



STARS SEEN IN PERSON

Selected Journals

JOHN WIENERS

Edited with an Introduction by Michael Seth Stewart

Preface by Ammiel Alcalay

City

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Preface

Ammiel Alcalay

In Friendship

“Why is it a major poet seems impossible to write about, while the ingratiating success yields odes of dazzling elegy & national award”

—John Wieners, in “The Cut (*After Reading Gerard Malanga’s Interview with Charles Olson* in *The Paris Review*, Summer 1970)”

I learned about the death of John Wieners in 2002 through a phone call from poet and old friend Duncan McNaughton. He had died on my birthday and I was attending an academic conference, very rare for me, on the partition of India, Ireland, and Palestine. I had gone mainly to be with old friends who seldom had a chance to gather. But after speaking to Duncan, I realized there was no one there I could share the news with, or at least no one who would immediately grasp the significance of the loss. The details came later, from John’s stalwart friend Jim Dunn, about how John had left a party and collapsed on his way home, found by a parking lot attendant and taken to the hospital. Not having any ID on him, it was only through the persistence of a social worker and some nurses that he was identified at all. This scenario almost played out John’s answer to scholar Robert van Hallberg’s 1974 question, posed in a rare interview: “For whom do you write?” he asked. “For the poetical, the people.” Wieners responded, “Not for myself, merely. Or ever. Only for the better, warm, human loving, kind person. The guy on the street who might hold open a door for

you . . . stops to give you instructions, spares some change, lets you in his bookshop. Friends I take for granted, like the future.”

My encounter with John Wieners was early, and personal. That is, I met him as a teenager while hanging out either at then Gordon Cairnie’s Grolier Books or the Temple Bar Bookshop, run by Jim and Gene, the O’Neil brothers, both in Cambridge, Cambridge MASS, with an emphasis on the long broad “A” that the rest of the country once might have been familiar with through President John F. Kennedy. Since then it’s only been an occasional movie or, among poets, the singular voice of Eileen Myles. That’s part of a bigger story, in which the Boston John Wieners came from and mainly lived in was/is an actual place, peopled by a particular accent that, in John’s case, was immediately recognizable, almost archaic.

This first encounter would have most likely taken place sometime in 1969. I had just become a teenager and was drawn to everything *outside* of school: playing hockey at the Commons; taking in triple features at the Stuart in the combat zone while ducking the truant officer; shooting pool from one end of town to the other; going up the fire escapes to sneak into the Boston Garden with friends from the North End; sitting in the right field grandstands at Fenway for less than two bucks; listening to young men, not that much older than me, seeking asylum from the draft at the Arlington Street Church; talking to kids from Roxbury selling the Black Panther Party paper which I bought religiously every week and read from cover to cover; gravitating from bookstores to demonstrations and back again, depending on what might be happening in the streets of our world.

I often found myself in what might have seemed strange circumstances, but I never questioned them. All the while I raided my parents’ bookshelves, loaded with little magazines of

the 1950s and 60s: *Black Mountain Review*, *Big Table*, *Evergreen*, *Yugen*, and so many others, never thinking it unusual. When Jack Kerouac died in October 1969, I was irate, knowing he'd been forgotten, and viscerally feeling that he'd somehow been assassinated by society. I knew that most of his books were out of print because you couldn't find the ones we had at home in bookstores. I asked family friend Vincent Ferrini, the Gloucester poet to whom Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems* were first addressed as a series of letters, what to do. He suggested I write to Allen Ginsberg, which I did. I then suddenly found a use for school and proceeded to write a militant twenty-five page typed single spaced paper in which I went on the offensive, reviewing Kerouac's work for a teacher I was sure would be uninterested or taken aback by my attitude, and I poured it on, making damn sure that would be the case.

Not long after Kerouac's death came the news of Charles Olson, another family friend, going into hospital in New York. Through a conversation at one of the bookstores, I was given to understand that a book dealer had appeared with a stack of books for Olson to sign. Outraged, I wrote a near libelous letter to the dealer who was ready to sue me until he heard how old I was. Throughout, John was a presence. I would see him at the Grolier and we'd walk to the Temple Bar, or the other way around. Sometimes I'd sit with him at the Hayes-Bickford's in Harvard Square. Other times I found myself at gatherings with a group of older people, not knowing exactly what they might be going through, but never feeling unwanted or uncomfortable. Along the way he'd give me books or broadsides, always signed to me: *Ace of Pentacles*, *Asylum Poems*, *The Hotel Wentley Poems*, *Nerves*, *Pressed Wafer*, *A Letter to Charles Olson*. Once he gave me an old copy of *Amiel's Journal*, by the Swiss philosopher-poet Henri Amiel, published in the 1880s. When my mother and I went to Olson's funeral in Gloucester, John was there, among the

pallbearers, who included Ferrini, Peter Anastas (another old Gloucester friend), legendary patron of the arts and Frontier Press publisher Harvey Brown, scholar and translator Charles Boer, poets Ed Dorn, Allen Ginsberg, and Ed Sanders.

