

## Hearing Voices · *Stephen Berg*

*to Charlie*

I.

Late one night, one of those mild, hazy nights  
just before Christmas, elated, burning with red wine,  
I dialed the number of the house you were staying in.  
No answer. You were out, or making love, I thought.  
I pictured you on the beach, Laguna Beach,  
faint, phosphorescent whitecaps slitting the darkness,  
appearing, brightening, sliding  
until they dissolved at your feet.  
You were amazed, I thought, by the immense, incessant hiss  
of the sea; you stood there, watching and listening until  
it got light.

I needed talk, talk about poetry and women, one of those talks  
when we'd sit for hours, say anything to reach that  
moment of insight, truth—gone instantly—you see it, feel it  
but can't say what it is—  
its doomed, wordless afterimage wounding the air.  
We're anything then, anyone—the moon, a face, branches,  
windows empty and dark, words crossing a page—that's when we  
know  
what is. That night, I sat in my kitchen in the dark, remembering  
how Giacometti's despair grew.  
In his Notebooks he wrote he couldn't sculpt a head the way he  
saw it,  
“the way it is,” but it wasn't only that.  
He couldn't believe consciousness must include death, his death.  
“. . . he goes on speaking but he's dead. . . . Is he dead?”  
He wrote that too, seeing himself awake at the moment of his  
own death, feeling  
something like what James the novelist in his great short story  
about the fear  
of love chillingly calls “the horror of waking.”  
That skinny, agonized, bent arm G. gouged into shape  
and set on top of a black steel rod,  
the hand splayed wide open, is his scream, a scream you actually  
hear

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corkscrewing its way up through your chest into your throat and out  
when no one's there to hear, the aloneness of life, how strange  
and beautiful  
it is, how it simply is, how all is,  
*is, is* pulsing in every cell as what I'd call *conscious fire*.

Now it's another of those nights.  
This desk, this lamp, this paper, these too familiar hands.  
The moon seems not to move; every time I look away, look back,  
it's passed deeper  
into the web of branches splashed on my window. Its bleak light  
quivers.  
Frost tinges the oblong panes. Down in the street

a black man in a big, buttonless, brown overcoat is  
hacking with a handax at a sawed-off chunk of tree-trunk pinned  
under his foot,  
cutting short pieces, splinters, stacking them against a wall  
of the backyard shack he sleeps in,  
working in a cone of lamplight.  
Each time he slashes the ax down puffs of steam  
burst from his lips the way words bud, blossom  
and die almost immediately between us.

## II.

Late night here and you've come back.  
We talk on the phone. You say  
it's impossible to go on paying so much alimony, you say  
something incomprehensible about going to jail  
then confess you coughed blood out there on the coast  
but kept it secret for a month until today  
when you heard the tests were negative, and say  
California was all sun, few friends, freaky cool people,  
nothing. I fill my glass. Listen—

"Do you ever think about yourself?" I ask again, and see  
the kind,  
unindulgent face of a shrink who treated me (at first I was  
so terrified  
I could barely speak), and hear him say

“Almost never,” and in Princeton, years later, a teacher  
from Japan, a short man  
dressed in a shiny, gray suit, asks, after I tell him I’m  
in pain,  
“Who is the I?” twists his right hand like a corkscrew  
above his head  
and asks “This is the sharpest sword in the world—it can  
cut anything—  
can it cut itself?” “No. No. Be the sword!” I blurt out.  
Jeff’s sitting next to me  
in that stuffy, third-floor office in the Religion Building,  
and says, “Of course it can!”  
definite, sure. “The ego has no foundation, you know . . . ”  
I hear the teacher say.  
I stand: “I’m standing here—on the floor!” “Show me where  
you’re standing,” he says  
as I hesitate, look down, step back, and point to where I was  
and we start laughing. “Why didn’t you do *this*?” he says,  
and walks toward me,  
stops, his face a few inches from mine, his clear eyes mine.

This morning I’m waiting for the 33 bus half a block from the halfway  
house near my house when one of those baby-men who sits in the sun  
on a bench all day next to a wire safety door or picks up candy wrappers,  
loose trash, leaves, who’s somewhere between old and wise and infantile  
and stupid, walks up to me, stands next to me, tilts his head and smiles  
at me and I ask Do you ever take the bus? No No he utters, shaking his  
head, No No! Do you ever go downtown? Oh No No No he answers,  
so clear and sure, urgent. Can’t even find my mother, he intones, all too  
seriously. I ask How old are you? Sixteen . . . his toothless, wizened, shy  
bag of an adolescent face seems to sag at the pavement to escape seeing  
me, to escape being seen, as the bus doors wheeze open and I step up and  
in, trapped on the reeling floor, squeezed between a fat black woman  
clutching a Bible, hugging a steel pole with her free arm, and a man  
with a stiff curly red beard flashing his age card at the driver. Poor sweet  
little guy--I watch him, shod in blue socks, blue plastic bedroom slippers  
open at the heels, shuffle back to his brothers and sisters in the nut house  
as we pull away. No No Oh No No No No No