

ROBERT DUNCAN

in San Francisco



Michael Rumaker



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**City
Lights**



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With an Interview & Letters

Edited by Ammiel Alcalay and Megan Paslawski

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CITY LIGHTS / GREY FOX

San Francisco

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Introduction

“THE WHOLE THING HAS NO MEANING IF IT IS NOT SIGNED”

When Robert Duncan was twenty-five—only a year older than Michael Rumaker would be when Black Mountain College asked Duncan to serve as Rumaker’s external examiner—he published “The Homosexual in Society” in the August 1944 issue of Dwight Macdonald’s magazine *Politics*. The article was short, but it was seen as momentous because it issued from someone who openly acknowledged that he was part of the human race.

Just three months before the appearance of Duncan’s article, Charles Olson resigned from his position at the Office of War Information. His resignation bore witness to deep policy changes that would lead the United States to assume the mantle and practice of imperial might. While the US took the role of global steward and policeman, its government-sponsored cultural policy would conspire with economic and military policy. The very framework of knowledge would alter radically with the growth of the university and the culture industry in the Cold War.

In August 1945, less than two weeks after the US dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Olson

changed the narrative of *Call Me Ishmael*, his groundbreaking study of Melville, to focus on the tragic story of the whale-ship Essex, on which the crew resorted to cannibalism after going astray. His own change of course away from party politics left Olson to seek a new base of knowledge and experience from which to explore what Duncan would later call “the underbelly of the nation.”

Michael Rumaker was born into this “underbelly” in 1932, but would journey from it to one base of new knowledge, Black Mountain College. With Olson as Rector, Duncan as teacher, and Rumaker as student, the paths of these three men aligned in their search for new ways of writing and being.

Rumaker was one of nine children born into a working-class Catholic family who struggled to make ends meet during the Depression. Rumaker’s mother, as he wrote in *Black Mountain Days*, “helped pay for her keep and my getting born by peeling potatoes in the kitchen of the Retreat, a maternity home for poor married women of ‘good moral standing.’” The circumstances of this childhood would loom large in Rumaker’s most ambitious novel *Pagan Days* (1999), narrated in the first person by Mickey Lithwack as he grows from six to nine years old. Were it not for Olson’s instinctive recognition of East Coast working class boys as his spiritual kin, Rumaker might have seemed on this evidence an unlikely candidate for Black Mountain.

Between the poles of *Pagan Days*, which named and celebrated his own queer beginnings, and his earliest stories (written at Black Mountain in the mid-1950s and shrouded in the depths of unconscious impulse), Rumaker’s work

distinguished itself by what Duncan later characterized as “a writing that matters, that feeds a hunger for depth of experience and that will make new demands upon our understanding of human life.”

Few writers in this country have explored the politics of memory as profoundly as Rumaker. His understanding of memory was a hard-won product of years in which he found himself silenced, first institutionalized for two years at the Rockland Psychiatric Center and later choked off by alcohol and drugs. *The Butterfly*, an account of Rumaker’s post-Rockland relationship with Yoko Ono, painfully limned the effort it took to break that silence. The book’s appearance in 1962 and the publication of *Gringos and Other Stories* in 1967 were the last the wider world heard from Rumaker for ten years, until the publication of *A Day and a Night at the Baths*, a groundbreaking portrait of sexual freedom powered by gay liberation. Allen Ginsberg joyously declared that *Baths* allowed him to see through Rumaker’s “eyes and feel thru his body.”

Rumaker’s silence through the late ’60s and early ’70s matched Duncan’s in intensity and perhaps in inspiration, despite how differently they expressed their malaise. In 1968, Robert Duncan declared that he would not publish a new collection for fifteen years. By the time Rumaker started working on his portrait of Duncan in San Francisco, Duncan was a poet of major stature whom few knew and even fewer could read, given that he deliberately removed himself from the careerist gravy-train. By circulating his work among friends and in very limited editions, Duncan could block out a wider but narrower world and discover what poetry

asked of him. Across the country in Nyack, NY, Rumaker was learning to bring the same focus and strength to his own writing, though his journey required him to publish.