Back in Boston, there was a visit to poet Steve Jonas's apartment, somewhere near the Charles Street Jail, on the other side of Beacon Hill, in the palpably absent shadow of John's beloved Scollay Square, victim of the juggernaut wrecking ball of "urban renewal." There was a reading at the Charles Street Meeting House where I took pictures, as I often did then, with black and white film that I developed and printed, some of them gracing the walls of the Grolier or given to the poets when I had the chance. From that night there were pictures of John along with Denise Levertov, Anne Sexton, and Ron Loewinsohn. I always thought the reading must have been for some political cause but everyone I asked in Boston over the years couldn't remember or said no such event took place. It was only in 2012, while working on a *Lost & Found* project with poet Joanne Kyger, that she sent me the copy of a letter from John to her, dated February 22, 1970, in which he wrote: "Monday evening I gave a benefit for the Chicago 7 at the Charles Street Meeting House with Denise Levertov, Anne Sexton, Ron Loewinsohn, James Tate, etc." Jonas had died just twelve days before John's letter was written. I remember the shock wave that both Olson and Jonas's deaths had sent through this familial group of older poets that I found myself in the company of. I'm not sure what exactly I understood, but I knew that these events, like so many of the things we were demonstrating about, were momentous.

The intricacies of this particular history, what poet Gerrit Lansing has called "the occult school of Boston" (as mentioned by Seth Stewart in his introduction), is one of the many chapters of North American cultural and political life from the second

half of the 20th century yet to be fully documented or even remotely understood by those who weren't, in at least some way, part of them. While celebrated throughout his lifetime as a unique and masterful lyric poet by the most important poets of the period, the availability of Wieners's work has varied wildly. Receiving no critical acknowledgement or recognition during and even after his lifetime, gathering the work has mainly been the task of dedicated friends.

When most of his early small press books had become increasingly hard to find, Raymond Foye edited two superb volumes for Black Sparrow Press, *Selected Poems 1958-1984* (1986), and *Cultural Affairs in Boston: Poetry & Prose 1956-1985* (1988), gathering previous collections and uncollected works, as well as the few extant interviews that Wieners had given (with Foye, Charlie Shively, and Robert van Hallberg). The introductions to those books, by Allen Ginsberg and Robert Creeley, provided, for the time, the clearest responses and assessments of his work. William Corbett, at some point, published a facsimile edition of *The Hotel Wentley Poems*, feeling the need for people to read something akin to the original version of that landmark book, published by the late Dave Haselwood as the first title of Auerhahn Press in 1958. Over the years, many people have sheltered, gathered, pirated, written about, and published the work of John Wieners, and a complete list would become a who's who of the poetry world of the past six decades.

With the publication of these journals, through Seth Stewart's erudite and meticulous editorship, the possibility of beginning to see Wieners' work in its fullness comes that much closer to realization. Parallel to the journals, a new *Selected Works* (edited by Joshua Beckman, CA Conrad, and Robert Dewhurst) has come out. In addition, Stewart has completed an extraordinary critical edition of Wieners' collected correspondence, covering

important exchanges between Wieners and Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Michael Rumaker, Edward Dorn, Diane di Prima, Amiri Baraka, Philip Whalen, Joanne Kyger, and many others. Parallel to the correspondence, Dewhurst has been preparing a *Collected Poems*. As Stewart has put it, “I consider these projects together as a *habeas corpus* mission, an effort to “produce the body” of Wieners’ thought, works, and life, liberating him from the institutions that subsumed him, that “official verse culture” that could not accommodate a poor, homosexual, visionary poet who refused to be simply one of those things.”

II.

