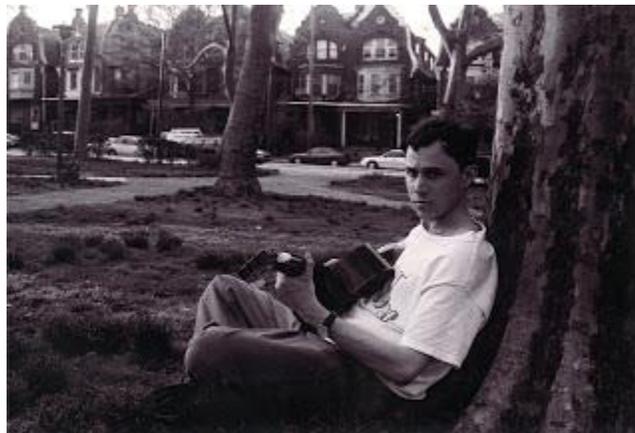


A POET IN CENTER
CITY
ADAM FIELED



Preface

What “A Poet in Center City” focuses on most intensely is the complex interrelationship between the four founding fathers of the Philly Free School— myself, Mike Land (John Rind), Nick Gruberg (Ricky Flint), and Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum (Christopher Severin). It was easily the most explosive group context I’ve ever been part of— everywhere we went, we attracted attention. Part of the explosive energy was generated by our physical appearance together— I was the shortest, at 5’9/5’10, and we were all good looking, with dark hair and eyes. We looked like brothers. None of us particularly lacked education; Nick and I were already in graduate school; but we all drank, drugged, smoked, and shagged nonetheless. When we hit the streets, the Philly Free School guys did massive divide and conquer routines just by ambling into rooms (particularly bars, music venues, and art galleries). The streets of Center City Philadelphia had clearly never seen anything quite like us. Because the four-person square was split down the middle between bisexuals and hard-line heteros, we could as easily end up at Woody’s as at Dirty Frank’s.

But four explosive, abrasive personalities thrown into a cage together (no matter how glamorous the cage looks from the outside) is not easy to sustain; and, for us, the fractiousness was right there on the surface with the passionate élan. The “classic” period of the Philly Free School, with all four of us more or less completely engaged, lasted roughly a year, from mid 2004 to mid 2005; it wasn’t exactly a Rimbaudian season in hell, nor was it an effortless joyride. It was a tumultuous congeries of both; was, in fact, the single most tumultuous year of my life. One of the big, cocaine-level highs for me was that I had (as I thought might be possible when I arrived in Philly in ’99) created and let loose a wild beast into the Philly arts scene. There was something about the shows we put on at the Highwire Gallery that was feral— because we went out of our way to get everyone stoned and drunk, the nights there became bacchanals, with nothing timid, precious, or academic about them. The vibe was near-complete Dionysian abandon— well past the arid frigidity of Warhol’s Factory, or the rich kid pomposity of the Cedar Bar.

There is, to my knowledge, no real parallel to the Philly Free School shows anywhere in the history of American art— not just for the bacchanalian frenzy, but for our wild, egalitarian sense of multi-media. The Philly Free School shows at the Highwire Gallery featured poetry (bare or with accompanying videos/images), paintings, bands, films, and even DJs. The shows were successful; people came. Even as the lurching four-headed beast ripped holes, willy-nilly, in everything and everyone it touched. There was always a violent undercurrent following us around. What we were together wore us down individually, as well. The lurching beast was not especially discriminating— it would not stick at tearing into its own flesh. We all wound up with blood on our hands— through sexual conquests and competitiveness, unrequited love, deep-in-our-cups harangues in many directions, and especially, gossip, gossip, and more gossip. America stood on the edge of a major recession— the times were not particularly generous. I still believe that the spirit of those Free School shows at the Highwire Gallery is worth preserving— rare visions of reckless American freedom, but executed with thoughtful taste. That’s another reason why this book is worth reading, and why I wrote it.

#1

The story of my life in Center City begins on a hot August night outside Philly Java, on Fourth Street between South and Lombard. I had just met a poet named Christopher Severin. He was tall, a bit stocky, with a black bowl cut and a cherubic face. His cadence was distinctive— pressured, ironic, flippant on the surface. We were sitting at a table outside, overhung with foliage from trees, overlooking TLA video store across the street. Suddenly we were overrun with teenagers— street kids, who never knew much but concrete and pavement. As they hovered around us (Christopher having known some of them before), I had a revelation of the wild vitality of Center City Philly. There were modes of being hidden here which I had never experienced before. The suburbs had been slow and moderate; the college town I had known even more so; New York had been so brutish I registered very little at all. Center City was overwhelming in the right way— I had frissons from people and places which were going someplace. As I walked the long way back to Twenty-First and Race, I knew that I had stepped like an actor into a role I could play. The stage was set.

#2

Fast forward into the spring— it's a chilly night in March. I'm sitting on a Septa train to Manayunk with Bill Rosenblum and Pete Lawson, two musicians. Christopher Severin is letting me run an open-mike night at a coffee-joint called La Tazza on Cotton Street. Bill, Pete and I are stoned on pot. I'm paranoid on the train that I might have to take a piss (Septa trains have no bathrooms). I've brought a carton of eggs to break on my chest. But I wimp out— I give the eggs to one of the attendees. Bill is short and stout, wears glasses and rags— his day gig isn't much. Pete's a lanky redhead with a bushy red beard— how he maintains himself is a mystery. They're in the game to get high and have fun. At twenty-four and in a state of constant excitement about what might happen in Philly, it's enough for me to get attached to them. I need man-power and they need guidance. Christopher is a figurehead in his own right, but his scene is limited. The world converging around me is dynamic, but I have to shape it myself.

#3

There is the problem of mixing worlds and that nobody in Philly does it. Things remain segregated, and to the extent that Philly artists don't mix, the Center City art scene is all dark corners. What happens if you match Christopher with Bill and Pete? But I'm not worried yet. One of my compartments is filled by the Center City "Goth" scene. I meet the niche stalwarts— Lee and Damon Buckner, and Baptiste Spurn. Lee and Damon are tall, black, mystical Christians and musicians. Lee is dominant, and always followed by a retinue of Goth kids— Center City raised, precociously sex-and-drugs oriented, attired in black leather pants, fishnet shirts, and chains. He plays a twelve-string acoustic guitar, and his songs are intense meditations on fairytale worlds— ghosts, goblins, vampires, demons. Damon is calmer, more generous and hospitable, often with Lee to lend moral support. Baptiste is their rival— a white, Europe-raised transplant with grandiose plans, whose front-man moves borrow heavily from the 80s New Romantics. He sings in a band called Station. The night I meet him at the Khyber signifies— the whole Center City Goth crew are there, and I give Baptiste my multi-media sales pitch. We're all young and moving fast— the vibe is right. Still, I have to get used to the rough edges these characters live with— no health insurance, bills which can't be paid: scattershot approaches to leading a solid life.

#4

I have it in my mind to start doing things at coffeehouses, so I do. What Christopher and I do at Philly Java isn't particularly intense— we sit in the cozy back room, reading our poems. If other poets show up, so much the better. One thing I notice about Christopher is that he has a knack for graphic design. The fliers he designs for these open readings have a nouveau Dada feel, and the images are memorable. The Last Drop, also, is available, and I arrange a show there for Lee and Bill and Pete. One thing I've already let go of is the need to be the main attraction. If you want to put a scene together, you have to know how to juggle egos; to hold a hollow emptiness in your consciousness for others to enter. Bill likes to work with a poetess named Dara March. He plays keyboards while she recites. I've invented a moniker for the series I'm putting together— This Charming Lab. The night of the show, the Drop overflows with Lee's minions. The proprietor of the Drop is fuming (for some reason) but the show goes on. And I've got my girl Joan there, she's Goth, and Baptiste and Lee hate each other so Baptiste is missing, and the thronged downstairs is what I want forever.

#5

One thing I do with Bill Rosenblum is patrol Olde City and other neighborhoods, looking for venues. We're usually stoned when we do this; Bill teaches me the nooks and crannies around Center City where you can get stoned in the street. I'm in love with the Center City streets at night; they have an odd kind of peacefulness (especially when held up against the ugliness of NYC). Bill and I are walking down Second Street in Olde City between Market and Arch, and stumble across a joint called the Upside Down Café. It's run by an attractive African-American woman with a Jamaican accent. She's accommodating and gives us the run of the place, to do events as we choose. Now, This Charming Lab has a home. The events we put on at the Upside Down didn't change much— we were "newbies," and didn't have much draw. But we were doing multi-media, literature and music together (poets and bands) in Center City Philly, and I thought (perhaps) I could investigate trying to get This Charming Lab some press. I lived on a daily diet of both serious stuff and the jejune free-press weeklies (City Paper and Philly Weekly). I was to learn that the press is its own dark corner.