Some critics, cleverer writers than readers, have described *Robert Duncan in San Francisco* as *Michael Rumaker in San Francisco*. Such an interpretation ignores the generosity of the book: a generosity that acknowledges the influence and spiritual guidance one person, however unconsciously, can communicate to those around him. The memoir repays Rumaker's debt to Duncan and the other mentors who helped Rumaker survive San Francisco of the 1950s, a city where queers congregated only to find themselves kettled by police, mainstream society, and their own fear. But as in all great writing, this debt was not simply to individuals, no matter how cherished they might be, but to the act of writing itself, to the historical and political process of exploring how identity is formed through perception of oneself and of oneself through others, in specific times and places, through specific forms, and in the context of very specific oppression. *Robert Duncan in San Francisco*, to remain true to Duncan's liberationist instincts, must be the story of many, all connected in their struggle to live more truly: Rumaker hiding in his clerk's uniform at parties, the painter Tom Field opening his home to all passersby, poet John Wieners shocking his landlord with his cherry lipstick.

Back on the East Coast after a year and a half in San Francisco, Rumaker wrote Duncan about some poems of his that appeared in *Measure*, the magazine edited by Wieners. "Your 'Propositions' in *Measure* is . . . I can't find

the word. I'm thrilled, and moved. You're the richest man in San Francisco." Rumaker located the wellspring of Duncan's richness in his careful construction of a protective domestic space in which he practiced the freedom that he then brought into the outer world.

Because he fought for so long to feel comfortable in his own queer skin, Rumaker took years to understand the import of his encounters with Duncan on Duncan's home ground, where the poet found spiritual nourishment through a loving relationship with the great artist Jess Collins. As Rumaker later explained, "I didn't know the secret then: the more open, the more protected you are."

Rumaker had at last understood the precept that Duncan had stated so clearly in 1944, when he castigated the notion of group allegiance and its consequences. To hold the "devotion to human freedom, toward the liberation of human love," he wrote, "every written word, every spoken word, every action, every purpose must be examined and considered. The old fears, the old specialties will be there, mocking and tempting; the old protective associations will be there, offering for a surrender of one's humanity congratulations upon one's special nature and value. It must always be recognized that those who have surrendered their humanity, are not less than oneself."

Such thinking, as Duncan wrote back in response to Dwight Macdonald's well-founded trepidation for Duncan's public future were he to publish "The Homosexual in Society," must be backed by openness: "it is only by my committing myself openly that the belief and the desire of others for an open and free discussion of homosexual problems

may be encouraged . . . *the whole thing has no meaning if it is not signed.*”

This faith in openness and dislike of in-groups would temper Duncan’s sometimes contrary politics through the 1960s, as when he described the humanity of the police charging demonstrators at a march on the Pentagon where he had been scheduled to speak: “Two of the faces I find immovable with hatred for what I am. What have they been told I am? But the third wavers in the commanding panic and pleads with his eyes, Retreat, retreat, do not make me have to encounter you.”

This encounter made Duncan realize that he must refuse an audience that would want what they think he can give them: “In the face of an overwhelming audience waiting for me to dare move them, I would speak to those alike in soul, I know not who or where they are. But I have only the language of our commonness, alive with them as well as me, the speech of the audience in its refusal in which I would come into that confidence. The poem in which my heart beats speaks like to unlike, kind to unkind. The line of the poem itself confronts me where I must volunteer my love, and I saw, long before this war, wrath move in that music that troubles me.”