In a 1972 text, Wieners wrote: “Since 1955, poetry or verse as some would prefer it be called has, despite all forebodings that it was dying, taken through a handful of writers in the United States, a stranglehold on established modes of thought, analysis, and attention.” Marking this at 1955 meant, for Wieners, recognition of a now very obscure but enormously influential poem, Ed Marshall’s “Leave the Word Alone,” included in Donald M. Allen’s landmark 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*. He goes on to mention, among others, Charlie Parker, a figure that looms large for the poets of the period. Jack Kerouac delineated Parker’s significance very particularly when he talked of bop as “the language of America’s inevitable Africa,” but an idiom “no one understands because the language isn’t alive in the land yet.” Making such a language live—a language arrived at in relation to the world, as a statement about the kind of world that had come into being—is certainly a strand running throughout the artistic stance of the period, in every medium, and part of the “stranglehold on established modes of thought, analysis, and attention” that Wieners refers to.

We should never lose sight of the fact that this great period of cultural activity—by artists in various forms and media: musicians, painters, dancers, poets— took place at the height of the Cold War, and in a place of isolation so acute that, as Gary Snyder once remarked, “you’d hitchhike 1500 miles to see a friend.” As the administration of knowledge grew with the expansion of universities and the military/industrial complex, artists struggled to redefine the parameters of knowledge, but completely outside the framework of official institutions and structures. Without enough money for long distance phone calls or frequent travel, the most vital records of thought in the United States following World War II took place in conversation, private journals or through correspondence, in letters, a venue still fairly well protected from the reach of surveillance.

Our adulation of the individual, tied to the destruction of any collectivity or commons, dictates that our cultural figures remain lonely, unmoored from friends, lovers, competitors, idols or places of reference, unless some scandal or possibility of ideological hijacking might be involved. From our present vantage point, it takes more than some mental gymnastics to grasp the excitement, for example, of Jack Kerouac when he writes in a 1957 letter to Allen Ginsberg about how excited he is that John Wieners, newly arrived to San Francisco following the dissolution of Black Mountain College, wants to publish a few of his poems in a new magazine Wieners has launched called *Measure*. Or that the late Amiri Baraka, then LeRoi Jones, became John’s legal guardian after a hospitalization. Needless to say, most readers will never have heard of this incident or *Measure*, a magazine lasting three issues over a span of five years, but with the greater availability of Wieners’ work—particularly the journals and letters—his absence in the historical record can start to be addressed. Ironically, while Wieners remained largely obscure in his lifetime, he

was beloved by other poets and his survival depended on friendships, while Kerouac was turned into product, eaten alive by the relentless machinery of consumption. The return to materials that have been withdrawn, the creation of a world of beauty out of them, is a turn to what Olson called “the gold machine,” interpreted by scholar Miriam Nichols as “an alchemical trope that makes actual things rise up as concretely *in situ* as possible, thus to trouble generic representations—to throw the disturbance of actuality into the universe of discourse.” This troubling of generic representation is also, in this case, the multiply complex individual—John Wieners—that, as Seth Stewart emphasizes, could not be accommodated by either “official verse culture” or “the universe of discourse.” The universe that John dwelt in was filled with harsh reality—forced electroshock and insulin therapy, poverty, addiction, despair—but out of it he forged a world of truth and beauty. His absolute mastery of form should, by all critical criteria, have put to shame all of his conventional prize-winning and celebrated contemporaries purportedly working in traditional forms. But such a thing could not be for it would signal an admittance of reality and historical consciousness into a world of propaganda, disinformation, and absolute counter-factual fabrication. In the face of a systemic violence that attempts to destroy any lasting record of the contradictory real, relegating the very material of our most intimate history to oblivion, I have no doubt that John’s work will remain as an act of singular courage and testimony to the lives we actually lived.

Ammiel Alcalay
January 22, 2015

Introduction

Michael Seth Stewart

When asked what school of poetry he belonged to, John Wieners identified as “a Boston poet.” He doesn’t so much document Boston as embody it, giving it syllable and line to echo its speech, its gentility and subterranean pleasures. He is writing from a Boston that no longer exists, that got plowed over for the brutal urban renewal of the nineteen sixties, the Boston of Scollay Square and dive bars one could afford, of burlesque queens and movie houses where one could stare at the stars. Except for a fifteen-year stretch, John Wieners lived all his life in Boston or one of its suburbs. Those years contained all his lives in centers of poetry—Black Mountain, San Francisco, New York, and Buffalo—and the greatest share of his output. This was the span of time in which he wrote most of his crowning achievements—from *The Hotel Wentley Poems* in 1958 through 1969’s *Asylum Poems*—books that show a mind on fire for his work, for the poem, “the song of life, soft syllables from God.”

