DOUGLAS UNGER

Autobiography

Recently, in Las Vegas, a senior citizen from Continuing Education approached me after a fiction workshop. He held open a worn library copy of one of my books—*El Yanqui*, the most forgotten of my out-of-print novels. He was eager to show me some dialogue he had marked on one of its closing pages: "Come on, Harry, let's go. I've got some money, and maybe we can check into the Alton House, you remember staying in that place? It wasn't bad, and maybe the rooms are still only ten bucks a night."

These lines, confronting them once more, seemed unimportant. The man's name was Saul Bromberg, a small, rough-talking New Yorker in his late seventies. He had survived an adventurous youth on the fringes of a world of Jewish and Italian gangsters on the Lower East Side then combat in World War II, also the trauma, from which he had struggled to recover, of being one of the soldiers who liberated Buchenwald, overseeing the burial of emaciated corpses, leading nearby German citizens past the crematoriums to witness their complicity. Saul was writing an earnest autobiographical novel about all of this which had considerable charms despite these horrors.

El Yanqui is also autobiographical. I thought Saul must have a creative reason for pointing out lines from that obscure book. But he said, "Professor... I used to own this hotel, the Alton House. It's been eating at me. Could that have been you and your brother I remember when you were kids?"

He showed me an old business card, grimy at the edges, which had *The Alton House* printed on it, and his name, the hotel's address, phone numbers—offering proof. I stiffened, defensively leaning one hand on the table. I had to will myself to breathe. Grief covered me like the stench of filthy clothes.

Recovering a little, I was able to look into his face. He had a kindly, Jewish grandfather's face, almost comical, with big ears sticking out. His large pitted nose was pushed off center—I knew from his story that it had been punched that way. His face was too thin, an old man's slack gauntness to it that looked unhealthy, slightly

bluish. I recalled him mentioning something in class about heart trouble. His face would have been scary, a tough guy's face, an old boxer's face, but it had been softened by age, by his milky hazel eyes squinting good-naturedly through his thick, somehow rabbinical glasses. Those eyes were lit up now with gleefully mischievous discovery. He was onto something and he knew it—uncovering the secret past of another man.

He *had* discovered me—or who I had been years ago—something I had spent much of my life trying to deny and which that orphaned, mostly autobiographical novel never honestly addressed (it might have been a better book if it had). Saul Bromberg was seeing the street kid I was once with my brother Harry. There's a term now—*throw away kids*—which sums up something of what we were, runaways our parents had quit looking for, hustlers, drug dealers mostly for our own stash, and in the middle of that life I was a sometimes child prostitute, in alleys, in cars, on construction sites, selling cheap feels and hand jobs to pederasts and drunks.

We weren't the only ones. In the sixties, the East and West Villages of New York looked like a ragged carnival of homeless kids and hippies—we called ourselves "freaks"—troops of us milling everywhere. Finding a place to stay was hard. No matter the youth movement idealism promoting togetherness, communes, all power to the people we heard in songs, talked up on the streets, Harry and I learned early on that it was best to keep to ourselves. We sometimes slept in a big cardboard box stuffed with newspapers off 11th by the piers. Or we were part of that roving tribe of addicts and crazies who invaded abandoned buildings in the East Village, ripping each other off, getting high on whatever there was, crashing in any piss-stinking corner we could find. We were always cold. Worse, when we couldn't find a place to sleep, we wandered all night, hanging out in coffee shops until the counter guys kicked us out. We dozed off in the quaking crash and shriek of subway cars or in among the homeless thousands laid out like so many corpses in the tunnels of Penn Station—people just walked by us as if we were already dead—until the cops finally rousted us. They herded us, sleepless and scared, back into the winter streets. Cutting blasts of arctic wind in pure howling misery through the cruel canyons of buildings made us let loose involuntary moans.