#6

Olde City is famous around Philly and the East Coast for its “First Fridays.” On the first Friday of every month, all the Olde City art galleries opened their doors and offered new shows, wine and cheese. As of the turn of the century, Philly has produced nothing to compete with New York’s century XX art scene. But the set-up is cozy and sensuous and it seemed logical at the time that on First Fridays This Charming Lab would set up shop at the Upside Down, which was advantageously placed to attract street traffic. Bill and Dara do spoken-word with keyboards, I read and play a few numbers on my acoustic, Christopher swooshes in to do his usual read-from-a-book routine. Looking back, This Charming Lab was doing the right thing for itself— starting small, building gradually. But in some ways, I’m already dissatisfied— my ambition for some kind of grandiosity is getting the better of me. So I’m split in half— delighted by being in a new place, but frustrated by a small stage and an even smaller response. Sometimes I can forget this dichotomy in a haze of pot smoke, sometimes I get depressed. Tonight the ambience is just right to allow me to get lost in it all. The Upside Down looks decent— white tiled floors, glass façade. And I get dragged by crazy Jean over to the Painted Bride once festivities are over at nine.

#7

I find myself, through Lee and Damon and Baptiste, doing West Philly house parties too. That winter, Damon throws a house party the wildness of which I've never experienced. The drug situation is drastic— people are lining up to shoot H. Baptiste is there (he doesn't mind Damon as much as Lee) with a stout, voluptuous blonde who looks like a porn star. We get righteously stoned, and then everything begins to move in slow motion. The rest of the night passes me by like a movie— I'm in a dark room with Baptiste's date, but too paranoid to hit on her; I'm standing on the porch, watching someone (for some reason) dive over the railing into the front yard; I'm sitting ("like a spider," someone said) watching the Goth crew dance to Bauhaus; I'm noticing what everyone else noticed, that Lee failed to show up. Finally, at four a.m., I'm betraying my roots and phoning for a goddamned taxi. My truth is my truth— I'm not as desperate as these kids are. I don't need to suffer the torments of hitting the West Philly streets at four a.m. That's why there will always be an edge of unease between me and the other participants in This Charming Lab. I'm not as authentically city as they are. But the middle-class sense of self-worth I have is useful to them, too.

#8

By March, I manage to score a date for This Charming Lab at the Khyber Pass. For this night, it has to be all music. All the Station characters are becoming important in my life. Baptiste's guitar player, David, was raised middle-class by two professors in Australia, of all places. He and his brother are in Philly to attend U of Penn. David is there to do math, but his attitude is lax at best. He's as good-looking as Baptiste, tall, broad, and jovial. He also prides himself on sleeping around. Our main topic of conversation is music. David has a fondness for "classic rock" which Baptiste doesn't share. What's interesting to me about David is that working-class postures and attitudes fit him like a glove. He seems more authentic to the Center City scene than me. If downward mobility is the story of our early adulthood, David is more graceful and effortless about it. In any event, Station are to headline the Khyber show. Lee has become difficult to manage and I've had to exclude him. He's too narcissistic to participate in any scene. It's a shame— he writes interesting tunes. But any artistic scene requires that you be able to jump out of yourself at least part of the time, and he can't. Meanwhile, I'm having bizarre love affairs, Jean, Joan, on the side. They add to the general feeling of expectancy.

#9

Center City Philly is not just a conglomeration of artistic people for me but a conglomeration of places. I learn the character of different streets— Pine Street is genteel and refined, with several blocks devoted to antique shops and not much traffic. Walnut Street, the main thoroughfare of Center City, has everything all together— first-rate restaurants like Le Bec Fin, glamorous boutiques, four-star hotels, and, of course, Independence Hall. Chestnut Street, one block north, has a grungy feel— nothing fancy, but dollar-stores, low-end department stores, and (then) the old Sam Eric movie theater. South Street, several blocks south of Walnut and Chestnut, is (supposedly) *it*, the epicenter of Center City cultural life. But by the turn of the century, South Street has been commercialized, and even Zipperhead (a repository boutique of punk and Goth fashion where I buy my fishnet shirts) is on its last legs. What's hidden in the interstices is better than what's on the thoroughfares— Philly Java Company with its funky back room between Lombard and South on Fourth Street; the Last Drop Coffeehouse, with its high, coffered ceilings and French ambience at Thirteenth and Pine; Dirty Frank's, the best of Center City's sleazy dive-bars, caddy-corner to it; and McGlinchy's, which serves cheap stout and lager and runs neck-in-neck with Frank's (Glinch has a better jukebox), wedged on Fifteenth between Locust and Spruce (both inconspicuous streets with no particular identity). It's the hidden gems which make Center City for me; and I stick to them.

#10

What develops very fast for me in Center City is a need to prioritize. Everything seems to be leading me away from literature and into music; so music (for the time being) is what I decide to stick to for a while. I've kept contacts in New York and can record there almost whenever I want and for free. I try to shop these recordings around to Philly independent labels, with little initial luck. Center City, like the East Village in the late Nineties, has no in-built scene to speak of. At a young age, and sharp enough to be status-conscious (which Baptiste and the rest of the Lab crew aren't), I drooled at the idea of getting signed. The first Khyber show is a one-off— I'm to be backed by a drummer and bass player who are only signed on for that show. As had happened in State College and New York, I had trouble finding musicians to play with. The night of the show (a chilly April night) is hectic, and the Station guys dominate it. They have a redhead named Nora, who David is apparently shagging, following them around with a video camera. Station are the headline act, and most of the crowd shows up to see them. To me, there's something profoundly joyless about the whole experience— not just because me and my music are relegated to the sidelines, but because the Station guys are "hamming it up." They come across as attractive but irresponsible and (potentially) unprofessional. This Charming Lab has already established a few rules and folkways. One is that the after-parties have to beat the gigs. We roll, stoned, down the Olde City streets, too young to care— and the chill leaves the air.

#11

The vibe between Baptiste and I is interesting— it's clear to me that Baptiste was raised working-class, but his parents are Europeans. Baptiste has traveled all over Europe. He doesn't necessarily fit into the Center City scene any better than I do. Baptiste's social niche falls between the Goth and punk scenes, and he's perpetually obsessing over some girl or other. He's not desperate like the Cheltenham guys I grew up with— he nails his girls before he obsesses about them. I'm having some luck on that level too— we commiserate. Baptiste's angle is always the same— the guys who get the most (so to speak) also get trampled the most. It's headed towards summer and we're always stoned as we walk around. Baptiste is ambitious but undisciplined— he's not writing the Station songs. Mike, the bass player, runs the show from the side, and lets Baptiste and David front the band. I sense quickly (and with alacrity) that Baptiste could get me into trouble. The weed we smoke sometimes seems laced; we take joyrides in "ambiguously owned" cars (Baptiste is good at "borrowing"). Baptiste, during these years, has an odd light of luck around him which I'm instinctive enough to notice. To make a long story short, Baptiste (with David on the side) effortlessly corrupts me. The system has to work, because I'm getting them gigs. There's something in the bank for all of us.

#12

As summer rolls in, it seems to me that This Charming Lab needs to plan something big. A little press would be nice, but we haven't dealt with the higher rungs of bands yet. If I could get, for example, the Eycliners onboard for a show, we'd finally have the right wattage. I put together some money and rent out the Killtime Warehouse in West Philly. It's usually used for punk shows and meetings of radicals, and it's run by a ring of junkies. Station will play, of course, and I've roped in the Eycliners (an all-girl band who do girly schmaltzy indie-punk), and Bill and Dara, and a miscellaneous cast of others. About an hour into the show, and with very few people having shown up, I make a fatal mistake— I let the Eycliners smoke me up. It's potent weed and I'm blitzed enough to begin enjoying myself. The problem is, at about ten p.m. throngs of people begin to show up to see the Eycliners. I'm supposed to be collecting money at the door, and I'm too skittish and paranoid to do so. I try to enlist Bill and Dara to do it but they're even more non compos mentis than I am. It's a little disillusioning no one pitches in— This Charming Lab was supposed to be a co-op. If I'm the only one trying (and the Station guys are too high and mighty to do menial work, off chatting up girls), TCL isn't going to be what I thought it was.