John Wieners grew up in working-class Milton, Massachusetts, just outside Boston. He was a child of the Depression, a member of the so-called Silent Generation, the one conscripted into service in Korea, too young for World War II and too old for Vietnam. He started Boston College at sixteen, knowing out of the gate that he was going to be a Poet, a vocation he knew, from his devoured poetry books and gossip magazines, would lead to heartache and possibly glory. At school, beneath the oppressive eyes of the Jesuits, he found safe havens with

other nascent bohemians, budding poets and artists with whom he could gab in the offices of the student lit-mag and the bars and coffee shops of Beacon Hill, swooning over Edna St Vincent Millay and Zelda Fitzgerald, like many of their generation obsessed with the legendary flair and freedom of the nineteen twenties. The rest of the decade was marked by this lust for life, a Rimbalidian excessiveness that, by the end of 1959, so alarmed his family they had him committed, the first of several forced hospitalizations.

With the four books in this collection, Wieners' known journals are now all in print, seven fascinating books that vary wildly in style, intent, and relative coherence, altogether defying categorization. His first published journal, the only one released in his lifetime, was released in 1997 as *The Journal of John Wieners is to be called 707 Scott Street for Billie Holiday* (Sun & Moon Press). Written in San Francisco around the time of *The Hotel Wentley Poems*, the journal opened a window into Wieners' developing poetics and wide reading at the time, making it clear that *The Hotel Wentley Poems* was not the fluke product of some tripping prodigy, but the culmination of several years' work. "Last night I saw Greta Garbo one instant," he writes in 1959, before turning abruptly: "All I am interested in is charting the progress of my own soul. And therefore all men's souls. What the soul is I don't know."

In 2007, five years after Wieners' death, Bootstrap Press released another journal, *A Book of Prophecies*, a lyric, fragmented book written between 1970 and 1972. This was followed in 2010 by Bootstrap's ornate edition of *A New Book From Rome*, a red-and-gilt book of poems and fragments that Wieners wrote in the latter part of 1969, during another punishing six-month stretch in a state asylum. These later books explore many of the themes he writes about in the 1969 journal included here, in short lyric poems interspersed with lists and mini-essays on

figures like Charles Olson and madness. This mix of memoir, poetry fragments, false starts, and lists—primarily of movies or celebrities he’s seen—is perhaps the dominant mode of Wieners’ journals, however varied they are in so many other ways. Always there is the work of poetry, and his memories and theories of that work, and a record of obsessions. Like the 1969 journal, which ends with a long list of “Stars Seen in Person,” *Book of Prophecies* ends with “Seen or Encountered in Boston,” “Poets I Have Met,” and “Presents My Mother Gave Me,” a charming two-year recollection including “room,” “cigarettes,” and “visits.” And fittingly, the first of these books, *The Untitled Journal of a Would-Be Poet*, begins with recollections of his guiding star as a young poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay.

*

The journal swings between private and public like a door, oscillating—often within the same entry—between intensely personal address and an outward-facing stance which is confident in its eventual audience. There are different kinds of journals—the poet’s book filled with scraps of verse and overheard phrases, the artist’s sketchbook, the regular daybook lined with minutiae—and John Wieners’ own journals run the gamut. Some, like 1955’s *Untitled Journal of a Would-Be Poet*, are intensely self- and reader-conscious, the writing a discipline of preservation and refinement, passages crossed out and rewritten as he hones the best way of telling his story. By contrast, the 1966 journal is painfully naked, working through intense personal dramas by narrativizing and timelining the events of his life.

Somewhere midway on the spectrum are the dazzling journals—poets’ books?—from 1959 and 1965, *707 Scott Street* and *Blaauwildebeestefontein*. Written while living with

Joanne Kyger and Wallace Berman, respectively, they were self-contained, thematically and aesthetically. The books are written during times of repose for the young poet, on Kyger's sofa in San Francisco and Berman's porch in Topanga Canyon, and contain reflections on poetics that distill Wieners' visions at those moments. *707 Scott Street* has long been an essential part of Wieners' canon, and *Blaauwildebeestefontein* stands alongside it, the meditations on process and life an expression of the six years of greatness and trauma lived between the two journals.

This is how we tell what kind of journal—or book—each one was meant to be, by studying it for clues. The self-contained 1959 and 1965 journals are decorated and very public in feel: for example, the 1965 journal includes a long section, rewritten in parts, explaining the history of Boston poetry. The 1955 journal, by contrast, is largely written according to a fixed daily quota, for a brief burst of time (picked back up a year later for just a couple of post-Black Mountain entries), with disciplined daily writing the goal. However, even among all its “I must write today, I must I must” type entries there are poems and lyric narrative sequences—in one case, rewritten twice more within the journal—that indicate a writing toward futurity. This is all, of course, in addition to the title: *The Untitled Journal of a Would-Be Poet*, intensely self-aware and self-deprecating, affecting a modesty that is belied by the book's assured, relatively sophisticated voice.

