

Breaking Out



Ian Brinton

When Michael Rumaker was kicked out of his home in Gloucester County, south of the Delaware River, in 1950 it was an expulsion directed by his father and with his mother's tacit assent. It was for not going to church and for being queer. A year later he heard Ben Shahn give a lecture at the Philadelphia Museum of Art extolling the virtues of the unconventional and innovative educational establishment in the western hills of North Carolina: Black Mountain College. Arriving on a work scholarship in 1952 he later recorded his initial reactions:

The place was in many ways just as I had envisioned it: steep mountains with isolated buildings along the slopes, a sense of vast wilderness-like space and isolation.

Soon picking up on the unusual sense of educational space being provided he "also recognized, with a delicious excitement of my well-hidden but naturally rebellious heart, that there was something going on in this isolated backwoods called Black Mountain College that I had never conceived of in the world outside." Going on to describe how he learned his first lesson at Black Mountain he

remembered “When confronted with objects of creation beyond my comprehension to keep my mouth firmly shut and my eyes and ears open.” The latter part of that observation he kept firmly to throughout his writing career. Travelling into Ashville with Charles and Connie Olson on the first Friday night after starting he felt that “maybe here I could finally learn to write; equally as important, maybe here I could find a place to be.”

The first real advice that Olson offered the young Rumaker was to saturate himself in Theodore Dreiser, “Saturate yourself in Sherwood Anderson for the limpidity of his style, and Stephen Crane”, emphasizing Crane’s short story ‘The Blue Hotel’, “the best thing he ever did.” As a result of this directive Rumaker later recorded that much of his early time at Black Mountain was spent in this process of elimination:

Through Charles’s encouragement, of pushing me back to myself, to what was my experiential truth, I’d begun early that summer of 1953 to write from that experience, particularly about my family....Charles picked up on these first-hand experiences, and bid me to *mine* them.

And that was the direction, “direct, clean, and to the point, a precise, uncluttered image.” It was only later, after his first public reading that he overheard the music teacher, Stefan Wolpe, say to Olson “The trouble with Rumaker is he doesn’t know how to *lie* yet”. The lie of the imagination creates the truth of reality. Or, as Charles Tomlinson, the first poet to really introduce the Black Mountain poets to an English audience, put it in 1956, “The artist lies / For the improvement of truth. Believe him.”

The first serious story that Rumaker wrote was ‘The Truck’:

It was in the autumn, in the midst of all the uncertainties about the future of the college, after two years of continued false starts and superficial scratchings, that I wrote my first real short story, although, in what was to become usual for me, I didn’t know it till after the fact. Heeding Charles’s advice, what I did to get it was reach back into my adolescence in the mid-1940s to a street gang I got to know through a childhood pal, a former next-door neighbor, who

had moved with his family from our sleepy little South Jersey town to the northern section of Camden, in a tough, working-class neighborhood...Looking back on it, writing 'The Truck' had been my first totally pleasurable writing experience, something Charles told us *writing should be*, a terrific sense of enjoyment in the first-time experience of words as *living* things, of letting go and letting form grow out of content, as Olson, via Creeley, suggested. With the response of Olson and the others to back me, I felt the possibilities of really becoming a writer at last. In their eyes, and starting in my own, I was beginning to smarten up, learning to *lie*.

Olson's description of Rumaker's new stories was overheard at the Thanksgiving dinner at Meadows Inn in 1954. Mike Rumaker had been a student there for two years:

I was just talking about your new stories, Mike, and how each word is sharp, is like cutting words out of metal with shears.

'The Truck' was sent off to Robert Creeley in Mallorca where he was editing *The Black Mountain Review* and in October that year Creeley wrote back accepting it for issue 5 of the magazine where it appeared in the summer of 1955 alongside work by Joel Oppenheimer, Robert Duncan, Louis Zukofsky, Jonathan Williams, Charles Olson, William Bronk, Robert Creeley and Denise Levertov.

Whilst staying in New York in the winter of 1954 Rumaker hitched home to see his family:

It took me most of the day, getting short hops from exit to exit, to finally arrive at Exit 3, where I got off to head for my hometown of National Park a few miles distant. As I was hurrying along in the now-darkness along the winding exit ramp of the Turnpike, I encountered a car full of drunken servicemen travelling up from their base in the South, on leave to spend the holidays home. One of them was a marine with a bandaged hand who was more drunk than the others and who lived, as it turned out, in my hometown, and who the driver of the car, a young soldier, sick of him, was

trying to dump on me. I took notes in my head of all the vivid details of that experience for future use.