#13

One thing I've noticed is that This Charming Lab isn't making me happy. I'm a bundle of nerves. The reason would have to be that what happened at the Killtime signifies— I'm running the show by myself. On the side are nice times— with girls, or fucking around with Bill and Pete on lazy stoned West Philly afternoons. But the business of trying to push a bunch of acts forward is wearing me down. My own tunes I'm trying to sell at these shows form a whole— "The Seduction of Sara Starr." While I'm in shape to play them, nobody seems to listen. David does, and I appreciate it— but Baptiste has a bunch of defenses up. So does Lee. Bill and Pete are unabashedly "junk-rooted," and my tunes are too classicist for them. I always have an acute sense of my own smallness— and what's in the air is that the Philly free press has blacklisted us. We're either too unprofessional or too gauche, or both. No one in the Philly press corps likes my ambition, either. They don't want a scene in Philly, especially one which translates nationally or internationally. They like doing hit-and-run routines where they cast bands or performers up, then shoot them down again. I'm sharp enough to realize quickly— where music is concerned, I'm in the wrong place at the wrong time. This is my first, and most hurtful, Center City tragedy, but I took it in stride.

#14

One branch I've got going which many of my friends don't notice is an interest in modern and post-modern art. By this time, I'm fascinated by post-modernity generally, and I learn the charmed names— Warhol, Nauman, Koons. Nauman, especially, attracts me— the West Coast creepiness of his early work (product, I can't help but believe, of high marijuana intake), matched with a penchant for absurdism, balance out the direct and uncompromising brutishness of the East Coast life I'm leading. My nightly routine, when I get home from Barnes & Noble (where I work as a bookseller) and when I happen to be alone, involves a pile of post-modern art books and approximately two bowls of weed. If I like Basquiat's playfulness, I'm repulsed by the vacuity of Jeff Koons; if Paul McCarthy is a bit too Willy Wonka, Ed Ruscha's sense of language, space, and minimalism in two dimensions gets under my skin. There's no one to talk with about visual art yet; but a young lady named Trish works with me at B & N, and I have my eyes on her. When I walk around Center City stoned, I try to imagine what life would look like through a painter's eyes— West Philly, especially, is oddly picturesque, and many of the houses (half-dilapidated though they might be) are exquisite, as is all the architecture in Philly. I can still walk around with a good clean buzz on; if there is any danger, I don't notice it. For Bill and Pete and I, this is what everything reduces to— a buzz.

#15

My interest in post-modern art leads me to the PMA. I'm stunned to learn that the modern art section actually has in it Bruce Nauman's "The true artist helps the world by revealing mystic truths" neon as an installation. It also has Jasper Johns' "Painting with Two Balls," and a cache of late-period Rothkos. I'm even more stunned how Cubist Picasso looks up close; by the Renaissance art on the second floor; and by the Calder mobile I'd forgotten having seen as a kid. That I live a fifteen-minute walk away from the PMA is tremendous. Christopher appreciates my need to talk about such things, but the This Charming Lab musical crew turn a deaf ear. As summer wears on, we do Doc Watson's and the Philly Fringe Festival at the Upside Down. The Fringe people don't give us any special treatment; we're "local," and all their hype goes to national and international acts. The culminating Fringe show for us happens at a venue called La Tazza 108 at Front and Chestnut. I have friends coming in from New York and D.C. to play. But the lack of press around This Charming Lab shows; there's no buzz. Into the fall, I have the conviction that this has to end. We've been black-listed in Philly and there's no way up for us.

#16

The night of the 2000 election is a strange one. I'm working a closing shift at B & N, and a call comes in for me from Elizabeth Yankel, editor of a regional print journal based in Philadelphia called *American Writing*. *American Writing* is ranked high enough (Christopher endorses it too, and they carry it at Borders) that this call from Elizabeth (to inform me that one of my poems, "Icarus in New York," would be published in the next issue) gives me an almost unbearable sense of exhilaration. Like the rest of America, I'm up all night waiting for an election verdict. It never happens. But my ass is kicked into gear by what *American Writing* is, and the new task is to jump into poetry head-first. I want to be thorough— rather than sticking to the texts I know (Beats, Bukowski, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, etc), I want to learn the right histories and ground myself in them. I start with a vengeance— Pound's *Cantos*, the Greek tragedians, Eliot's *Four Quartets*. But the most profound breakthrough occurs one night at B & N, as I'm goofing off— on impulse, I pick up the *Collected Poems of John Keats*. I flip straight to "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and when I hit "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ are sweeter..." my brain turns on its axis. This proves to be the most important moment of my artistic life— discovering the English Romantics.

#17

Through dealing with Elizabeth Yankel, I'm introduced to the Center City literary old guard. Many of the men are gay; if they scope me out, it's to determine if I mean "action." Joe Miller fits this profile; an old friend of Elizabeth's who lives in a duplex apartment at Seventh and Bainbridge. His most prized possession is a photo of himself and a bearded, bespectacled Allen Ginsberg, taken backstage at the Painted Bride in the Seventies. It's on the wall of his study; the other wall is covered by long bookshelves filled with recent poetry books. Joe seems to have read everything; to know what he's talking about. His real penchant is for Philly literary gossip (particularly among the gay poets), and he considers himself the raconteur of the tribe. His heyday, he always says, was the Eighties; that was the peak, the time Philly poetry really swung. There were readings every night and everyone slept with everyone. It's all (I later find out) blarney. The hitch with me is that I'm straight. Nevertheless, I arrange a bunch of readings for us to do together— at bookstores, music venues, even at the Kelly Writers House on the Penn campus (I'm finishing my degree at Penn.) The readings are half-festive, half-strained; but because I happen to be sleeping with girls, I deny Joe the gossip-angles he wants. Elizabeth, I'm later to learn, has the same reservations about me that Joe does. For the gays in this tribe, art and gossip seem inseparable; are, in fact, flip sides of the same coin.

#18

The old guard are reserved about me; they refuse to deal with Christopher at all. Christopher is pompous about being young and fresh; he'll do anything not to be a bore. The sensibility finger points from Christopher to Morrissey and straight back to Oscar Wilde. As might be expected, Christopher is sexually ambiguous; he frequently makes flirtatious remarks in my direction. But, I notice over the first few years I know him, he only seems to date girls. Bisexuality is one of his adopted poses. Joe Miller and Christopher, when they run into each other, have nothing to say. Christopher, at this time, has several poems out in the Columbia Poetry Review. Christopher's writing is more avant-garde than Joe's or Elizabeth's; bits of Pound, Cummings, and "Pop" kitsch. I never lose the sense that Chris is based in Manayunk, which is its own place (at a tangent to Center City) and with its own ethos. Main Street, Manayunk, is posh like Walnut Street, but smaller, more sedate, and cozier. Drinking in Manayunk (as Christopher and I are wont to do) is peaceful and, especially in spring and summer, decidedly a glamorous experience. Some of the glamour Christopher has for me is Manayunk glamour, and he does come off sometimes as a Manayunk transplant in Center City. The first important reading I do with Christopher is at Villanova University (he's an alumnus) on a cool spring night in '01, with J.R. Mitchum. We read to about fifteen female undergrads, and they treated us like big-shots. Who could ask for more?

#19

Bill Rosenblum and I are still working together intermittently. Bill lives in a studio apartment on Twenty-First Street between Chestnut and Market. It's filthy— Bill lives like a pig. But Bill already has a primitive Pro Tools set-up, which means he can record me cheaply and (somewhat) efficiently. I have a cache of songs I wrote in the spring of '96— folk songs, for us to record. One thing I have now also is an album on mp3.com, which I can add to. Bill and I maintain our own routine— record, smoke a little pot, repeat. Bill's infinitely distractible, and I try not to be impatient. He even gets me to watch "Adult Swim" and "Space Ghost," as I did as a teenager. The album doesn't do much— I have a difficult time promoting it (having "offed" myself from doing live gigs in Philly). Everything feels liminal to me except Penn— it's the new centerpiece of my life. College Hall, Van Pelt, Bennett Hall are golden for me; and I covet the armature of an Ivy League education. As I expected, Penn only transferred two years worth of credits from Penn State. Now, in my mid-twenties, I prioritize getting my degree. Christopher, Elizabeth, Bill, and the rest know this is happening— but my life is becoming strictly compartmentalized into bits, which don't always cohere.