Such contradictory motivation—and such openness to it—has made Duncan’s work, like Rumaker’s, extremely difficult to mobilize on behalf of any single identity and thus more difficult for the critical establishment to assess. The appearance of Duncan’s *H.D. Book*, along with Lisa Jarnot’s biography and the first volume of Duncan’s *Collected Writings*, parallels the publication and republication of key works by

and about Rumaker: this book, *Black Mountain Days, A Day and a Night at the Baths, Selected Letters*, and Leverett T. Smith Jr.'s *Eroticizing the Nation: Michael Rumaker's Fiction*. All point to a revival of interest that might further the possibility of these essential writers once again circulating more widely and re-inhabiting the common currency of significant historical and literary achievement. Our aim in presenting this new edition of Michael Rumaker's *Robert Duncan in San Francisco* is to provide a new context for the work, both through an interview we conducted with Rumaker in February 2012, and the publication of selected correspondence between him and Duncan. In doing so, this text illustrates an evolving relationship that reveals obscured lives—particularly queer lives—at the height of the Cold War. These new and newly gathered materials challenge the historical categories, whether of schools or identities, we have received. We may instead follow the journeys these people took to see where they lead.

Ammiel Alcalay & Megan Paslawski

City Lights



ROBERT DUNCAN IN SAN FRANCISCO

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One

Robert Duncan wrote me several letters from Black Mountain College in North Carolina in the summer of 1956, saying he wanted to come to Philadelphia (where I was living after graduating) to meet me. Because of various unexpected changes in plans, we didn't get to meet til late summer of that year.

Duncan hitchhiked up from Black Mountain and arrived at my basement apartment at 21st and Spruce on a Saturday morning. The first thing of course, were his eyes, those curious and lovely eyes that looked at me, directly, while in the same instant, with hesitancy and vulnerability, looked around me and off to the sides. He was nervously casing me and, simultaneously, what lay beyond the door. Voluptuously plumpish, with a coxcomb of dark hair, he stepped into the room. Shy with each other at first, he began to talk, nonstop, generating energy for a dozen people, radiant with intelligence and enthusiasm. In a word, overwhelming, like a force of nature. His presence filled the room. (Charles Olson once said, "Duncan's like a roman candle, dazzling and exciting for the first couple hours, then it begins to wear you out. You want to go away, or you

want *him* to go away—go home and write it down.” This from a man not exactly lacking in overwhelming razzle-dazzle himself.)

It was a bad time to meet Duncan because I was drinking too much and spending nights cruising Rittenhouse Square. I was working in a financial advertising agency during the day (Black Mountain had prepared me for nothing but my destiny, but in spite of that I bluffed my way into getting hired for a job I knew nothing about). I was trying to write at night but didn't have the concentration and energy I'd had at Black Mountain, or the sense of protection. I was also “in love.”

I'd met a young man, a writing student, when I went back to the college for a week's vacation-visit in the first week of August 1956. Duncan was away at that time so I didn't get to meet him then. The young man told me he was 18th in line for the throne of England. He also believed himself to be the reincarnation of Holden Caulfield, said he even had the typewriter that *Catcher in the Rye* was written on. It didn't matter. He was slender and blond and wore black-rimmed glasses that enhanced his good looks. He was also heavily into pot and pills, especially speed and barbiturates, as were some of the few remaining students at the college. This was near the final closing of the school and in the year since I'd left there was a drastic change. There was a psychotic, unpredictable energy in the air. Jerry van de Wiele, the painter, told me that when certain students came to visit, when he was living at Last Chance on the road to the farm, he was careful to put the axe he used for cutting firewood in a safe place, out of sight and reach.

During my stay, Olson and Betty Kaiser, with whom he was now living after first wife Connie's departure, invited me up to supper one night and Charles gleefully told me (but with a touch of bewilderment and exasperation in his voice since the quality of the work of what writing students there were had dropped considerably) that the remaining faculty should vote to take down the Black Mountain College sign over the Gatehouse entrance and "run up a bright red flag that says 'SECONAL' on it in big letters!"

What seemed the main, and singularly constructive, activity of that spring quarter (Duncan's *Medea* was done in the summer of 1956) had been the production of Robert's farce *The Origins of Old Son*, with a cast that involved practically the entire population of the school. Van de Wiele told me he had felt uncomfortable playing the baby, in baby hat and dress, his legs hanging out of the carriage, because he strongly suspected Duncan's baby was Olson and that Olson suspected it too, although Charles didn't say anything about it. Jerry knew, however, that set look Olson could get that spoke loud and clear.