When I think of that time, what I see is a picture of this kid with long greasy hair tied with a bandanna like an Apache. He's stumbling along a sidewalk of sharp frozen slush between pools of streetlight darkness, ice like glass shards tearing at the red canvas of his sneakers. He wears an army surplus officer's greatcoat he once thought looked cool but that's way too big and long on him, just wool blanket cloth not nearly enough for that weather, the hem of it dragging in filthy shreds behind feet he can no longer feel. The coat is missing buttons. The kid struggles, holding it closed, the strap of a small army surplus gas mask bag slipping off his shoulder so he has to hitch it back up again without letting the coat fly open. The bag holds everything he still owns, everything that hasn't been ripped off—one pair each of dirty socks and jockey shorts, half a roll of toilet paper, a few candy bars, a spiral notebook, tattered paperbacks. He can't stop shivering. His knees are unsteady, his feet slipping and sliding. His brother is just up ahead on the sidewalk. The kid is falling behind—Harry with the back of his navy blue pea coat silvered in freezing sleet, shoulders hunching over into the sudden face kicks of wind, his guitar case slapping his leg with each long gangly stride. He's not slowing down. The kid is crying, crying out for him to wait up, crying out in rage, crying out to God.

We reached that point when we couldn't take this anymore. We had to find a bed and a hot shower or lie down and die for real. Enough said that the idea of going home—back to our dysfunctional parents, that abusive drunken violence—was far worse in our minds. Any description here would only confirm a sad cliché. Let's leave it that the idea of going home was dreaded more. When being stuck out on the streets got bad enough, there was the Alton House, over on 7th Avenue and 14th, in those days a fringe neighborhood of seedy commercial buildings with a few low-life bars and crumbling tenements and that run-down, dormitory-style hotel now claimed by this same Saul Bromberg standing next to me in my class, in Las Vegas, thirty-five years later, the man who had just handed me his old business card as if our meeting like this were a kind of celebration.

I was trying my best now to be objective again—the teacher—and to understand what he was doing. For the three weeks he had been my student, I had begun to think of Saul Bromberg as a cheerful, beat-up old wise guy who had become like a senior mascot to the

other students in my workshop. He always made honest, good-humored comments about stories, even if he was dead wrong in what he was saying. And I had been reading his work and encouraging him (as I always did with seniors who signed up for help with writing fiction) by my tales of Harriet Doer winning the National Book Award for *Stones For Ibarra* at age 76, of Helen Hooven Santmyer hitting "The New York Times" bestseller list at age 88 with her five-pound opus, *And Ladies Of The Club*. And there was my own former student, Sam Halpert, well into his seventies when he put together and published a fairly decent oral biography of Raymond Carver, and who wrote a half dozen fine stories he saw published in the journals (then nothing, and me not wanting to pursue what might have happened to him). In any case, what good would it do to discourage them by the real odds at their age? I pitched writing fiction to these seniors as a self-enriching process worth all the effort for its own sake, art practiced for self-discovery and for the benefit of the soul, like a spiritual quest—let's face it, the standard Humanist reasons to keep the class full enough to justify my paychecks to the head-counting administration. And there were times when I believed that teaching fiction workshops was just one more hustle, only occasionally redeemed by the few genuinely talented writers who turned up, it seemed, by the most unlikely accidents.

So here he was, Saul Bromberg, an older writer not without some talent. But all I saw next to me taunting me with words from my forgotten book was that other man, as I now remembered him with revulsion—the monster at the gates of the Alton House. At the same moment, he was seeing me as I had been then—hungry, terrified, at thirteen already with a hard glazed look of predatory survival from too many nights out there pulling off dicks for money. We were silent for a long time, squared off like this in the classroom, unsure we could believe what we were seeing.

In life and in stories, time and actions seem to me a series of collapsing and expanding frames, something like the internal wire structures of a bellows. It's as if we live inside the body of an immense accordion, in the air, moving through this continually opening and closing machine. We can progress through one of the frames—for some reason, they seem to me triangular in shape, per-

haps because of the three-dimensional conceptualization of our sensed world, or of so many religious and psychological trinities, also the geographical calculation from three coordinates to determine any exact location. Imagine: we're pushing our way through this pumping bellows tunnel of dark triangles. We find ourselves at a certain place in the tunnel. One of the frames collapses back, reversing, the bellows closing in on us. Other frames begin to move past or over and around us in the opposite direction. We discover with no little discomfort—that tingling of the mystical or just plain weird—how we've landed in the same place as before, inside the exact same triangle. There's no explanation that fits neatly into our rational world.