This first journal begins in the early winter months of 1955, just before his twenty-first birthday and just after his graduation from Boston College. He confesses in this “untitled journal” that he still loves Edna St. Vincent Millay, “despite her great faults,” made ecstatic by the musicality of her light verse. Appropriately, the journal opens with a breezy recounting of this period, from across the gulf of graduation and, though it goes unmentioned in the journal till the end,

his fateful encounter with Charles Olson at the Charles Street Meeting House. That performance would draw him to Olson's inspirations—notably Williams and Pound—and then down to North Carolina to study with the man himself, a relationship that endured the fifteen years till Olson's death. But for now, in January 1955, Olson is still in the background, as the young “would-be poet” studies Pound and works on his self-discipline, knowing the great work it will take to become what he considers a real poet, the vocation he would pursue with singular focus for the rest of his life.

But, of course, the young poet keeps getting distracted, keeps getting pulled into the world of the “golden people” with their “loud laughing” (“I love loud laughing,” he writes), and he uses his journal to define himself against this cast of characters: Rita, a flirty friend he met at the art museum; the brainy Pat from Providence who “pants for life”; Robert Greene, his best friend from his Boston College literary magazine days; and a shadowy presence at first called “god” and finally identified as his first lover, a handsome blonde firefighter named Dana. At the same time, he's reading everyone Olson read, and the poets they cited as influences, excitedly noting his favorite lines and observations about the line and the breath, so influenced by Olson's 1950 essay “Projective Verse.” The work culminates with his first semester at Black Mountain College, the summer of 1955, and there is a year's gap in the journal as he labored at his poetry and perpetually fraught relationship with Dana. Finally he revisits the book in September 1956 after his second term at the school, during a pause in his life as he decided whether to return to Black Mountain or stay in Boston and work out a life with Dana and the poets of Boston. He chose the latter, and in turn formed lifelong relationships with the influx of poets in 1956-57, writing and drinking with visitors Robin Blaser, Jack Spicer, and Frank O'Hara, and familiar faces Edward Marshall, Steve Jonas, and Joe and Carolyn Dunn, the

libertines on Beacon Hill's working-class north slope, a pack that their friend Gerrit Lansing would aptly call "the occult school of Boston poetry," the group both occulted and driven by occult fascinations.

Appropriately, the journal ends with Wieners' desire to remain with Dana and "the most exciting part of love, the plan one makes to be loved, the traps one sets for love." By the fall of 1957, he and Dana would join many of their friends in migration to San Francisco, where he would continue in many unexpected ways the plan of study begun after the Charles Street Meeting House reading, as well as the social networking that went into his small magazine *Measure*. By the time he reached San Francisco, he was well established in the loose network of "New American Poets," and would produce during his stay there the two great monuments of his youth, *The Hotel Wentley Poems* and *707 Scott Street*.

His first hospitalization was in 1960, after a manic visit home frightened his parents into committing him for six months. His friends rallied to his side, petitioning doctors and lawyers, taking care of him upon release. He shuttled back and forth between his parents' home and the East Village of Manhattan, where he worked sometimes at the 8th Street Bookshop, wrote plays for the New York Poets' Theatre, and began his first full-length collection, 1964's *Ace of Pentacles*.

The second of these journals was written just after this strange time in late summer of 1965, a spectacular season for Wieners and for poetry. First he was able, through some maneuvering by Frank O'Hara, to accompany Olson to Spoleto, Italy, for the Festival of the Two Worlds. He met many literary lions but the pinnacle for him was meeting Ezra Pound, the gnarled poet celebrated (and protested) as a centerpiece of the festival. Like the other poets—a wide range, from Pound to John

Ashbery to Pier Paolo Pasolini—Wieners read in the ornate Cato Melisso. “What a ball,” he described the trip in a letter to Wallace Berman. “I hope I can keep my cool.” New York poet Bill Berkson also read at the festival, and while traveling picked up the leather journal for John Wieners that would, four years later, be filled and remembered as his *New Book From Rome*.