Charles had introduced us to Duncan's poetry in his writing classes. He would read us the latest work he'd received in letters from Duncan out in San Francisco or, later, in Mallorca, and we'd discuss the poems. Charles' own energetic affection for the poems was, as with so much else that grabbed him, contagious.

Once he said in a writing class after reading a new poem Duncan had sent him, "It's like Duncan has no 'social sense' in his poems. The lines of them drop down—They're all movement" and here he lifted his long arms high over his

head and let them drop slowly in a shimmering motion—
“Like falling bolts of silk.”

When Duncan arrived that Saturday morning it had been, despite our correspondence, abruptly and without much advance notice. The trouble was I had planned that weekend to be with my writing-student friend who had since left Black Mountain and was now living in New York City. I told Robert this and that I felt bad leaving him alone in a cellar apartment in a strange city.

He said he planned to stay til Monday anyway; too, he wanted to see the Arensberg Collection again at the Philadelphia Museum, that he could amuse himself while I was gone, and was gracious enough to tell me not to worry about him, we'd talk when I got back on Sunday.

I don't remember that weekend in New York at all except for walking late into the Cedar Bar with my friend. For several hours previously we'd been smoking and popping pills and drinking. I went eventually into a blackout and awakened from it for a few moments as we walked to the crowded rear of the bar. Several people I knew were there from Black Mountain, Joel Oppenheimer, Fee Dawson, Dan Rice. As I moved down the long narrow bar to the back, each looked at me with a set face and then parted, moved several steps away, making way for me. I can only imagine what I looked like from the expression in their eyes, as if they were looking at a stranger, and someone they didn't want to get close to.

When I returned to Philly Sunday afternoon I was jittery and exhausted. I wished Robert wasn't there. This non-stop talking cyclone of energy was more than I could handle

in my hungover, strung-out state. I have said that this was a bad time to meet this poet whose work I esteemed but whose personal life frightened the bejesus out of me. For Robert was unabashedly and openly queer at a time when practically everybody in America from Senator Joe McCarthy on up was a terminal closet case.

After three years at Black Mountain I'd learned how to write but I was still pretty callow about a lot of things. Love in particular, and gay love most emphatically. Same-sex relations at the college were tacitly approved but never openly discussed, at least not as comfortably by faculty and students as non-gay relationships. The prevailing attitude was tolerance (no small thing at the time; given the climate of the decade, even in the relatively protected enclave of Black Mountain, care had to be taken since Buncombe County was most definitely a part of the USA). Charles' remark to me in the early 1950s in one of the few brief times he ever discussed gayness that "there are no camps" was the only sensible words I'd heard on sexuality up til then.

So here was a real faggot, open and reasonably happy about it, unafraid to be what he was. It frightened me. I, who had so carefully striven to appear "straight" in my job and in the city of my birth, crowded with working-class Catholic relatives. It was only after a quart or two of Schmidt's ("of Philadelphia") that I had the courage to cruise Rittenhouse Square. A number of times I was beaten and robbed, three times in my basement apartment, once by two men who drove me to a dump in South Philly. Once raped, twice almost murdered. Each time by homophobic men, as I always found out too late, posing as upfront gays. I went to them

because “straight-appearing” was more attractive than “gay appearing,” more desirable because accepted as the “healthier.” I was halved by the split of that ignorance.