#20

There's a poetry reading circuit in Center City which I'm now heavily involved in. Other than the old guard and Christopher, some contenders subsist who are nearly my age. D.P. Plunkett is a rising star on this circuit. He happens to be ten years older than me. D.P. is bisexual, obese, and his poetry is all rough edges and dirty jokes. He, like most of the old guard, is a historical naïf where poetry is concerned— he's read very little pre-1960. He also, as a high-school dropout raised out in the sticks, loathes U of Penn. It seems natural that we take an instant, intense dislike to each other. His sordid history with Elizabeth and Joe ended in rancor on all sides. I spot D.P.'s big weakness— he needs to be buffeted by people (preferably poets) on all sides. D.P. has one major henchman; a bouncer/poet from Southwest Philly named Doug Winter. Whatever social games come to fruition around them are planned by Doug and D.P. together. They run a reading series out of La Tazza 108. I go sometimes with Christopher. Christopher detests them, but there aren't many reading series in Center City which deliver the "action-quotient" we want, and this is one. We learn fast; there's no use trying to talk with D.P. or Doug unless you're part of their in-crowd. Neither of us is prepared to make much of an effort. Through the whole liminal period of the early Aughts, we work around scenes like this and try and establish something worthwhile, both in and out of the accepted Center City circuit.

#21

Oddly enough, many of the characters who accrued to my life through This Charming Lab are still around. Baptiste remains as recklessly lucky as ever. One summer day in '01, we take one of his girlfriends canoeing on the Delaware. It's very pleasant— we stop at all the little islands to smoke pot, and we're right in the heart of the wilderness. If Baptiste's girlfriend almost kills us on the drive home (she's driving stoned, and super-erratically), we don't notice much. Baptiste's recklessness is contagious. The Buckners are around, though I've ditched my Goth attire. Occasionally, I'll do a reading with Bill Rosenblum playing keyboards behind me. This happens at least once at Tritone at Sixteenth and South. The shift from music to poetry isn't seamless— I still get in heartbroken moods about my failed attempt to become a successful musician. But another force is gaining momentum in Center City at this time— a bunch of Swarthmore grads are putting together machinery behind a new, iconoclastic, monthly free paper. It's to be called the Philadelphia Independent. The editor is another Bill— Bill Pearl. Bill approaches me to see if there's anything I might like to write for the Independent. We settle on an idea which doesn't satisfy my artist's ego, but does assure me a wide audience fast— an astrology column. Because I write it in a tough-minded way, Bill calls it "The Rizzoscope," after erstwhile Philly mayor Frank Rizzo. I notice the other Independent staffers, especially indie princess Sara Blount. The Independent has boxes like the other weeklies; what it gives Center City is an edge towards youth, freshness, liberal values, and educated quirk.

#22

It's early 2004. Elizabeth died a year ago; I've cut ties with Joe Miller. I'm doing a reading in Northern Liberties for an online journal called Lunge. It's not just me— there's a bunch of bands playing, short films, and a team of technicians doing "ambient." The crowd is a hundred-plus; the mood is festive. The multi-media angle reminds me so much of Swinging London (my imagination of it) that I get an intense frisson. It occurs to me that now might be the time to write the second chapter of *This Charming Lab*— that the moment might be germane for it. Meanwhile, Bill Rosenblum is producing an album for me. We're recording at his pad at Eleventh and Webster— "Webster Street Studios." The album was supposed to be just spoken-word; but we expanded and expanded until it looked like we would reach an album's full of tunes. Through Bill, I'm introduced to what the Highwire Gallery is, in the Gilbert Building on the PAFA (Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts) campus. I begin to put pieces together— this is where I could stage the sequel I've been cognating. The curator is an erstwhile roadie for the Grateful Dead— Jim O'Rourke. He's older— short, thin, intense, a redhead. The Highwire is a space to die for; several rooms, all with high ceilings, including one which looks like a cleared-out factory space. Still, the man-power is missing; I need running-buddies for this new "trip." Simultaneously, I graduated magna cum laude from U of Penn and geared up for grad school.

#23

I met John Rind at the Last Drop at around this time. John was twenty, and had been raised in Center City by an interesting family. His Mom was a therapist; his deceased father had been a hustler and a card-shark; his brother, who was my age, had been murdered on a college campus years before; and his older sister was a burgeoning fashionista in New York. The tragedies in John's life gave him a precocious sense of humanity; he carried himself like someone who had been through crises. He was extraordinarily good-looking: 6'3, thin, with piercing brown eyes and curly dark hair. Providentially, he was also artistic— a junior at University of the Arts, majoring in film. His nexus was all artistic kids. U of Arts (Sara Blount was another grad) has its own social niche in Center City— the archetypal U of Arts undergrad is a snotty, sexy, know-it-all brat who WILL make it, by hook or crook. Older Philadelphians take for granted that these kids will soon be derailed by circumstance into eternal waiters, bartenders, and service-industry goons. But John's not snotty with me at all (as Sara is). His attitude is flexible and open. He's also a damned good hustler— between his imposing height, looks, charm, and barfly style (he's also precociously sub-alcoholic), he can only be an asset. To add even more sauce, John is an active bisexual. He oozes seduction in all directions out of all of his pores. Furthermore, we wind up working together at B & N, which assures us a context and constant contact. This is how the fun started— the sense that John and I were a team.

#24

Christopher Severin was in. I'd enlisted him. What I felt we needed was a square— four guys. Ricky Flint, who worked with John and I at B & N, was a half-obvious choice. He was a science guy (grad of U of Chicago) who was also into literature; good-looking, in the manner of the three of us (dark hair and eyes; like me, bearded); a wild drinker and libertine; and a penchant for head-butting, intellectual and otherwise. I knew instinctively he would be the most difficult of the other three to manage. He had some issues with U of Penn; with what I was writing; with how I was running things, even before we began to put shows together. But, importantly, John and Ricky hit it off like a house on fire; two kids in their early twenties (Ricky was twenty-three), solidly Center City, rabid for new (or, in Ricky's case, any) experience; their circuit was tight. So tight, in fact, that often Christopher and I couldn't get a word (or a drink) in edgewise. Ricky likes to spite us two old fogies by sticking to John— but not sexually. Ricky's straightness was also tight. The tensest circuit in the square is Christopher-Ricky; they're both hotheaded control freaks, and they don't get on. Where Christopher is concerned, Ricky starts with shoot-down routines immediately. Just generally, what Ricky brings to the table is some light (vivid, educated intelligence) and a whole lot of darkness. The fire which animates him has a harsh, destructive edge.

#25

I still remembered the Lunge event in Northern Liberties, my frisson, and Swinging London. One of my abiding Swinging London fixations had been the London Free School— a loose conglomeration of artists, musicians, and curators who staged multi-media events around London through the “Swinging” Sixties years. Even before I enlisted the other three, I decided to call our group the Philly Free School. Ricky, of course, had to argue the finer points of why it needs to be called this, even as John and Christopher didn’t resist. If we were going to use the Highwire Gallery as the dominant space, it was inescapable that Jim O’Rourke would be a dominant influence. Jim was an odd mix of East and West Coast attributes— he’d be the first to light a joint for you when you showed up to negotiate with him; he’d always deliver some kind of goods (hash brownies, nitrous tanks) to create a suitably debauched ambience for your events; but he could also get East Coast intense about money and logistics. His vibe was very unique, and people tended either to love him or hate him. Luckily for the Philly Free School, John and I in particular clicked with him instantly. In fact, the John-Adam circuit was as much about channeling the West Coast as it was about channeling 60s London. So the square, aided and abetted by Jim O’Rourke, began to plan events. And when we hit the streets, everybody stared.

