

by CLIFF FYMAN

*I was keeping a journal ten years ago. I'm always keeping a journal, but ten years ago my father passed away which caused changes and I started going to the synagogue to say the mourner's Kaddish. Around the same time I was keeping a second journal entirely in question form. I wasn't sure why I wanted to write in question form. I just wanted to try it. When my father died I also started covering my head for religious reasons as I'm doing now by wearing this cap which is a large cap crotched by my friend which I try to make look like it's a rapper's hat but really it's worn for spiritual reasons. So I'd like to talk about it for a second. I don't feel righteous when I wear it or feel that I especially know what I'm doing. I wear it probably because I don't know what I'm doing and I'm trying to know. By wearing it, it makes me look more carefully at what I do and say. I can't say I've done anything really good since I started wearing it but I haven't done anything really bad either so that's ok. I wrestle with spiritual issues when I'm wearing it and I think of it as my wrestling hat. What I'll read is a section of the narrative journal but it too opens with a section of questions because I was writing so many questions that year that I became question crazy.*

Was I too hard on Jamil? Is there pressure on the heart? What if I tried reaching Theresa at her parents in Albuquerque? Wouldn't she be with someone else by now? Why'd Ira Kazlow laugh when I asked what was his goal? Would you like coffee? Should I buy Rabbi Soloveitchik's essay, "The Lonely Man of Faith"? Why do some people never find a companion? Is striving for perfection a secular way of seeking something Divine? What would you like with the vegetables? Couldn't I be close again with anyone I was once close with? What will Tompkins Square Park look like a hundred years from now? Don't our fathers handle their own deaths much better than we give them credit for? How many grave plots should I buy cheaply now anticipating a family? Do I believe in jinxes? Does Scott's sphinx jinx his rhinoceros? How's your steak? Would you like more sauce on the side? What is there to look forward to after a hospital visit except coffee and wine? Do the walls smell of antiseptic? Why does the t.v. play nonstop in an empty hospital waiting room? How to form the hospital experience into art? Didn't I say soft? Did you hear me? Was Mary my English professor ever married? Why am I too reticent to ask her that? If it's

September does that mean Mary's in Paris? How come American literature professors don't give any recognition to the Japanese fiction writers? How come Mary never heard of Akutagawa? Wasn't Mori Ogai absolutely great? Would you like green tea or herbal tea? Will I ever be able to do as well as my father did? Am I a fool? Am I lured by a smooth calm exterior and a determined interior? Is my family's criticism of my earlier life choices driving me away? Could you run this credit card for table 5? Which show are you seeing? How do you get to the Imperial Theater? Have I learned to quiet myself? Should I join an archeological dig? If I clear my thoughts can I attract only the good intentions of others? Is it a scheme or an honest idea?

Wearing white overalls and black rubber boots he yanked open a heavy freezer door and dug his bare hand into a cardboard crate on the floor. The Essex Street fish seller plucked up the iced bright fish by the teeth with two fingers and said: "White fish." I agreed to buy it. He tossed the dangling fish in the air onto a marble slab for another worker to clean by noisily brushing off silvery scales with a steel scraper. The worker with fat pink hands then scissor'd the body in half. Quickly he flipped the fish around. The head bled, he ragged the blood and guts off the marble into a gray aluminum can. He held a slippery orange sack in the air as it slid between his knuckles and asked,

"Roe?"

"Can it be poached as well as broiled?" I asked.

"Anyway you want it," he replied.

"Yes, I'll take it," I said, and he flipped the roe behind him nonchalantly onto a sheet of white paper, *splaaaat*. First time buying kosher fish.

#### D. RIVERA'S DRAWING

the drawings the laborer the  
pickaxe the joint the break breaking  
the strong hand holding the pickaxe  
the earth the hard earth  
worker curved over the hard earth

a solid black line  
from his pickaxe hip and up to shoulder  
swings down rock foot planted  
universal line accomplishing uniting  
him to earth the fallen earth  
the labor of an axe pick points  
a harmonious line encircles  
the man the man in motion  
down toward the earth the whole  
swinging arc of axe  
under one almighty sun  
around the body bent at work  
the live earth  
the limestone granite gravel  
grave earth the earth of  
frustration & bittersweet fruit  
& wildflowers the earth to  
to take a stand on & jump from  
& bow down to  
this earth

**COMPLIMENTS ON MY OLD STETSON  
FROM GUYS ON THE STREET**

Keep on walking  
by  
in your bad  
hat  
Ooo, why'd you  
have to do that  
to me!

When you're finished  
with that  
hat let me wear it!  
You know something  
young  
man, I like  
that hat  
*damn*  
I  
like that hat  
Now that's  
a  
hat  
Now that  
hat  
I like  
Nice hat dude!

## SAY A STRANGE MAN

is lying on 14<sup>th</sup> Street

Assuming he's drunk is convenient

Annoyed his body's in the way is  
greed

Realizing the man is my father is  
tragedy

Blaming the man for starving in public

is probably bigotry

To make him smile  
is noble

To lie down next to him  
is charity

To write it down  
is poverty

#### IF YOU SEE SOMETHING...

say something.

Say something if something something if.

If something something if say something.

If you don't see something

like, say,

one single African-American waiter or waitress

in the restaurant where you eat or work

in a city of millions

say something.

If I've done something wrong to you—

I goof up all the time—alert me!

Say something

but put it easy.

Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, atheists, Christians, Jews.

A time, say, of studying all the faiths.

Me understanding them

and them understanding me.

Freedom of freedom of  
freedom freedom of of of.  
If you see say O say can you see  
by the orange alert?  
No, I can't see anything  
in an orange alert.  
But I can see everything  
by the light of a poem.  
Can you see me?  
Can you hear me?  
Do I know you?  
Can we trust each other?  
Say something.