I only wanted Robert to go away (but for different reasons than Charles had sometimes wished), this gay man who I’d heard early on at Black Mountain was living, and had been living for some years in San Francisco, with another man, a painter named Jess, in what, from what I could learn, was a reasonably harmonious and loving friendship. That seemed unbelievable to me. At Black Mountain I’d lived for a time with another student who was gay and even though everyone knew this they pretended not to. The student and I couldn’t be open and comfortable in our situation with others, and, aside from our own personal abrasions, that sense of being not quite permissible affected our own feelings for each other. To be tolerated isn’t the same as sharing an equal and open acceptance. Black Mountain in the 1950s, for all its latitude in other areas, reflected in microcosm the general attitudes of American society at large, and that was that un-gay was more okay than gay, and that gay, no matter the liberal solicitude, didn’t somehow fit. Mainly there was, for me, and the other gay males and lesbians at the college, no source of identity to plug into. However, considering what lay outside the Gatehouse then, at Black Mountain you could at least breathe and, most importantly, you weren’t hassled for being what you were. Uppermost, the spirit of acceptance was for all, in the work being done there, open and “rough around the edges” as Charles said Black Mountain should always be.

Robert told me he had amused himself by reading some of my personal stuff while I was gone (perhaps unconsciously

he was still playing the part of my outside examiner). In my exacerbated state that really pissed me off. But I kept silent. That wasn't the real reason for my anger.

When it was time to go to bed we split the bed apart (it was a small apartment and I had one of those narrow Hollywood jobs, secondhand). Can't remember who slept on the mattress on the floor. Being the typical young egoist and hypocrite, I was afraid Robert would put the make on me and I couldn't respond—and, more likely, unconsciously afraid he wouldn't. I had glimpsed the recognition of something in my own face in his eyes and had looked away. His eyes were a hand-mirror to mine. He was the bountiful looker. But my own seeking then was niggardly, pinched, cataracted and only sexual.

My initial, and romantic, sense of him was that Robert was like some sensuous flower, all-enfolding, too heavily perfumed. I ran from the pull of its fascination. Its ecstatic brilliance hurt the eyes, in his person, in his poems. Strange and unknown to me, I dreaded its power. How could I know then that what seemed so fearful and alien was as natural as breath? That it was the center and secret of all happiness?

I left for work in the morning relieved to know that when I got home in the evening Robert would be gone.

Beginning in 1954, as a writing student at Black Mountain College, I had sent several of my early short stories, at the urging of Charles Olson, to Robert Creeley in Palma de Mallorca where he was then living with his family and editing the first issues of *The Black Mountain Review*. Creeley liked the stories and showed them to Robert Duncan

who was also at that time staying in Mallorca with Jess Collins. Because Duncan responded with excitement and favor to the work, especially “The Pipe” and “Exit 3,” when it came time for my graduation, in 1955, Olson, backed by Creeley, decided Duncan would be an excellent choice to act as outside examiner. “We don’t want any academic types,” Olson had said.

There was a sticky moment or two when Duncan, understandably uncertain as to just what was expected of him in the matter, did, in part, ask questions of my range and ability as a writer in a somewhat academic vein. Still, the concerns and generosity of the person were evident in the letter he wrote to Creeley (who was now teaching at the college) and, by extension, to the Black Mountain faculty, from Bañalbufar on October 7, 1955 as a clarification after I had graduated.

I quote it here for that reason and for the record, and also for the sense of Robert’s stance and thought at the time, and not for his generous praise, heartening as it was:

Dear Bob:

You ask me to consider this work of Mike Rumaker’s “with reference to its level, educationally speaking”; “does he write as competently, and as potentially well, as the average graduate from the usual college?” There need be no qualifications of my answer that he does indeed do as well as the better than average graduate from a college. In the short story, in such pieces as “The Pipe” or “Exit Three” [sic], Rumaker has, after all, a professional

command of his craft and is engaged in that craft at a level which is to be compared not with “the average graduate” but with the best at work in the field. One has only to compare an earlier story “Loie’s Party” or “The Jest” to appreciate what has been learned—and in the terms of learning as well as command, in the terms of gain in craft which I take it comes from his engagement in learning as well as in terms of his command which I take comes from his engagement in the immediate task of the writing at the time of writing, he is certainly at the best level of graduate writing.

From the three critical pieces provided for my consideration, it is clear that Rumaker’s work in this type of essay is better than average, certainly as good as average graduate work. The papers¹ are casual, not academic—but it is a difference of task set, not a difference of competence in organization and craft that would distinguish here. And the insights, the constant interplay of experience and new materials which is of the essence of a critical intelligence—these are here, as they are not often to be found in graduating students at the “A” level.