#26

The first Philly Free School event was held in July 2004. There were some physical characteristics to the Highwire Gallery space which facilitated the event. The west-facing wall was all windows. The event began in the late afternoon, then into the evening, and we got to watch a spectacular sunset as it happened. We sold Jim's hash brownies for a dollar a piece. This guaranteed that by the end of the night, everyone would be on their backs. As for the acts— Golden Ball played psychedelic space-rock. Many of the Golden Ball guys and the retinue they brought had been my friends in State College. I imported Lucky Dragons from the Lunge event in Northern Liberties; they were pure, laptop driven ambient. The demarcation separating Philly Free School from This Charming Lab happened fast; there were lots of paying customers at the door. Plus, Jim's presence assured that there was free hard liquor floating around. Jim O'Rourke did things right. If we were taking big risks, we also had some protection— the Highwire, not on the Gilbert Building's first floor, could only be accessed by stairs or elevator. D.P. Plunkett bombed; Christopher walked around taking pictures with his digital camera; I was clean-shaven. If the "factory room," unfortunately, remained untouched, the important thing was that when the square locked in, we really did work together, even Ricky. I knew instinctively that nothing like this had ever been done in Center City before.

#27

Baptiste Spurn reemerged at about this time. He had spent time in London with Station, but nothing had panned out for them there. Baptiste's new incarnation was as front-man for an industrial-leaning band called ElektroWorx. Unlike Station, who were very raw, ElektroWorx were steeped in multi-media. Their performances incorporated videos and lighting effects. Thus, they were a natural choice for the Philly Free School. Baptiste's life had retained a reckless quality; as of '04, he was living out of a recording studio at Thirteenth and Carpenter. As I soon discovered, it was a junk-fest. Every time I smoked pot with Baptiste at the studio, it was dusted with H— I got flu symptoms instantly. There were always people drowsing on the couches scattered around the studio. This coincided with a period Baptiste was going through of dating strippers. When Baptiste signed on for a bunch of Free School engagements, it was the John Rind-Adam Fieled, West Coast influenced circuit he was working with. John and I could hang out at the studio and not feel out of place. Christopher never particularly liked the junk vibe and Ricky was adamant that only alcohol worked for him. Nevertheless, once Baptiste was convinced that this wasn't This Charming Lab redux (Baptiste had hated Bill Rosenblum and Dara March), he didn't hold any of his spoils back from us. I noticed things beginning to sink into a certain miasma— none of us were ever completely sober. The Philly Free School had a Manifest Destiny approach to debauchery— we prized altered states of consciousness. And all of us (including Baptiste, with his European edge) were sublimely ignorant of how different we were than the rest of the Center City art scene. We had created a self-contained world.

The debauchery edge of the Free School had some darkness and some light in it. What was always tinted more darkly for us was sexual tension and competition. We worked fiercely together, but there was ferocity between us too. As far as raw sex and how the square worked, it reduced to two basic circuits: John-Christopher and Ricky-Adam. John and Christopher were either would-be or "very much" bisexuals— they were sweet on each other, and on Ricky and I as well. They preferred the bisexual "sweetheart" approach. Ricky and I were straight-up, straight, and macho. We looked for girls. The problem Ricky and I had instantly is that we often wound up going for the same girls. Ricky, being Ricky, had to abuse the living shit out of me (both behind my back and to my face) whenever I won a battle. I wasn't big into subterfuge, but I was big on telling Ricky the truth: my slightly-less ferocious moves worked more frequently than his Genghis Khan ones. It meant that when the four of us went bar-hopping in Center City, the edge of unease between Ricky and I would start early and last until one of us "won." The "sweetheart circuit" had a lot more finesse than we did. After the first half-hour, Ricky and Christopher would go out of their way to avoid each other. Visually, we all knew the square worked— we became the center of attention wherever we went. As all the circuits worked except one, we could always branch off in ones, twos, or threes to flatter, seduce, or co-opt whoever we needed to. There was no precise system— we were selling good looks and youth. Philly in the mid-Aughts suffered no paucity of either.

#29

One thing the Free School needed to do was to chat up poets. We were doing multi-media; just musicians weren't enough. We learned very fast; if anyone among us was going to chat up poets, it would have to be me, or Christopher, or Christopher and me together. That's what the Adam-Christopher circuit was about: poetry. Christopher was very particular about his affiliations; he'd spent four years studying Pound (and the Modernists) at Villanova; it was always Pound who wound up being the major touchstone. If the four of us happened to be speaking with someone with serious literary pedigree, Ricky and John would soon wander off. Christopher and I were older (Christopher was two years older than me, and ten years older than John), and the necessary depth of historical knowledge was there with us. It meant that the major defunct circuit in the square often hinged on Christopher telling Ricky off for not knowing enough about literature (and Ricky dismissing Christopher for being pompous). When all the parts were working together, the scientific objectivity of Ricky's mind allowed him to pick up things very fast (and oozing condescension the while); and John was always ready to learn. Christopher and I had a history of doing readings; we knew how to angle things to get poets to read with us. Even if the poets other than Christopher and I who were associated with the Free School were taken more than slightly aback by how intensely we were living. It was difficult not to think of Rimbaud's "systematic derangement of the senses," and Christopher and I were both suckers for the French Symbolists, even if Christopher's tastes stopped before the English Romantics. On some nights, it really was the Book Nerds vs. the Drinkers— God help Christopher and I for stopping at five drinks and debating what Pound did or did not help Eliot with; John and Ricky drank us two old fogies under the table every time.

#30

It has to be said that, all things considered, the big “getting things done” circuit in the Free School nexus was John-Adam. We were always “on,” always ready to seduce, always working the angles with everyone and everything around us. Lots of subterranean action happened at B & N on Rittenhouse Square, where we worked (Ricky had started off with us, but had been “offed” for molesting female employees). Free School characters would drop in to say hello and commiserate. John and I would smoke a little pot on our lunch breaks (the streets around Delancey Place were conducive) and plan new heists. John had U of Arts kids he wanted to include; he had also become chummy with a gaggle of Temple undergrads who were into poetry. We were too on fire to create a context to be snobbish or elitist; anything young and fresh, with at least some artsy edge, had to work. The big sexual tension between John and I was more personal than my head-butts with Ricky— John was in love with me. He made passes; I deflected them. I was later to learn that many people who saw us on the street assumed we were a gay couple. One of the reasons we so liked to get high was so that John could numb the pain of unrequited love and I could numb the pain of having to deflect him. I was, and remain, incorrigibly straight. Still, these were dark undercurrents in a period charged with vitality and excitement. As a way-station leading to other destinations, B & N worked just fine for us.

#31

For the second Highwire show, Jim O'Rourke installed a nitrous tank in the stairwell behind the "factory room" and manned it. Whippets were sold for a dollar and almost everyone, including us, indulged. We were all in an exhilarated mood— it was now October, and attendance had doubled since the July show. We exhibited one of Trish's paintings, and she came with her sister. We were also able to show movies for the first time— our friend (and Trish's PAFA buddy) James Nguyen had two short ones, perfect for a venue and an event this size. Most importantly, the square worked cohesively (especially at keeping the money collection tasks in order, at Jim's behest), and no major balls were dropped between us. I learned about Ricky— when he had just the right kind of alcohol buzz going (we had loaded up on cases of wine for the event), he could be a sport. The best part of the night, for me in particular, was how effortless it all felt— the work of overseeing things (balloons in hand) was a pleasure for all of us. If there was a dark edge operative that night, it was that many artists were showing up who wanted to ride on the Free School gravy train, and not all of them had good or honorable intentions. John, in particular, would drink with anyone, and he was besieged with invitations. I struggled with my instinct to impose on John who he could and could not drink with.

#32

By now, all of us were infected by the freewheeling spirit of the Free School. We were bummed that Bush had won a second term; but there was nothing that could be done. One of John's many chance acquaintances had bequeathed to him a little acid blotter sheet. So, one night, when Christopher and Ricky happened to be unavailable (Christopher in particular, being based in Roxborough/Manayunk, was in and out of Center City), we decided to trip. We started at my pad at Twenty-First and Race; the acid was slow-burn, and took about ninety minutes to sink in. We had been listening to the ambient music the whole time; it passed in front of me as something concrete. We somehow managed to stagger over to the Last Drop, and found ourselves occupying the basement, which was dimly lit (as ever) and dank. Neither of us could sit still, and John was stuttering. I had a fortuitous inspiration—I was seeing another B & N girl named Jenny Lee, who lived around the corner on Lombard between Thirteenth and Broad. We could drop in on her. She was a stoner, after all, and forbearing. We found her entertaining a bunch of her Delaware friends (she was a U of Delaware BFA), including a gorgeous brunette named Erin. At first, John was OK. But when we smoked a bunch of weed on top of the acid, John became catatonic. He was rocking back and forth in an armchair, and wouldn't respond to questions. The Delaware crew became aggravated by John's bad vibes, so I got him out of there. The trip would've been better with all four of us on it, but what the hell.