The first draft of this story was written between Christmas and New Year in New York, 1954 although it didn't appear in *Evergreen Review* until the summer of 1958 where it sat alongside Beckett's 'Krapp's Last Tape' and Olson's 'Human Universe'. Introducing the first Grove Press collection of Rumaker's stories collected under the title *Gringos*, 1966, Gilbert Sorrentino wrote that unlike many of the characters in the world of American 'dirty realism' Rumaker's people are *irretrievably* lost, lost in a sense that recalls the world of Dante's *Inferno*:

His characters are located in a relentless present, spatially undifferentiated, except insofar as their places are either starkly public or wholly empty. The one constant in these narratives is that everyone is defined by despair. The condition of despair cannot be ameliorated, and the America so defined by these lost souls is a cruel and empty one.

Rumaker's story opens with a placing within landscape that draws the reader in:

The tractor-and-trailer rolled slowly off the shoulder and onto the turnpike, its red and yellow lights blinking. Jim stood a minute watching it go, then leaned down and picked up his suitcase and started walking briskly along the exit road, past the brightly lighted toll booths. He walked faster, tucking his scarf tightly about his throat as a cold wind sprang up. The exit road made a sweeping curve downward, joining the main highway a hundred yards on. He shifted his suitcase to the other hand and headed toward the highway. As he walked along a Chevrolet convertible pulled up beside him, the motor idling. The horn blew. Jim turned, staring blindly into the headlights, and kept on going. The horn blew again, the car inching alongside him. The window of the driver's side rolled down and a head poked out.

"Hey, buddy. C'mere.

The desolate atmosphere of the uninhabited wasteland associated with a motorway exit route is created immediately with the opening image of desertion. The heavy vehicle has left the hitch-hiker at exit three and we can feel the isolation as it “rolled slowly off” the stopping point and “onto the turnpike”. The blinking of the lights seems like the last communication from a civilization in movement which has left a refugee stranded. The blinding headlights of the car which pulls up beside Jim usher in an inescapable world of personal involvement which will soon become nightmarish in its confusion of violence and homo-erotic responsibilities. The car unloads a drunken marine and Jim is trapped into being responsible for him “as the tail lights of the convertible disappeared in the traffic.” The marine’s hand is “crudely wrapped in a dirty handkerchief damp with blood” and his explanation is

“Window!” laughed the marine, his head flopping on his chest. “Doggie. Only he was on’a other side’a window... smashed...”. His head flew back and he shouted, “Smashed the fucking doggie!”

This violent sense of achievement at having attacked the US soldier (the term “doggie” pre-dates Hubert Selby’s use of it in the opening section of *Last Exit to Brooklyn*) is linked with breaking a window and it is in this image, associated with the military ‘glass house’, that we see the helpless terror of the man who is trying to escape from his own world of self-doubt. The self-doubt is reflective of unresolved feelings concerning male homosexuality as the marine cannot move away from the image of his own actions:

“I smashed his face,” he moaned. “Cut it all up. I showed him. Cut his face to ribbons. Ground his face in the broken glass. He won’t make faces any more. I ground his pretty face to bits.”

The word “pretty” and the flirtatious associations of making faces sit uneasily with the brutality of the memory and the lonely caged figure of the marine who cannot break out of the constricted world of American homophobia. He veers between calling Jim “babydoll” and “a real buddy” before confronting three soldiers who are out for

the night, provoking a fight that leaves him “the prostrate figure” at the end, presumably dead. The isolation of the marine, named Stark, the man who feels that he is in a glass house, is moved into the foreground of the story as Jim supports him off the road in search of a telephone booth so that Stark’s father can be contacted to pick him up at exit three. The confused telephone conversation with Jim attempting to locate the father emphasises even more the complete loneliness of these figures; it is clear that no one is coming to pick up, rescue or heal the damaged marine. As Jim helps him across a road they glimpse what it might be like to be on the other side of the glass:

They crossed tree-lined streets, the trees slender and bare in winter, and on either side, stretching down the blocks, low bungalows with warm yellow lights glowing in the windows. “Pretty. Awful pretty,” croaked the marine, swinging his head from left to right. “Ain’t it pretty, buddy?”

Left propped up against a sheer wall of plate-glass belonging to a drugstore while Jim goes to search for a taxi the marine can only say “I’ll bust it. Bust any window I see...Bust the doggie.” As Jim finally gets through to a taxi firm the marine makes a desperate attempt to smash the plate-glass of the store with his “bloody hand lifted high over his head, clenched as a fist”:

The glass shuddered under the impact. He threw back his arm and pounded the window a second time, leaving a smear of blood where his fist struck.