Yours truly,

(signed)

Robert Duncan

I would also like to quote, again, as a basis for this reminiscence and for the record, and to establish that personal sense of his kindness and caring, from part of a letter

Duncan wrote to me from Black Mountain, where he was now teaching, on March 30, 1956, several months before our first meeting. The quote is to give the value of the person and poet Duncan was, and is, not only to myself in my apprentice writing days, but to other young writers as well. It's to give, too, his perception of the different angles in which each of us approached our writing:

They put me in a hot position by #graduating# you. I would not myself like to be “graduated” as a writer. What does it mean? Anyway, Creeley pickd me because he knew I liked your work—this means that I read it in the same sense that I read anything, because it feeds me. And how to get that across? It isn't anyway part of my recommendation. What does it mean that you write well, which is easy to say, and sets me up to discriminate? when it is a pleasure I get, it is the life of all conversations, all talk in your stories . . . and then the veracity that lingers. EXIT THREE still stays with me after six months . . . tho I forget sometimes and think it was something that happened to me when I was hitch hiking. You invade my own experience that way. But I must be the strangest of audiences for you . . . you are so straight. And I glamor-enamored. Well, I am used to arriving at my soul's home in some monstrosity of history, some Venice . . . but just so, I am amazed at where you get on a truck, a pipe, or a highway. THE RIVER and the poems I have not read yet. If, when I read the poems, there is

anything I feel right to say I will write you. But the damned difficulty of my position in having to write an official recommendation was that I view this thing about a writer, a real writer as unofficial . . . one ought to FLUNK it into its own authenticity. The point about the What about Henry James? was just that I couldnt see you (and, thats the point, cant) as the product of a school. It was not as that but because one saw too that “graduation” meant jobs perhaps etc. But you belong in my heart as a reader in your own place. Not as a comment on H.J. or J.J. or even Robert Creeley. Oh well, tho Mark Twain and Dostoyevsky do come to mind somehow. And I think you would get a bang out of reading Chekov’s BLACK MONK, tho I dont know why. It hasnt got the genius of talk. But I’m write, right, here—you aren’t just the genius of talk. The pit on one side for you is the “camp,” the folk-ways of the queer—just as for me it is the “drag,” exotic decor of the queer. But the human being is more important so far to you—this is what I get out of your writing—than any of his minorities. And I always find men there, they’re all parts of a Man. And that I think is the firmest hold I have on your work. Your beautiful sense of man’s nature. . . .

When I graduated from Black Mountain College in 1955 I planned to give myself a year in Philadelphia to work and pay off some small debts. Luckily, I was able to stay with some friends in the small top floor room of their

tiny 18th-century, three-story Father-Son-and-Holy-Ghost house, as those old servant houses are called, on back alley St. James Street in Center City, while I looked for work and could finally rent the basement apartment at 21st & Spruce (where another visitor, John Wieners, stopped by one day but didn't stay long, Beantown chauvinist to the core, opining, "Philadelphia was trying too hard to be like Boston").

I had also met a wealthy lesbian, and all her lesbian friends, who lived around the corner on Locust Street in a much more luxurious apartment, and who was in analysis to make her stop being a lesbian—a quite common barbaric practice in those days and with whom I on occasion slept to help create the miracle, and with whom I drank her Black & White Scotch and listened to the smoky-voiced Chris Connor, especially her queer-popular "Lush Life."

When the miracle didn't occur she would rush off in ever more avid appetite, still a miraculously intact dyke, to the arms of one of her women friends.