From Spoleto he went west for the Berkeley Poetry Conference, a twelve-day convocation, the kind of event that seemed legendary even as it happened. Wieners had his own night for reading, July 14. Olson’s two events were epic performances, one a seminar on “Causal Mythology” and the other a rollicking, drunk poetry performance-slash-extemporaneous monologue on poetics and history, among other things. Wieners stayed with Joanne Kyger in San Francisco, making the trip together over to Berkeley every day for the seminars and readings. By August he was exhausted, and went to relax with old friend Wallace Berman, who lived with wife and son in Los Angeles, working on his magnificent small art magazine *Semina*. Staying there in the hills of Southern California, Wieners wrote a journal he called *Blaauwildebeestefontein*, in a bound black sketchbook featuring a pasted-on photo of naked Berman (with face scratched out, presumably out of discretion).

This journal brims with vital new poems, including drafts of an elegy written soon after Jack Spicer’s premature death, but also some of his greatest explorations of poetics since *707 Scott Street*, such as an unparalleled history of his mid-nineteen-fifties poetry scene in Boston. His mission in this history is to place his friends, poets Edward Marshall and Steve Jonas, at the heart of not just Boston poetry, but the New American poetics across the board. He insists upon the primacy of Marshall’s 1955 “Leave the Word Alone”—a scorching jeremiad whose passion and openness would inspire Allen Ginsberg in his composition

of “Kaddish”—calling it “the first magnificent long poem of the century,” written after “Steve Jonas first presented orders to us in the early years of the decade.” His ruminations on Marshall and Steve Jonas are especially important contributions to the emergent histories of the New American Poets and the poets they loved, and the only time within Wieners’ corpus of poems, journals, and letters in which he explicitly addresses their shared history and legacies.

The third and fourth journals in this collection come from the late 1960s, when Wieners was living in Buffalo, working on new poetry and studying again with Charles Olson. The university’s new poetics program offered a teaching assistant’s meager but steady paycheck and the chance to study with his teacher again, and so he moved there in January of 1965. Soon, however, Olson moved back to Gloucester, and the college town was stifling for Wieners, exacerbating an already fragile psychological state.

In 1966 he fell in love with a woman, well-known patron of the arts Panna Grady. She rented a house for the summer in Annisquam, up the road from Olson’s Gloucester, and Wieners moved in. Living there with Grady and her daughter, Wieners flung himself with great gusto into the family-man role that decades of Catholicism had urged him towards. “Who would believe it?” he wrote in his journal, the third in this collection. “That the most notorious faggot of our times would fall in love with the best most beautiful woman.” But the good times would not last long. As the relationship disintegrated, Grady became pregnant, and she chose to terminate the pregnancy. Wieners’ reaction in his journal is difficult reading. But amidst the pained confession is the beginning of a new phase in his poetry, work that would continue in his books *Pressed Wafer*, *Asylum Poems*, and *Nerves*, which Allen Ginsberg would call “three magisterial books of poetry that stand among the few

truthful monuments of the late 1960s era.” The last of these three begins with “Supplication,” an appeal to poetry to “give me a wife and home”:

Return me to the men who teach
and above all, cure the
hurts of wanting the impossible
through this suspended vacuum.

Over the following two years, he became obsessed with old friend Robert Creeley, who Wieners was convinced was conspiring to harm him. “Unhappily his circumstances are very difficult,” Creeley wrote to a mutual friend. “He is a brilliant poet, and paradoxically, an old friend,” but “he was manifesting pretty literal paranoid behavior.” In 1969, his last year in Buffalo, he sat down to write the final journal of this collection. It is in a leather ledger with yellow pages, written in tight, cramped script, and the title on the first page is *The Turned-Down Mouth*. It is as searing a read as the 1966 journal, flecked with moments of light and brilliance. It ends with a simple list of names and places, “Stars Seen in Person.”

A few months after completing this last journal, Wieners was institutionalized again, this time for six months at a public hospital on Long Island. He started an enduring and generative friendship with Boston gay liberation activist and teacher Charles Shively, and kept the journal published as *A New Book From Rome*. After his release, he moved back to the Boston suburbs and survived the deaths of Charles Olson, Steve Jonas, and his mother Anna. He continued to develop new poetry, and worked on another journal, *Book of Prophecies*, building towards a tremendous, challenging book of new poems called *Behind the State Capitol, or the Cincinnati Pike*, published by Shively’s Good Gay Poets Press in 1975. By this time he had settled into a comfortable but hand-to-mouth life at 44 Joy

Street, just a few blocks from the apartment on Grove where he lived while writing *The Untitled Journal of a Would-Be Poet*. The neighborhood had changed mightily, and so had he. He lived there for almost three decades, and by all accounts never stopped writing.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