The world of the ‘glass-house’, resembling in its sense of a penitentiary the power games exploited in the creation of Panopticon-style prisons, is central to Ken Kesey’s 1962 novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. There the Big Nurse’s central observation tower protects her sanity, the correct way of perceiving reality according to the Combine of Political Power, differentiated from the madness of the inmates, by means of a highly polished sheet of glass. The narrator, Chief Bromden, acts as our guide to this Hell where Big Nurse spends the day sitting at her desk and looking out of her window and making notes on what goes on out in

front of her. The anarchic inmate Randall P. McMurphy confronts her power by running his hand through the glass barrier:

The glass came apart like water splashing, and the nurse threw her hands to her ears. He got one of the cartons of cigarettes with his name on it and took out a pack, then put it back and turned to where the Big Nurse was sitting like a chalk statue and very tenderly went to bushing the slivers of glass off her hat and shoulders.

“I’m sure *sorry*, ma’am,” he said. “Gawd but I am. That window glass was so spick and span I com-*pletely* forgot it was there.”

Unlike the heroic MacMurphy whose style is modelled on the Wild West Cowboy, Rumaker’s isolated marine can never break through or out: as he lies “stretched out a little distance from the drugstore” the owner comes out with a sponge and a tin of water. For a brief moment the reader might wonder if there could be an act of compassion from a Samaritan before realising that she is there to just clean up that window again:

She rubbed briskly, pausing once to dip the sponge again in the water and wring it out, then polished the glass clean with a corner of her apron.

In the 1966 Penguin selection of Rumaker’s work the editor, Tony Goodwin, chose a cover which depicted a manic figure whose fist is punching glass only to crack it not break it. It was the first photograph cover that Penguin used and it cost Goodwin his job!

When Rumaker finished his three years at Black Mountain College he went to live for a time in San Francisco and the world of tacit segregation haunting the place in the late 50s was presented in terrifying detail in his memoir of Robert Duncan. After describing a scene in the cellar of a downtown bar that could have illustrated a landscape from Dante Rumaker found himself passing by the alley between City Lights Bookshop and the Vesuvio Bar on Columbus Avenue:

I saw half a dozen young men standing up on the front and

back seats of an open convertible jammed in that narrow place, their bodies swaying silently back and forth, going at each other with broken beer bottles.

George Butterick, had referred to 'Exit 3' as "being *on the road* in a desolate landscape charted only by impersonal traffic signs". It was Charles Olson who had played the role of teacher, traffic officer, to the young Rumaker and in *Black Mountain Days* the student recorded the importance of what had taken place:

What Olson had been trying to pound into my head – into all our heads – was, for starters, to write, simply, what we knew from our own experience, what we had seen with our own eyes, what we had heard with our own ears, to write it in our own tongue, "like Pausanias", the ancient Greek traveller and geographer, he'd instruct us, "go out and see for yourself and come back and tell what you saw and heard, first-hand." And this I found was the hardest thing to do for a variety of reasons: fear of exposure, of plunging into the imagination, the main ones; fear of facing not only the world but myself, another. The gist of it was to get the cataracts out of my eyes, unplug my ears, and speak direct with a singular voice – "the many in one" – rather than mouthing the stolen, second and third-hand banalities of others, including my mother's.

It was Olson who some months after Rumaker graduated from Black Mountain wrote 'As the Dead Prey Upon Us' with its urgent cry to "disentangle the nets of being" in order to take responsibility for living a life that reaches beyond our inheritances. The poem recognises that "Purity / is only an instant of being" and that "the trammels / recur". Rumaker's early prose inhabits this world of purity and it threads its way through the eight dream pieces he gave to John Wieners for the second issue of the magazine *Measure* which appeared from Boston in 1958. Olson was struck by Rumaker's interest in the clarity of dream sequences and sent him a copy of his own poem, 'The Librarian' in late January 1957, the day it had been written, outlining his own position in the accompanying letter:

It raises the whole problem of how one gets dream material to avoid its own obviousness. And I take it the rule is the turning of it – drying of it out, shifting it into the real – has to be done by a means of the poem itself, not by exterior devices.

Rumaker wrote a short piece on ‘The use of the unconscious’ for that issue of *Measure* looking at a vivid approach to the interleaving of landscape and imagination:

Story can be, obliquely, a map of the unconscious, its terrain and peopling.