Having had a student deferment for four years I also had to take care of my draft status. (At my induction examination, after several minutes of indecision, I checked the question "Have you had any homosexual experiences?" with a Yes, and became 4-F.) In October 1956, shortly after Robert's visit, the year was up, my debts paid off and the Selective Service no longer a threat. I left Philly and hitchhiked to San Francisco. Shortly before setting out Robert, who was now back in San Francisco, wrote:

... Yes, you can send your things care of me at this address [1137 DeHaro]. Where we will find a place

for you to stay is still up in the air. When I got your letter I phoned Tom Field who was looking for a place himself—but I haven't seen him since. If that worked out, it might be the easiest for you but however it goes I think I can find a corner of this city ready for you when you arrive. . . .

I thought it would be a good place to start again, a place totally unknown and new to me, 3,000 miles away from the placid brick of Philadelphia and the magnetic pull of Rittenhouse Square dangers and addictions. Also, some friends from Black Mountain had gone there just before the closing of the school. In a different place maybe I would get to know Duncan in a different way.

With nothing more than \$30 in my pocket and clutching my mother's old battered suitcase, my lesbian friend drove me, in style at least, in her cream-colored Mercedes-Benz convertible to the Valley Forge entrance of the Pennsylvania Turnpike early one morning in October 1956 to begin my hitchhiking across the continent. After a day or two of numerous hops, in Vandalia, Illinois (curiously, where Abe Lincoln began practicing law and later the location of the writing farm where James Jones wrote *From Here to Eternity*), I luckily got a lift with an Air Force jet pilot who was headed for the outskirts of San Francisco. A pleasant enough guy who talked about the girl he'd left behind in Indianapolis the whole trip but who didn't mind sharing a bed with me at several of our overnight stops, aptly enough at one place in Oklahoma called the Homotel, the young, attractive pilot saying to the desk clerk, "A double

bed's OK." A fast driver, we made it to Needles, California, in three days. Near San Francisco, he dropped me off where I could get a bus to Buchanan Street where Tom Field and Paul Alexander, both painters and former Black Mountain students, now shared an apartment and where they'd invited me to stay til I got a place of my own. As I waited for the McAllister Street bus the first thing that struck me about the city was the look of the police on motorcycles. They were dressed in white crash helmets, black leather jackets and jodhpurs with stout black boots, and had bullets and hardware bundled around their middles. You must remember that this police dress was not so common as it is now. They made me think of the SS men in anti-Nazi propaganda movies during World War II. It certainly made me uneasy.

I was to learn in my year and a half stay in San Francisco that it was indeed a police city. There was, in spite of the extraordinary quality of light over the city, a heavy climate of fear, not so much from the violence which occurred, although there was enough of that, but rather from the activities and presence of the police themselves. This was particularly true for gay men. There was also the burgeoning narcotics squad with the beginnings of the wider use of drugs. But the Morals Squad was everywhere and the entrapment of gay males in the streets, the parks and in numerous public places was a constant fear and common occurrence. Often the most handsome, hung, desirable-looking cops were used for these plainclothes operations. I often wondered who did the selecting.

My first night in San Francisco Paul Alexander took me to Lafayette Park on Pacific Heights (Tom was working night-

work and unable to be there when I arrived) and showed me the view of the city looking off toward Telegraph Hill and Russian Hill, and Marin County across the bay. Looking out at the vast downward run of lights from that height and smelling the cold-salt smell of the Pacific in the darkness, I knew, just as I had several years earlier in my first days visiting Black Mountain, this was the place I needed to be.

We walked to North Beach to The Place, which had been opened (like The Tin Angel²) by former Black Mountain students, the painters Leo Krikorian and Knute Stiles. The huge dark wooden bar, elaborately and intricately carved, with fluted glass lamps set between its columns and large, faded mirrors, had been found in some old saloon long gone out of business. It was one of those antique bars carved in New York City, I was told, and brought around Cape Horn by ship to San Francisco before the turn of the century, like most wood products and timber to that craftsman-sparse and sparsely wooded area of California.

Paul introduced me to steam beer (The Place had only a beer and wine license) and we weren't seated at the bar more than a few minutes when the door burst open and a horde of people rushed in, young men and women shouting and laughing. "Ginsberg for President!" they were hollering, over and over, as they ran around the bar and up onto the balcony at the rear and back down again. There was a loose, good-natured feeling in their highjinks and roughhousing. A few ran around and hugged and kissed acquaintances sitting at the bar or at tables.