In the interest of readability, these journals are presented in a clear text format, meaning that the vagaries of the page—cross-outs, insertions and emendations, rearranged passages—have been judiciously resolved. A few of Wieners’ especially provocative or revealing textual changes have been preserved. Errors within the prose that are very clearly accidental (a keystroke slip, for example) have been silently corrected; whenever there’s been doubt, and whenever it appears within poetry, the apparent error has been left intact. Wieners was constantly revising his poems, but also studiously preserved textual accidents as integral to the meaning and prosody; in a 1963 letter to publisher Robert Wilson, he wrote that any “mistakes in grammar, punctuation and spelling” were “intentional, or absolute, as this is what the poem demanded . . .”

That is true to the experience of the poem. The punctuation is right, as is the spelling, viz: *surrended* for *surrendered*; a comma at the end of a poem instead of a period; poems with no titles; or sentences beginning with small, lower-case letters. I hope this doesn’t offend you.

And so, all eccentricities in spelling or usage within this book are preserved intentionally.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Blaauwildebeestefontein and *A House In The Woods—Moths At The Window* both reside in the John Wieners Papers in the Special Collections of the University of Delaware Library, where Curtis Small has been of invaluable assistance.

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To thank Ammiel Alcalay is like thanking ink and paper, but I still want to thank *el capitán*.

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Tonight is again Monday and Rita is outside washing my dishes.

You, I have written that because Marie was here to tell me of her love for God. Seventeen is the most mind-breaking age. Tonight a machine from where I work was here and the two girls came with him. Marie was at her wildest. She went into a long soliloquy about having ~~not~~ been a lady wrestler and then ~~confronted~~ with him about his poor wife who had to go out and give brush demonstrations. ~~666~~ Rita (we called her Greta) took on the role of my mistress, we talked about the gas bill and the oatmeal left in the morning dishes until night. She wore my khakis and showed her sketches. He talked about his five children, Marie discussed business at the Casino burlesque house where she pretended to work and I informed him that I hated our mutual office. But now I am writing and I feel that I must work on the new poem.

THE UNTITLED JOURNAL OF A WOULD-BE POET

Syracuse University Library

And eight ^{shrill} bells from Beacon Hill ring the world's not well tonight,

- Tell of the killing of patient gulls in ~~filthy full lagoons.~~
- Over agony who saves the tears, ✓
- Who carries back with arms full of nights the hours that were shredded ^{down} ~~away~~ by the imposing world
- Who remembers the desire,
- and who will replace the subway womens' erased faces,
- finding for them the years
- when they braided blonde hair ^{half a mile} behind their backs,
- who will fill the passion of garretteurs,
- who can give the girls who cannot quite grasp the real, fantasies of fabled knights who fight for fancy in an unreal Rome,
- sending forthem from the avenues where they last fell,
- 666 who will bring the battle boom and flags to broken legs
- and who, besides the ever brooding bright eyes of death,
- will wish we were home (will watch us home) (will wish us home)

Tonight, on the 17th of January, nineteen hundred and fifty five, I begin the writing of what will be my intimate journal. Here, as the better dust blurbs shall say, are play reviews, people descriptions, impressions of my world, high nights and black nights. Here will be thoughts that I hope will sometime be poems, here will be stories, but most of all in this undisguised and true journal will be memories of the life I have chosen.

I ask you to bear with me here at the beginning as I have not written for such a long time, my head and heart grow tireder than my hands. Tonight is the coldest night of the year, and the cold kept the trees' branches un-quivering in the wind. I want to begin among the cold in my sixteenth year, the summer before I climbed the then immense and towering hill to what was called Boston College. They have since added some unsayable religious adjectives to its title. On the back of a swaying orange trolley, I turned a corner of Commonwealth Avenue, and growing over apartment houses the grey stalk of a Gothic tower. I cannot go into the early fears, the embarrassment, the self-consciousness of those first months under that tower, because every journal I have ever read devotes so much space to same that every journal reads the same. I shall tell of the boys I met there, the parties we went to that seemed to explode brighter than any parties in the world, the drunken afternoons, the tossing of Latin and Greek and French books into the air higher than anyone else had ever tossed Greek and Latin and French books. It was the time of one's life. Poetry was found at the first when a Jesuit priest called Leonard read Edna Millay's more discernible and youthful poetry in his best flaming twentiesish voice. It was

October of 1950 and She had died two days before and he read the last lines of “Moriturus:”

“I shall bolt my door
With a bolt and a cable;
I shall block my door
With a bureau and a table;

With all my might
My door shall be barred.
I shall put up a fight,
I shall take it hard.

