town, a very small burying ground near the Mississippi River: some of our friends are buried there. But we already have strewn ashes in the glade between the gardens [on their own land], and Rambo and Tray are also buried there: good enough for me.

Your letter didn't bring all this to mind so much as what I've recently read in the Hannah Arendt—Karl Jaspers correspondence, a lifelong correspondence of student and teacher that of course became much more, the much more spoken for in the word *solidarity*, which both of them use to cover the most essential relations, both public and private relations, Jaspers would say, that sustain and further "Existenz," which in his philosophy is the deep experience (being), of the "me myself" (Whitman already knew this).

I regretted coming to the end of this correspondence (400 letters), just as I did that of Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem, which ended with a

blank page following Scholem's last letter: the blank of WB's suicide. Life and letters: both, alas, come to an end. But then these letters can be read again and again. It's in this spirit that they took me back to Arendt's and Benjamin's work, and on to Jaspers'. And, as for rereading, I also went back to *Mimesis* [by Eric Auerbach], which is a splendid richly human book, a tribute to (a monument of) the humanistic tradition of philology as good Europeans practiced it.

It's getting on time for me to go to town for my daily noon swim, my therapy and my most agreeable physical pleasure. I'm still somewhat short of being well—still have plenty of aches and pains—but now that I'm off medications (which, I suspect, cause their own troubles) I am at least finding that eating is a pleasure and not a task. My arthritis specialist is a throwback to the 60s, still a Beat, and he calls me Dr. Sherman and even troubles to phone me to tell me the results of tests and to inquire after my well-being. My persistent problem, now a year old, is a low count of both red and white corpuscles; nothing has brought them up and with that the enjoyment of easy breath. But maybe not having to take drugs, which are suppressants of the function of the bone marrow, will help. Sure can't hinder. Meanwhile, we chug along, and to borrow from Olson, keep moving.

[. . .] Appropriately, it's Valentine's Day.

Love to all of you, Sherm

That summer SP was diagnosed with leukemia and began chemotherapy. He spent several months, off and on, in the hospital in Fargo, N.D., and died on May 28, 1995.

I feel sure that, like me, hundreds of others who knew him still think of him almost every day.