#33

One of the incidents which transpired at this time was symptomatic of Philadelphia's mixed reaction to the Free School. I asked a U of Penn staff poet to read with us at the Highwire. He demurred, and I shrugged; but Jim O'Rourke revealed that, having discovered the Highwire through us, he'd gone behind our backs and booked a huge academy affiliated poetry event there. He didn't ask any of us to read. Now, he wasn't breaking any laws, but it was a cheap move, and very not Free School. So, employing the privileged position we'd established as Highwire regulars (crucially, Jim O'Rourke didn't attempt to dissuade us), we decided to put in a unified appearance the night of the reading. It was just as boring, rigid, and Academic as we had expected—the important part for us was that we stole the show. Not only was our antagonist made visibly uncomfortable by our appearance, all the Academicians appeared uncomfortable that we were there. Even just our looks ran rings around them. As I was later to learn, many academicians have beleaguered fantasies of being stars themselves, and want to be perceived as celebrities. The "Fab Four" gave them a pungent dose of the real thing. It was enough to make me think that Jim O'Rourke, who had smoked us all up in the factory room beforehand, had the whole thing planned when he booked the Academy reading.

#34

Not all of the Highwire Free School shows were big ones. We would do series of modest shows between the larger shows. The Bats were an all-girl band we wanted to book, so we did. John and I did a bunch of schmooze routines with them, at Tritone and elsewhere, and John and I were both in love with Tobi, an old friend of Trish's and mine who played keyboards (and also painted). Tobi was tiny, an elf, with exquisite bone-structure in her face, chestnut hair, and bright blue eyes. Of the Bats, she was the most natural as a Free School person. By this time, we had a new system going at the Highwire, by which the factory room and the main space would be used simultaneously. The night the Bats played, we had poets reading on a raised dais in the factory room. The factory room had high ceilings, but was darker, danker, and more private than the main space— a perfect place to smoke up or hook up. The poets were Temple kids, and one stuck out for us immediately, especially to John; a buxom, olive-skinned Latino named Lena. If I sensed that I would beat John to Tobi, he would certainly beat me to Lena, who liked his looseness over my rigor. Christopher and I were attempting to perfect a new way of combining poetry with visual imagery; he projected images on a screen behind me as I read that night. Frankly, we were both bored with dry poetry readings (no matter how attractive the participants), and this was our way of extending their range. Headed towards 2005, John's characteristic looseness was the keynote mood. Even if it meant that Christopher and I had to up the ante to six drinks per night out.

#35

Baptiste Spurn had a birthday party at around this time at his studio at 13th and Carpenter. I wound up being the only Free School guy there. The four of us each had different sectors to work, and Baptiste's was one of mine. At the time, Baptiste had a menage situation going; he was living, not only with a stripper/burlesque artist named Lissy but with a couch-surfing teenage runaway named Anastasia. Anastasia was a wild child. She later tried to jump from one of the Highwire windows. That night, she insisted that everyone strip. We were passing around a bottle of Stoli; people were downing three or four shots at a time from the bottle. I decided to do them one better and down seven. For about fifteen minutes, I felt an overpowering sense of swirling ecstasy. Then, I got hit with a wave of nausea so intense I almost fainted. Everyone was very drunk and very stoned; I managed to drag my pile of clothes to the side of the circle and put them on. I didn't want to vomit all over the studio. I knew myself to be performing what was, for me, the greatest Intoxication Feat of all time—despite all the vodka-shots, I walked all the way from Thirteenth and Carpenter to Twenty-First and Race at 2 a.m. without puking. If I spent the rest of the night violently ill, I had done the right thing by the Free School; saved face before the big Intoxication Heavyweights of the Free School nexus, and entered the charmed circle (with John and Ricky) of the alcohol poisoned.

#36

At this time, John and I established an ancillary beat to the beat we were doing in Philly. Who's to say that, given the proper venue, Philly Free School couldn't conquer Manhattan? John's sister Kyra lived on the Lower East Side. She was a burgeoning fashionista. Kyra looked like a female John; long, curly dark hair, dark eyes, slightly olive skin. To John's dismay, we clicked immediately. I was aggressive in those days, and Kyra and I flirted aggressively. Meanwhile, I was looking up my NYC contacts from the Nineties. The big hook-up was Samantha Fry, a singer-songwriter I met at the Sidewalk Cafe back then doing anti-folk and who was still my friend. I was also in touch with Jeff Kim Chung, a Swarthmore grad I had worked with at B & N who was now doing a fiction MFA at Columbia. With Kyra's fashion contacts, we had the rudiments of an NYC Free School circle in place. The big venue target seemed to be the Bowery Poetry Club. Every time we went to NYC, John and I stopped in there to chat up the staff. We eventually got the e-mail of the guy who ran the place. He was slow to respond. And while we tried to get Ricky and Christopher in on the NYC shenanigans, it was clear that the problem was housing. Kyra could fit John and I comfortably in her little studio; but all four of us would have been absurd. I was hoping to court both Samantha and Kyra. John and I were still doing our pot n' books routine at B & N in Philly, and the whole Free School adventure became like living in a haze. If there was a rock beneath us at this point, it was Jim O'Rourke. We still, all of us, had the Highwire like a fist, and that was still where we had the most fun.

#37

The next time John and I hit NYC, we went with Kyra to see Samantha play solo at a club on Ludlow Street. I spent the night flirting with both of them. At one point, we were all sitting on a couch, and I had one on either side of me. We must've looked outrageous. Samantha lived far away in Brooklyn, whereas Kyra was only a few blocks away. Plus, John and I had a bunch of things to do the next day. So, I decided to stick around. Oddly enough, I never got another chance to hook up with Samantha. Kyra and I were hot and heavy all over each other. John, in the next room by the end of the night, just had to take it and go to sleep. I knew I was being cruel, but my blood mastered me then. The next day, the three of us went to see John Ashbery read in the West Village. We also stopped in to see our contacts at BPC, and it looked like we were finally going to get a date. John was only slightly more moody than usual. As for Kyra, I could tell that the night before hadn't been a big deal for her. I had it in me to be smooth about moving on too. John and I slept on the Chinatown bus back to Philly. Because John and I were both decent raconteurs, I guessed that the story about Kyra and I would do the rounds very fast. During a promiscuous era in Center City, I knew that the recounted drama would be all to the good. I could also sense in the air that some kind of drama would come to a head between Ricky and I.

#38

In the bars and the clubs, artistic types were beginning to migrate towards the Free School crew when we went out together. We didn't always have to search aggressively, or to be "on" anymore. I don't recall how we came to meet Heather Mullen. The first memory I have of Heather is of her sitting with us for some reason at McGlinchey's. Perhaps we met her there. She was tallish, about 5'7, handsome rather than pretty, in a thick-browed, Frida Kahlo-ish way. She was writing novels. She and Ricky were combustible. But the knife-edge current in the air, even on this first night, was that she wanted me too. I hung back, and let Ricky win, which was painful but (I felt) necessary. Ricky and Heather became an item almost instantly. In a way, Ricky was a more apropos target for Heather— they were both authentically self-destructive. They were also, I was later to find, derisive about me behind my back. We arranged a reading specifically for the five of us at Molly's Books in South Philly. Oddly, Heather's heart-on-the-sleeve prose aligned her more with John Rind than with Ricky, who tended to ape the loopy surrealism of Foster Wallace and the McSweeney's crew who were big then. One reason I had brought Sara Blount back into the fold was for her to meet Ricky— they were firing off on similar literary cylinders. Somehow, the meeting never came off— Sara was a delicate bird, easily frightened away. But Heather stuck. And as she and Ricky were soon living together, and as she was dragging all her social contacts (some artists, some young politico types) to Free School shows, the whole Free School experience was deepening and darkening into something more personal, more "felt," than it had been before.

