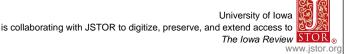
Hearing Voices · Stephen Berg

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 isits 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 101



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 treetrunk 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