The physical can be made to yield psychic responses.

The unconscious nests the actual.

In the fall of 1958 Rumaker entered the Rockland Psychiatric Center, whose name in Ginsberg’s *Howl* represented one of the ways a repressive society had attempted to destroy the best minds of a generation and he wrote to Duncan in September the following year “I want to smash everything. I want to smash these gray clerks of the soul. I want the day back. I am not a psychopath. I am not nuts.” Some of his experiences in Rockland found their way into his first novel, *The Butterfly*, which centred on the affair he had with Yoko Ono before she became associated with John Lennon. In the isolated Hell of the Center which has become Home, the main character, another Jim, “kept his eyes averted as they walked past the buildings on either side of the street. He stared at the ground, not liking to see the other patients locked in on the porches. That always made his heart sink, made him get depressed. Some of the patients were pacing rapidly back and forth, while others stood mute and alone, lost in some profound and unknowable silence. They each seemed alone, each cut off from the other and from the life about them.” One of his friends in the Home which he is about to leave clenches his teeth “and swung to the window and smashed the screen with his fist. The impact made a blunt dead sound. The screen was unyielding, as though it had not been touched.”

In *Robert Duncan in San Francisco*, republished five years ago by City Lights Press and edited by Ammiel Alcalay and Megan Paslawski the closing pages of the narrative visit the time of

Rumaker's discharge from Rockland. Trying to remember how to live an un-institutionalized life he wrote to Duncan on January 4th 1961:

Dear Robert

I have re-read your letters, letters I scarcely remember. I have been so withdrawn at Rockland and buried under the river of my life. Now I find them filled with kindnesses I cherish. They are dear to me...Your dark and splendid sensuality has always been foreign to me. I'm a seed feather. Which also has its splendours and toughness. It endures as well. It's only that we each, in our own way, work the making of a world.

Ken Kesey's version of smashing that plate glass window reflects an uplifting and sentimental denouement to the world of Big Nurse. Chief Bromden picks up an enormous control panel from the patients' tub room and hurls it through the screen:

The glass splashed out in the moon, like a bright cold water baptizing the sleeping earth.

Bromden runs for it and escapes hitching a lift going north in a truck full of sheep and the novel concludes "I been away a long time."

For Michael Rumaker bringing it all clear to mind was the result of his experience at Black Mountain College. As he wrote to Duncan on April 4th 1956:

I went there wanting something. And found it.

Outside/Inside...Just Outside the Artworld's Inside, by Martha King (Blazevox Books)



Ian Brinton

Memory is itself a form of story-telling and to some extent we all shape our pasts in the interests of our present. There are plenty of advanced literary critics today ready to talk of memoirs having 'a narrative truth' and language itself being doomed to unpunctuality with words chasing, describing and shadowing a reality that has already disappeared. In his fictional account of *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* Julian Barnes had suggested that "History isn't what happened, it's what historians tell us happened". Or as his fictional school-teacher and narrator put to us in Flaubert's *Parrot* "How do we seize the past? Can we ever do so?" To give an example of the difficulty of ever reassembling the past or even grabbing firmly hold of what has in fact become history the narrator in that second novel recalls an anecdote from his college-days in which a piglet smeared with grease was let loose at an end of term dance:

It squirmed between legs, evaded capture, squealed a lot. People fell over trying to grasp it, and were made to look ridiculous in the process. The past often seems to behave like that piglet.

Martha King knows the reality of this sliding world which is why she can say of her memoirs “Small surprise that what I remember is so indistinguishable from what I was told”. In this fascinating compilation of moments covering some seventy years “Swarms of detail easily wrap themselves in clouds of false emotion” and memoir is always “a revision, a form of fiction”.

In the early pages of the book Martha King suggests that memory as a movie “might use flashback techniques” and so when re-creating her wedding to the artist Basil King, Baz, she recalls that “premarital counselling” had been provided by John Wieners who had studied with Baz at Black Mountain College:

The filmmaker should show us meeting on Columbus Avenue. John looked far younger than his age when he was young, and the man we encounter on the street is a delicate bird, with a prominent hook nose, smooth forehead, and curling dancing eyes. He will write all the work in *The Hotel Wentley Poems* three months from now. The book will be published a little later in the year. But we already know what a poet he is. And we're excited. We tell John we're getting married. But instead of smiling he looks worried. Then asks us each for our place and date of birth, which we give him. The time of day? We both guess. He pulls a pocket-sized astrology reference book from his inside jacket pocket. “You'll be fine,” he says after ruffling some pages.