#39

When the square was initiated, the only circuit which didn't function properly was Christopher-Ricky. Over the course of a year, more tension developed as the John-Ricky circuit became more active. When The Drinkers drank, they liked to take the piss just generally; because Christopher could be awkward, and his social mannerisms were so unique, he was easy pickins' for The Drinkers in general. Ricky was constantly goading John to be harder and more callous; John wanted desperately to be impressive to Ricky, and idealized him as a big brother figure; both The Book Nerds bore the brunt of their chemistry, but Christopher in particular got victimized. Predictably, Ricky lorded his relationship with Heather over us, and it stimulated him to greater displays of rambunctiousness. Ricky wanted to invert things; to place himself at the top. My strategy against him was to keep working my circuit with John on a day-to-day basis, so that we could work without Ricky getting in the way. At this point, we worked towards another big Highwire show, with Baptiste and his band (ElektroWorx). We even had a place for one of Baptiste's DJ friends. By the time the show happened, Jim O'Rourke was there with a nitrous tank again. This time, throngs of teenagers from the suburbs showed up. Jim wisely hid the nitrous tank, as the Highwire momentarily went "rave."

#40

Lena, the Temple student who had read with us more than once, was on the scene quite a bit then. She and John were very tender with each other, and Ricky liked to play up the “double date” angle and bring Heather in on the action. I wasn’t seeing anyone steadily, and detested feeling like a fifth wheel. When this formation emerged, I would leave. It’s just that Heather was a sugar-cube underneath, and we had a little secret pact going, and knew it. By Bloomsday ’05 (June 16), we had entered into a full-on affair, and Ricky was out. All the while, John and I had picked up the cudgel to put together a huge poetry reading at the Khyber, patterned after the Poetry Incarnation reading in ’65 Swinging London. It wasn’t an entirely joyless enterprise, but without Christopher and Ricky there was little esprit de corps. Now we just felt like ordinary hustlers; even if, for the first time, the Philly press were showing some interest in us. We hammed the event up verbosely for them. The darkest cloud on the horizon for me personally was D.P. Plunkett and his crew. The Free School had found ways to upstage them, but we were falling apart. The Plunkett poets read at Poetry Incarnation ’05 with many others; but they were morose at the event because we didn’t treat them like stars. They reacted by concocting a spurious tale that I had withheld money from them and began to circulate it after the event. If I wanted to survive, I knew I’d have to stop dissipating my energies and focus on poetry in a singular way. There was no other way to conquer the Plunkett goons; and I’d learned that art events are all too ephemeral. There was little in them left to keep. I had one major piece out in Jacket Magazine; it was time to build on it.

#41

Times had changed in America, and in the Western world in general. The Free School had taken some notice of the Internet; we had a blog. But a vista had opened for me with poetry and the Net— I saw an unlimited amount of possibility in that conjunction. After all, poems are compressed and can be read relatively quickly. During the autumn of '05, I turned the Philly Free School blog into a poetry journal— Philly Free School Post— PFS Post. With PFS Post came an era during which I wasn't "in the street" as much. It was an auspicious time to rein myself in— John Rind, especially, had been caught in a social maelstrom with Free School hangers-on who had now migrated over to the Plunkett goons. It was a sick, alcoholic, head-smashing scene. The gossip and back-biting were terrible. The remnants of our social network were lost in absolute entropy— and if I didn't work fast and hard, I'd have been lost too. I myself was also drawn in to attend some Plunkett readings at the time. It was a scene of poseurs and flatulently undereducated blowhards— but they were well-connected in Philly, more so than I was, so I couldn't afford to ignore them. John and I disrupted them by being physically attractive— they looked like mongrels and dogs. They even had the nerve to follow our lead and do readings at the Khyber. The first lesson I learned about the serious poetry world was an important one— the vast majority of poets are physically unattractive and (for the most part) sexually inactive. Those who signify actual sex, as John and I did, are abhorrent to them. I made a quick decision— I wasn't going to give up sex to be a poet (and I did mean hetero sex). That sacrifice would be too great, especially as fecundity of mind often follows from fecundity of body.

#42

The other key decision I'd made was to pursue a graduate education past my MFA. Many poets (especially avant-gardists) in the Philadelphia area had PhDs. So, I applied to a bunch of PhD programs, and received the University Fellowship to study and teach at Temple University. This meant a stipend and health insurance benefits— I wouldn't need to work at B & N anymore. I had no intention of becoming a pedant (especially where the arts were concerned), but teaching at the university level seemed like a reasonable way to earn a living. I was still doing my MFA, but was rapidly evolving into an avant-gardist (avant-garde terrain in contemporary culture being intellectually richer than standardized) and so couldn't learn much from a faculty dominated by sentimentalists and Pulitzer bed-warmers. I began, past Jacket Magazine, to publish internationally as well, especially online. The Plunkett poets were provincial in comparison, and while I couldn't compete with their Philly connectedness (some connections were Old Money ones, some South Philly), I could begin to connect myself on other levels. The Center City art scene at this time, not just us and the Plunketts but the DJs, musicians, and impresarios who ran the club-nights we'd been competing against, was growing rather dark. Everyone seemed to be drunk all the time. If it was a train-wreck, it was a fascinating train-wreck— all the exhibitionism was dramatic and intelligent (John and Ricky were exemplars); but I was working towards writing actual books, and Center City for me began to be a more solitary place. I wanted to survive the wreckage.

#43

By the time I finished my MFA in mid '06, I had two operative blogs— PFS Post and Stoning the Devil. Stoning the Devil I used for lit-crit and general commentary. The final summer residency was an anti-climax; no drama with profs, no sex. I spent the residency reading “Infinite Jest” and writing a new series of poems I called “Madame Psychosis.” It was an experiment in a new kind of poetic portraiture. By the time I began at Temple in August, I was ready to submit a manuscript with “Madame Psychosis” and a few other new series (serial writing having become one of my stocks in trade) to a major publisher. The manuscript was called “Beams,” and was accepted for publication some time in '07. Christopher was staging a series of events around his photographs; I helped him when I could. John was on the bar scene as usual. Through Temple, I met a group of poets in my age group who had recently descended on Center City from Amherst, Massachusetts. They were very status-conscious, and were status-seekers themselves. They had some Free School-level moxie around alcohol and drugs, even if they seemed frigid in other ways. I learned from them. The wisdom they taught me was dark— that unless you have a clan of poets to work out of, you're unlikely to make it as a poet in America. The Plunkett poets weren't quite enough to teach me this lesson, but after the Amherst crew I never forgot it. I also never forgot that I was staking my claim on iconoclasm— living a life as a sexually active heterosexual male not affiliated with any particular group, including (by this time) the Philly Free School. I could only survive by going against the grain, and I knew it.

#44

What was new to me then was being alone in Center City. It was no longer the case that every time I left my apartment, I was guaranteed a new adventure. I became more settled in my habits. The Last Drop was convenient for me in many ways; it became part of my daily routine. I would sit there with a stack of books and do my academic work and write. John at this point was on his way out, off to L.A. to do video work. Christopher I saw fairly often; he was engaged briefly, then that broke off. Ricky studiously avoided running into me, though he was situated at Temple too. The Temple campus, in North Philadelphia, was a disappointment— a concrete jungle. Anderson Building, where dwelt the English Department on floors nine-eleven, was particularly hideous— a sky-rise done in tacky “nouveau” style. The English Department had all uncarpeted floors, and I was given an office with no windows. Because it was so forbidding, being on the Temple campus always elicited a crepuscular feeling in me. I was both doing and attending random readings around Center City; but none had the cohesive magnetism of the Free School shows. Many of the Center City streets seemed to have languished into deadness with the coming recession, or perhaps been petrified. I came up with the term “visionary deadness” to describe Center City then. It was a contradictory term, and meant that way. When I found myself reunited with Trish, I still enjoyed the ambience of West Philly— the Satellite Café, Mariposa, Clark Park. Anything at a substantial tangent to Center City, yet still related to it, worked for me (including Temple) when I was in the right mood. And I missed Tobi.

#45

I had begun to visit Chicago every six months. The visits were oriented around poetry and poetry readings. Wicker Park in Chicago reminded me very much of Manayunk in Philly, and the Loop was interesting to me for being as clean as the nicer bits of D.C. and having the scale of Manhattan. Times were dark for me in Center City— not only because I'd broken up with Trish again, but because I was on the verge of all-out war with the Plunkett poets. I was gaining power and currency— I was out-publishing them. But the fight wasn't really fair; it was a group of them against one poet, standing alone. The main circuits they engaged were gossip-oriented circuits— I was constantly being slandered in places I used to love, like McGlinchey's and Dirty Frank's. John, when he was around, would always (I later heard) rush to my defense; but many minor Free School characters had defected and were arrayed against me. I reacted to these pressures (and the pressures of my career at Temple) by redoubling my efforts, especially where the two blogs were concerned. It worked; I soon had a substantial audience for both blogs. That Center City could feel like a battle-ground was something I hadn't known before. Plunkett, in particular, was absolutely maniacal about getting me the hell out of his way, and (unfortunately for me) he had Temple backing to do it. What saved me, quite unequivocally, was the Internet. I had a life online they couldn't touch. The Internet was its own "New Art City," which held as many levels of excitement to it as Center City Philly had when I first arrived here.