The Alton House wasn't a bad cheap hotel, with good heat, clean enough, only ten bucks a night—my going price for a quick hand job and let's hope to get away with not much more. My brother Harry, who could pass for 18 with a doctored driver's license, was too big and awkward for that hard trade. He waited for me over on 6th, in a Greek coffee shop not all that far from the hotel. I would finish what I had to do. Gangs of us freaky kids would work up by the Holland Tunnel, catching those supposedly good family men with a taste for boys on the side in their warm cars, stopping off on their ways back to Jersey, dangerous because they usually demanded more than I was willing to put out. So I would finish—retching from the gamy smells or worse—then go find Harry at the Greek's and give him the money. More often than not, I was out a few times like this before I found him—one after the other in a numbing, automatic way—so we might put together money to last a week, though it was seldom enough to last that long. Harry pitched in, too, from panhandling and selling nickel bags. Neither of us said a word about where my money came from. That would have been intolerable, breaking the unspoken contract I had made with him but mainly with myself guaranteeing rights to total denial that would one day land me in years of expensive therapy owning up.

Owning up to what? Terror, rage, pain—such inadequate words. Essences, yes, now, for acid and peril half-consciously lived through by looking only to what lay ahead, to that next simple wish. So just forget about it, the car door slamming behind the kid as he hunts for snow or pulls out a wad of coffee shop napkins to wipe off his hand, what good to think about it anyway? The kid is already anx-

ious about the strange tense dance he'll have to go through at the Alton House getting past that nasty little man guarding the doors.

The hotel had a sign by the office we could read through the glass of its battered doors, *No One Under 18 Allowed*. The office didn't have anything like a counter, just a big desk behind a wide open door facing the street. At the desk was the younger face of Saul Bromberg, a face not in any way softened by age. He had thinning dark hair not so bald, fuller cheeks. He kept a plain-end cigarette gripped in his lips, shaping them into a perpetual scowling. He was a hateful presence to me then, small, mean, threatening. I imagined his fist around a bat under the counter just waiting for a kid like me to dare to try and get past him. He was a wiry little man, tough enough he had a reputation for tossing younger men twice his size into the streets (one tale about him was he had once manhandled beefy writer Norman Mailer to the sidewalk in a fury over a bad drug deal, which he in no way tolerated, not in his hotel). There was something biblical about this man under his signs, *No Credit, No Checks*, counting out his change. He was strict with money and house rules, *No Extensions*. We thought of him as pitiless, called him a *kike*, even a *gonef*, for how quick he was known to seize possessions left in rooms if someone didn't pay. We hated the sight of him. We hated him with curses, *motherfucker*....

Imagine: the kid slinking around, shivering in the shadows near the worn steps of the shabby, dormitory-like building. The rooms were all on the floor above. At street level was a dank Irish bar off to one side, down a ways from the hotel doors, a hot stench of sour beer blowing out from a humming fan over its door. On the other side was some kind of deserted garage or something with blacked out windows. Waiting, how the kid wished that man at the desk would die. It was only him now making him freeze even longer until Harry could sign in, pay cash, and the kid could somehow sneak past him through the doors and upstairs to his only goals—warmth, hot shower, real bed, all it seemed by then he had ever desired. And here he was again, thirty-five years later, this very same man, Saul Bromberg—*him*!