Among those flashbacks, those moments of reminiscence which stand arrested for a moment, for a lifetime, we meet Robert Creeley. He and Martha went on long walks from Black Mountain; they “walked and talked all night”:

I don't know if Bob told me then about his father's death, or if it was later that I got that defining image of the two dark tracks from the ambulance wheels that backed across his snow-covered front lawn and carried his dying father away. Tracks that stayed until the spring thaw. That backed across his heart. That stayed for a lifetime.

This was a conversational world in which the focus of discussion

was upon process rather than arriving at conclusions and Black Mountain College promoted the growth of a language “that works at getting at things, making connections that might be generative, a risky language not focused on defending itself, ranking itself, not devoted excessively to maintaining prestige and position.” The immense value that lurked behind that North Carolina educational venture, a campus that had hosted poets such as Charles Olson and Robert Duncan, artists such as Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning, musicians and experimental artists such as John Cage and Buckminster Fuller, can be felt in Martha King’s account of the proposed New York exhibition promoted by the art critic G.R. Swenson. Two years after the death of Frank O’Hara in an accident on Fire Island Swenson had wanted to organize a “counter-salon show” which would reassert the centrality of art offering a blow against irony. Intensity, honour and commitment were to be exhibited as a challenge to the “Art-smarts” which could be so easily learned, the Pop art in which “new could be as easy as picking up an attractive comic book”, the 1968 Art world which had toned down the dangerous qualities that had surrounded the earlier generation’s art. Swenson arranged for his exhibition to be held in the main floor exhibition space at New York University’s Loeb Student Center and it would promote work by Baz, Carol Haerer, Ivan Micho and Philip Wofford amongst others. A small manifesto was written for the exhibition under the title “Origins and Cycles” and the opening night was crowded with “friends and friends of friends”. And then all went silent: there were no reviews and it was as if someone had hung a “don’t touch it” sign up. The need to toe a party-line was further emphasised when Swenson’s article for the catalogue of a big Museum of Modern Art exhibition of Jim Rosenquist’s work was perceived by the establishment to be off-piste. Swenson poured out his rage and grief to Martha King and told her how he received a call from *Time* magazine offering him a guest column if he would “adjust” the views he had expressed in that catalogue. Swenson’s admiration for Rosenquist’s work was centred upon it constituting a blow against an artist’s sense of ironic distance and Swenson made a strong case for irony being used “to mask a cynical dread of belief”. Three years later Basil King was to publish parts of this essay in the magazine *Mulch* and its appearance there asserted the importance of what Martha was to call an art “that is exactly what you see”, an

art which is a “blow against hermetic, self-referential cleverness”.

The presence of Baz haunts the pages of this remarkable memoir and the respect which Martha pays him is itself a testament to a life of shared artistic commitments. After a trip to England in 1985 Baz opened up his life as a writer and “soon he was writing a place for himself between writing and painting, bringing together disparate things which has always been his gift and his burden”.

Martha and Basil King moved to Grand Haven in Michigan in 1972 when Baz took up a post at Thomas Jefferson College, a post which he owed to the encouragement of the dying poet Paul Blackburn. Martha wrote poetry:

In Grand Haven I didn't have a money job. In the mornings, when the house emptied out, I went upstairs to the typewriter on a big wooden table at the end of the bedroom. Most of the poems in my *New Rivers* book were hammered out at that table while I sweated and swore and smoked cigarettes.

She wanted to use what she had learned from reading Olson about the resonance of a place being revelatory and “that out of a jumble of information – personal stories, devices, connections, extensions – could come *form*”. Her poetry, so like this woven book of memoirs, reveals “the past’s continual cryptic intrusion” and in ‘Husband & Wife’, an early poem from *Imperfect Fit*, the selected poems which was published in 2004 by Marsh Hawk Press, we can see the patterning taking place:

to take command
of the situation
is the job of a weaver

In the opening essay to his book *Scratching the Beat Surface* Michael McClure had said that he wanted to “express the intensity and vividness of my own perceptions and the *manner* in which impressions linked themselves in the exciting swirl that I called my consciousness”. Martha King’s autobiographical memoir, both *Outside* and *Inside*, achieves precisely this and it recalls those words she had used in ‘M to B’, that celebratory poem to Baz in which she

had acknowledged a lifetime of commitment:

This is a greeting from me
on your fifty-third birthday
not just a present sweep I'm using
to keep sorrow back
but a clear ring of words you might speak
as you step up onto the street