I asked Paul what was going on. He said Allen Ginsberg had just given a reading that night of *Howl* some place in

North Beach. These celebrants, with their spontaneous energy and boisterous camaraderie, were something new to me. The Place was so crowded with them I'm not certain if Ginsberg was there himself that night. I found out later he and Peter Orlovsky left the city shortly after for Tangiers, after confiscation of the City Lights edition of *Howl* by United States Customs, and I didn't get to meet them both until 1958 in New York.³

But I was delighted; perplexed, too. This rough energy was something new in the air. That was my first introduction to North Beach where, it turned out, all the main action was.

But action was wherever Robert Duncan was. Robert lived with Jess Collins in a large comfortable apartment in a gray frame house on Potrero Hill, the old Russian section of the city. The walls were hung with paintings by Jess and others, and lined with bookshelves built by Jess for the apartment. There was a small desk Robert used only for writing letters. In the bathroom you could read Jess' cutup and reassembled Dick Tracy comic strips, mounted on the wall over the toilet, while you pissed. The apartment was filled with an abundance and pleasant disorder of beloved objects. I felt comfortable there. It was like a shelter against all that was around it.

Jess was thin and shy, a pallor like someone who stays indoors a lot. Quiet-spoken, when he did speak, he seemed like a vulnerable and sickly adolescent, although he was then in his 30s. He delivered mail at Christmas, and any other odd jobs he could find, to help put food on the table and pay the rent. Robert was assistant to Ruth Witt-Diamant at the Poetry Center (he was instrumental in getting poets

like Olson and Denise Levertov to read there), but had taken typing jobs in the past to help run the household. (Olson, when he learned of this, said one night in a writing class at Black Mountain, “A poet of Duncan’s stature having to do *typing* to make a *living!*” in outrage and disbelief.)

When people came to visit Robert, Jess stayed in his room, his presence felt more strongly in the awareness of his being just beyond the next wall.

Robert, who could be strongly outspoken and not always careful of the feelings of others, even his friends, was careful with Jess. He treated and spoke of him the way one does with something valuable. I saw that Jess was necessary to Robert. He was like a steady and determined presence Duncan could always return to.

Often, unprepared to handle so many uncertainties in my own life, over-excited and often over-confused in a new city, it was agreeable to think of Robert with Jess up on Potrero Hill, at home, busy and protected. After reading one of his new poems I mailed Robert a note and said he was the richest man in San Francisco. And he was. He was so open-eyed. I didn’t know the secret then: the more open, the more protected you are; have more surface space to deflect, to receive; are more supple and defended. Pinched in on myself, after my experiences in Philadelphia, hunched in uncertainty, I was an easy target, a pushover, in such shrunk space.

I liked to think of Jess as the grounding in Duncan’s reach, in his work and his needs, in a city which was then, for me, permeated with the shrinkage of conformity and repression.

Paradoxically, I also sensed that the openness that emanated from Potrero Hill was akin to the open energy I felt in The Place the night of Ginsberg's reading of *Howl*. A new vitality was beginning to stir in the light and spaciouly open air of the city in spite of the rigidity that was everywhere. It seemed that everybody was writing and painting and making music. Dress, hair, talk was shaggier, rawer; fresh idioms of speech were possible. To me, the look and talk of those most actively involved was like an extension and coalescence of earlier Black Mountain changearound that had cohered and emerged simultaneously in Swannanoa Valley and the Bay Area. Jazz was all over the place and poets were reading their poems to it. Speech and manner got quirkier, the surprise of variance and singular eccentricity was everywhere in North Beach. It was a haven and matrix for the possible, as was that other center, Potrero Hill. San Francisco was very much Robert Duncan's city. His presence was everywhere. If Ginsberg had been forced temporarily into exile by the authorities, Duncan was still very much in place.

City Lights