The truth all those years ago was that I never once spoke to him, never met him face to face. I was aware of his hateful presence by legend only and as a moving shape, distantly through the glass doors, lit up in his tiny green office. I was exhausted by then as only

people who spend days and nights out on the streets can feel exhaustion—a complete emptying out down to the last feeble threads. I kept well into the shadows outside, out of range of the lone streetlight, praying that this monster at the gates would please go away. I crept furtively to the doors, cupped my hands to the glass then ducked back quickly down the steps into the darkness, crouching there, scared that man might have seen me. What could be taking so long? Dread like a knifepoint scraped through the lining of my stomach into my spine. I prayed—let the hotel not be full tonight! Don't make us go to the Hotel Greenwich with its cardboard and chickenwire flophouse rooms! Sometimes, this sense of doom fell over me, like the certainty of a beating, that nothing would ever work out, ever, and I was blinded in a wept-out immensity when even suicide seemed no solution because what was the point—it would be like putting out a shadow with darkness. This total blackness covered me when I was convinced for sure we would spend another night out in the cold when it was no longer possible to stand it ten more minutes. Then joy—the rush running through him like a big relaxing bong hit that warmed his blood—he saw Harry's long-legged frame in his navy pea coat moving past the door glass, distantly, vanishing as he started up the stairs. Harry always asked for room number six, at the end of the hall—it was usually available, for some reason—so whenever the kid could sneak in, he would be sure which room.

Then came more torturous waiting, blasts of hellish wind shrieking up the Hudson, ice crystals peppering my face, the pain hurting worse in anticipation of its release. The kid hopped up and down on deadened feet. He closed his eyes and recited like a hippie mantra, prayers and curses spilling through his brain in raw bucketfuls—*please, man, take a break, go away, please, you fucker, when, when, when, ohhhh . . . man oh man oh man . . . fuck you, man . . . please . . . please . . . .*

The man in the office grew into more than he was, the monstrous shape of everything standing in my way, all the memories of blood and fear of home we carried with us in the streets, all the hateful people I had seen that day passing by not bearing even to look in my direction, all the guys who had felt me over squeezing me in places I didn't want to think about like testing ripe fruit, cheap with their money, greedy when they unzipped, faces like dumb disgusting cows when they shot off, and my rage concentrated then only on

him, powered by terror underneath that no one, no one anywhere on this earth, no one would ever *see me*, out there, and finally take me in—take me in without asking anything. Rage rose up from the agony of pure terror. Years later, I would discover this truth in Coleridge, *anger not excluding but taking the Lead of Fear*, the same Coleridge who disparaged novels and said reading them led to *utter destruction of the powers of the mind*. That moment came when I was certain the little man in the office would never let me in. I would be stuck out there forever, could die out there alone. Why the kid was so terrified this would happen, I don't know—Harry would never let more than an hour go by without coming down to find me. Still, the kid was raging, packed full of hate, aiming it all at that man in the office, every passing second murdering him in his thoughts.

It always seemed that man was talking nastily to someone—as if there might be another person with him in the office, out of sight to the side behind him. As the kid stole quick looks, the man's face took on an increasingly gruff, spiteful expression. Could there be somebody with him? Or was this just his way, snarling like that to himself as he leaned over his desk in his relentless smoke, doing his accounts, straightening out our rumpled dollar bills? Minutes passing were small eternities, each a further step into hopelessness. Finally—as always happened—the monster got up from his chair and moved out of view. Shadows hunched up on green office walls. Then mercy—the office door swung closed.

This was my chance. I clutched up the dragging rags of my coat. I flung myself up the stoop and through the doors. I raced past the closed office door. At the end of the hall were stairs and I stumbled up them, two at a time, feet too loud, long coat gathered up like an old woman's skirts. I didn't breathe, certain his voice would shout to stop me. All this took about five seconds. Then I was home free, at the top of the stairs and bounding down the hallway to our room.

"Professor...?"