#46

Trish did a portrait of us together, "The Fall," which got shown at PAFA in '08. One of my books was being taught at Loyola in Chicago, and I lectured there behind it. From time to time, Bill Rosenblum would record me reading my poetry and send me the mp3s. Occasionally, a poet passing through from London or Australia would visit me. Sometimes, Baptiste and I could get into some Free School-level drug mischief. Mostly, though, I was on my own, writing. The lovers who entered my life at this juncture didn't last very long. What I had to conquer was the feeling that I had to be heading towards something huge. Too many poets in Philly were arrayed against me; if I didn't find a way to overpower them, I would (inevitably) be overpowered. This is what most of the defectors from my erstwhile camp banked on. Little Fieled, the party line went; he'll keep working and working, but it will never be enough, because it can't be. Most of these people were primarily socialites who took for granted that that's what poetry was; a context for socialization, rather than a serious art-form. "You are who you know" was the dictum, and they tap-danced around ever speaking seriously about poetry itself, or poems. I was always on the edge of being counted out. Temple didn't help; no one there was particularly interested in my poetry efforts, and the poets on campus actively opposed them. I suffered the indignity of having my books taught at major universities while being treated as a pedestrian graduate student at Temple. But I never gave up hope and I never thought of quitting. If this was "do or die," I would do.

#47

During '09, I got in an extensive series of arguments online. By then, they had a name—“flame wars.” I was rather adept at flame war strategies, and for the entire summer the arguments raged on. A conflagration of another sort was unfolding that summer at the Last Drop. The culprits were two young ladies, a Temple and a U of Arts undergrad. Ginny was a voluptuous redhead and a promiscuous tease. Adrian was a raven-haired theater major and ambitious social climber. Together they did the dirty business of turning the Drop into a hectic soap opera. I was considered a suitor to these two and one of the main players. As the summer swirled round and round, everyone came to the realization that Ginny and Adrian weren't actually going to sleep with anyone. It was sad and pathetic simultaneously—I later learned that some of the other faux-suitors were conspiring against me behind my back. I was being accused of rampant misogyny and even rape. The whole situation had an eerie quality, and it was an eerie summer. I was pushing the hell out of Stoning the Devil. By August, I was also working on a series I'd had around for years— Apparition Poems. I had an eerie sense that I was finally on the verge of creating the most overpowering poems I could possibly write— but by September, I was stuck again. Providentially, I was leading into my second Fellowship year at Temple; for '09-'10, I had no teaching responsibilities.

#48

As the autumn of '09 progressed, I was more isolated in Center City than I'd ever been before. Even Trish had moved to New York to pursue an MFA. In early November, I found I couldn't sleep. I was having racing thoughts, the way I'd had as a teenager. It felt about the intensity of a profound LSD trip. For almost two weeks, I hovered in this limbo state. When my feet touched the ground again, I dug into Apparition Poems with renewed fervor. My mind had expanded (as it had from taking and passing my Comps in the spring), and new vistas had opened up. For the next several months, I did four "Apps" a day. There was something strange in Center City that winter, which I hadn't seen or felt before— a spirit of enchantment. I called it (again) "visionary deadness." It felt like a charmed time— the new Apparition Poems were given a warm reception, especially in Europe. I liked to walk around Center City pre-dawn, and watch the sun rise from the streets. Some of the charmed events of the time were absurd— when there was a fire on my floor of my apartment building, they had to enter my apartment to open my windows (I was with everyone else in the lobby), and they used a volume of Coleridge to hold my door open.

#49

It occurred to me during the composition of Apparition Poems that I might make a video to go on YouTube around the poems. I asked Bill Rosenblum; he had the equipment. He said yes. So, one mild day in March '10, I took the #34 trolley up Baltimore Avenue, got off at Fiftieth, walked two blocks over to Cedar and two up to Fifty-Second and Cedar, Bill's compound. We set up shop in the front room, which had an all-window façade out into the street. The neighborhood, wedged between West and North Philadelphia, was extremely unlikely as a literary hotspot, but the light in the front room was good owing to this façade. We took about a half an hour to tape the ten minute video, only to find that it was slightly too long to fit on YouTube. It was a bummer that was to be rectified five months later. But we took it easy, smoked a little pot as always and he sent me the m-peg. I was also scheduled to read in Brooklyn at around this time, and cancelled. I had decided for myself that poetry readings were a bore and a waste of time— no one listens to anyone else, and poetry just doesn't work as any kind of compelling spectacle. If I had to give up seeing Samantha again, so be it. I was also publishing a series of polemical essays in Europe which stirred up a substantial amount of controversy both here and in the States. And when spring kicked in, I thought something might perk up in the Center City scene to draw my attention again, but that didn't happen. Enchantment had given way to some equanimity and some lethargy.

#50

It was always painful to see Baptiste Spurn around. The last time we'd hung, in the eerie summer of '09, he'd laced some pot we were smoking with PCP, and it sent me on a trip. I decided then and there that I couldn't hang with him anymore; I was too old to be doing this shit. Baptiste had some signs of maturity on his person, but mostly he hadn't changed at all from how he'd been at the turn of the century. The reckless twinkle in his eye was gone; he no longer seemed to have a lucky knack for getting away with things. Partly it was because, by mid '10, it was clear to everyone that we were in the grips of a major recession. Jobs were being lost; resources of all kinds were becoming more and more scarce; everyone had less materially than they used to. Because what all of us started off with in Center City was not that substantial materially, many of the Center City artists I had known were turning to ashes. It created a mood anti-sex, anti-drugs, anti-art, anti-anything but survival. Baptiste, Bill, Pete, all impressed me as looking like animals at this time; if I could've helped them, I would've. Instead, I kept writing as much as I could and kept to myself.

#51

The book "Apparition Poems" was released in June '10. I knew not to expect much at first; I wouldn't win any prizes for it, and it was unlikely to land on bestsellers lists. But it was money in the bank for me all the same. I had quit the two blogs, and thrown all my weight behind my books. I felt it was crucial at this time to do so; if I continued with the blogs, poets who wanted to dismiss me could always take the cheap and easy way out and just use my blogs as reference points. I was discovering that in many ways, poets in America really were (at least partially) the dregs of humanity. They always make a calculated attempt to shut out everything except what's au courant in their little groups; and, more importantly, few of them have a serious interest in poetry as an art-form. For poets in America, poetry is mostly used as a context for socialization, and to sanitize the art portion of the gig. Poets are would-be socialites, and sanitizers, and the idea of a poet standing alone, as an individual, is anathema to them. This was certainly true of the Plunkett poets and the Amherst group; and what it amounted to for me was the sense that I couldn't mix with poets at all anymore. The "fun" had largely gone out of my life after Trish and the Free School ended; but I liked living with the rough edges of being a working man, rather than a two-bit flake.

#52

In the fall of '10, I was teaching at Temple again. I was also working on my prospectus. For the first time, I had a sense of peace on the Temple campus. I had proven myself to myself. God knows, it would be too much to ask for any of these sour profs to recognize my achievements. Most of them were frustrated artists and scholars themselves. As for the kids I was teaching, I found them, as usual, very tricky. They didn't want to be there. If you weren't rigorous enough, they would rip you to shreds; if you were too rigorous, they would rebel. I tried to find some kind of golden mean, as I had previously, but I never felt that I quite got it right. In a sense, I had no real personal life anymore. Everything I did was related to my work by one tangent or another. It was always waiting for some chiasmus to happen between me and someone else (could be an artist or a woman, or both), but it didn't happen then. It was even hard to do hang-out routines with Bill Rosenblum, who didn't give a rat's ass about literature and really wasn't aware of the battle I was fighting. But what I had earned, in my solitude, was a fundamental self-respect I hadn't had before. I was the artist I wanted to be, and that I always knew I could be, even though few shared my opinion when I was young. The bozo adjuncts and grad students who threw themselves into my path could no longer engineer conversations which forced me to deny my life as an artist. I had the finger on them. I knew how to manipulate their queries into ones I could work with.

"A Poet in Center City" is still uncompleted

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