The floor of the classroom seemed distant. I couldn't exactly feel my shoes in contact with anything solid so I was suddenly unsteady. Ringing started in my ears, a pressure inside my head cutting out all other noise. Saul Bromberg was still pointing at lines of dialogue which had lost all signification, like crude hashmarks, incomprehensible, talking on at me about something. I couldn't hear what he was saying. All was buzzing noise. Saul Bromberg's lips were mov-

ing, false teeth slipping in sunken cheeks. He was actually happy! He was proud! He was chattering away, all good cheer! It was like a grand reunion, some wonderful surprise! Hail fellow! Well met! Think of it—he was saying—all those years ago, in New York, and now we meet in Las Vegas! And that he should end up my student? Who could calculate such odds?

I had to fight off the urge to reach out and strangle him.

"Professor... are you all right?"

Paradise was that tiny room—number six at the end of the hall. Harry would already have his wet filthy clothes off down to his underwear, ready to head out with his clean towel to the shower down the hall and be first to climb under the blankets, between clean sheets, of the single bed we both fit ourselves into with minimal grumblings and a few sharp elbows to the ribs. He usually waited until I was safe in the room before he took his shower. The first thing I did even before taking off my coat was to wrap my arms around the radiator that stood against the wall. It was painted gold. I let it burn. I knelt there, hugging the gold radiator, burning, listening to it clicking with steam. Only later, late enough that I stood least chance of being seen, would I sneak out to the shower, that miracle, the hot water, the disinfectant-smelling steam—soaping and scrubbing, scrubbing and soaping, hands first, always my hands five times at least, like a superstition, before I would let them touch any other part of my body.

Saul Bromberg pushed closer to me in the ugly yellow classroom, his look changing. He grabbed insistently at the sleeve of my tweed jacket. This student was actually putting his hands on me, leaning into the pure revulsion for him I could no longer hide. Saul was talking to me, close to my ear now, demanding that I listen. That weird sense which I can only describe as being in two places at once—or of being two people at the same time—suddenly woke me up enough to hear him.

"Professor... I'm... I'm sorry," he stammered. "The way we had to be. You know the way you kids were, the way you lived. Let one of you in and let the others see... We'd be overrun! But Sylvia—that's my wife—Sylvia would always say, 'Saul, don't leave that boy out there! It's cold! Go out and get him!' But you know the kind of

neighborhood it was! We couldn't let grown men check in with boys! We didn't run that kind of place! You get what I'm saying?"

"Yes," I said tautly. "I understand."

These words were automatic. I understood nothing.

"No, you don't understand," he said. "It's bothered me for years. Sylvia—that's my wife—she looked for you, four and five nights a week. Remember? How you didn't leave the room for days?"

I shook my head. I had no memory of a woman there. But come to think of it, whole periods of dreamlike time passed in that tiny room at the Alton House, my brother out with his guitar panhandling and bringing up food and bags of pot, the both of us sitting on the floor, cutting a big bag of fragrant green flowers and leaves into dozens of little nickel bags he would go out and sell, nights hanging out in front of the music bars and cafes of West 4th Street, Bleeker and MacDougal—that hippie carnival scene. I would wait for him in our room, sitting on the bed, happy and warm—overjoyed—or huddling on the floor next to the radiator writing down everything I had experienced or thought on the streets in spiral notebooks I would later, with solemn intention, bury deep in city trash baskets so they could never be ripped off and read by anybody.

Long dreamy days, I would lie back in bed reading paperbacks bought for a dime or up to a quarter apiece out of the bins on 8th Street. Books I can recall from those days are Allen Ginsberg's *Howl And Other Poems*, Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of The Mind*, generous doses of Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* and *Big Sur* along with *Junkie* by William S. Burroughs. Eugene Ionesco's "The Bald Soprano" was in there, too—I can remember reading that crazy dialogue aloud, to myself. Mixed in with these were Robert Heinlein's *Stranger In A Strange Land*, *The Foundation Trilogy* by Isaac Asimov, all of Ray Bradbury—everything we considered cool and for sale in the bins, most of it possible to read while very stoned. (I still catch myself thinking of the so-called 'beat generation' and science fiction as more or less the same thing.) A whole week could pass by this way like one warm day. Mid-mornings, when only a decrepit old cleaning lady was around and this young guy snoozing at the desk downstairs—both seemed to speak only Russian—I would leave our room, run quickly over to stores on 8th then back to hunker in again before Saul Bromberg, the owner, came on shift around noon. Or if I went somewhere to hang out longer, like over to the hippie scene

on West 4th or St. Mark's Place—like over to the Eastside Bookstore—I would have to wait for night, when I could sneak in again. And so our time passed, much of it like this hazy stoned dream, until we ran out of money.

"Why don't you just go home!" Harry would say then, frustrated, ready to start crying, holding himself back from punching me. "Why are you following me around? What are *you* doing here! Do you know what the *fuck* you're *doing?*"

He blamed himself. He had tried jobs under the table—bagging incense at a head shop, washing dishes, unloading trucks—so I wouldn't go out and do what he wasn't saying we both knew I would soon be doing. But he also understood how many times I had tried—we both had tried—home, as he had called it, and that cycling abusive certainty that we would be driven to run away again, back to living this same reality.

"The two brothers, Sylvia called you," Saul Bromberg was saying. "She wanted me to call shelters or the police but I talked her out of it. What would they send you back to? I knew. Believe me, I *knew*... It got so she made me leave room number six open until last, the one your brother always asked for. Nights you didn't show, 'Wonder where the kid is, and his brother,' she would ask. That went on about two years.... Remember? Two winters?"

There are holes in my memory about that time, these buzzing blank spaces filled with noise like destroyed recording tapes, big gaps when I've tried to write down in the therapy workbooks—they call them "Life Healing Histories"—just where I was and what I was doing. It's typical of a condition my therapists refer to as *dissociation*. I've never had much desire to explore into this history very far with them, no matter what they say. They tell me there's a price to pay for this avoidance—nightmares, sure, but worse, an inability to experience true intimacy, friendship, love. So they keep trying.

"When your brother checked in, we couldn't leave you in the cold," Saul Bromberg said. "But how could we let you in without breaking rules? You were brothers! You weren't hustling in our place! We finally settled on shutting the door to the office. Remember? How you used to sneak in? Run up the stairs? We always made sure we heard you safe in the room until we opened the door again. We waited for the night shift guy, told him, then went home. Sylvia slept better knowing you were there," he said.

He said this with real sadness, liquid eyes behind his glasses. "One day, you two were just gone. But we always wondered. That's the way it was in the hotel business. People came and went," he said, a catch in his voice.

He must have known from reading *El Yanqui* that my brother Harry was busted then drafted and sent to Vietnam, from which he came back one hundred percent disabled. He also knew that I had been saved—caring teachers during another violent cycle back home improbably picked me as a foreign exchange student to get me out of there. I was sent to Argentina—what happened in that country is the main story of my autobiographical novel. I was more or less adopted by my host family, who somehow understood. They were sensible, kind parents. Even during tumultuous political events in their country, the opening actions of a story of tragic violence and murder by state terrorism which would overwhelm them, they provided me with a real home, an education in a private school, money, clothes, new brothers—a house full of art and books and love. This had been enough to change a life.

I thought he might say something more but he didn't. He stood there, sentimental, waiting for me to answer him, nostalgic for something I never knew I had shared. At a perilous time in the kid's life, with the kid convinced he was doing just the opposite, he had actually been one person in the world who did *see me*, as I had wanted so desperately to be seen. He had done all he could within his set of harsh rules to take me in—what the kid had wished for, prayed for, from another human being. Saul Bromberg was a soft, giving presence now in my classroom, a true *mensch*, a caring old guy whose wisecracks and anecdotes made him beloved among his fellow students—really just this sweet old man standing there with one of my books, asking something from me.

The feeling we shared then really was something. It reached into the literature we had bonded over in my office—the Aleph of Borges with its glimpse of the infinite, the voice of Whitman that is the universe, Rilke's terrifying angels. It felt like levitation. Suddenly, all of us—these four characters—landed in exactly the same triangle in the bellows. Our stories became the same story. We asked each other for forgiveness.