With his hand on my mouth
He shall drag me forth,
Shrieking to the south
And clutching at the north.

He finished and looked up and said, “Edna Millay died two nights ago on the third step of her Steepletop staircase, collapsed over an empty wine glass. She didn’t do much shrieking to the south and clutching at the north. But when I was in college, Edna Millay was what all the eager young girls were clutching to their bosoms and what all the bright young men were shouting through the parks.”

My candle burns at both ends,
It will not last the night,
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends,
It gives a lovely light!

Edna Millay was a goddess to me from that instant on. She is not a great poet, but she opened to me the avenues of great poetry. I was working as a student assistant in the College library for tuition and I took out her books (I still

have some of them here to my guilt) and I labored over them. I did not understand them at first. The words made no sense, but neither did the articles in what I then thought were all the better magazines. I cut out pictures of her, I read everything about her, I brought her books years later even when I realized her great faults. The publication of "Mine the Harvest," her posthumous book of poems, sent me down the streets of Boston singing to myself, holding its shiny blue and chrome cover to my sides for joy. I made the buying of that book a ritual as I nearly do with all the books I buy; I brought the reading of her poems by Judy Anderson and still play them. P.207 of her *Collected Lyrics* is open in front of me now. Because of her I fell in love with the 1920s as I suppose all the country did from nineteen fifty on. I read F. Scott Fitzgerald's biography in *Life* and I began on Fitzgerald. His "Crack-Up" and Jay Gatsby and Zelda and all the disenchanted ones pulled me up by my hair. I nearly cracked inside wanting to drink bathtub gin and knock on speakeasy doors, and dance with insane young things who smoked in the back of subway cars and made love in fields of blue flowers. I read literal histories of the 20s by people like F. Lewis Allen (I think) and someone called Mark Sullivan. And the world came open now.

There grew from me big flowing worlds outside Milton, Massachusetts. Not all the people were the small, unbright ones that stood on the corner of Central Avenue and Eliot Streets. I would sit on Sunday afternoons in the sun on the brick wall outside an ice-cream factory and see the trolley cars shuttling into Boston and I remember saying, "someday, I will get on one of those all by myself and go in town, and something would run quick inside me and although I knew nothing of what I would find, the mystery of a world outside of the downtown Washington Street shopping center a world where I would know no one, where every shadow on a street corner was god, where bright, glistening women in white dresses went in and out of hotels all night long never let me rest in familiar patterns

again. Neon lights made every face a face. Every eyebrow was remembered. I could tell how eyes would look at me. I would not let a face go by but I would tear into it until I made its eyes look into mine. Shadows were real, footsteps became men, laughter was white wine running down my throat. I did not want to laugh, I only wanted to hear laughing. I did not want to know what all the gaiety and the shouting was about, I only wanted genuine headless laughter running in my ears. I wanted bright faces not up against mine, I only wanted to watch bright faces go by. The widest streets I walked the most. Here I was freer. I did not like the Common and the Gardens except where the lamps came down and turned the trees into fire and the path was into gold streets. I haunted back and back again half-lit doorways, always watching to catch some little face of life that had a mask on it before. I loved windows with the curtains up and the people showing in them, bodies pressed against the window panes and even pieces of furniture that looked as if someone had just left them or was just going to return. But I was back in Milton and although I went through the city to school, I was always underground where the faces are not bright and glistening and where there are no white dresses and people only go in and out of men's rooms all night long. But it was beginning, and her poetry was my first vision, added onto the extra-curricular activities with the insane people I fortunately found in. Our first endeavor was the singing of Christmas Carols in the snow on the last day before vacation for the holidays. I had truly gotten drunk for the first time, it was with homemade Italian wine that someone had brewed for the holiday. We circulated paper cups in Latin class and poured from the great gallon jugs a liquid the taste of which I still remember every time I think of Horace. Fr. V.deP. O'B. as we called him developed the usual alcoholic gleam in his eye and let the class free to wander through the beginning snow, slipping and shouting, linking arms and feeling as defiant and dedicated as Christ. We advanced on a girls college miles out and smoked

at all the prohibited places, were chased away by the black nuns sliding through the snow with their habits being turned and taken away by the wind. We came back for English at 3:30 and spent the hour with Leonard singing the same carols for the 25th time, and then plans were circled for a class Christmas party shortly before The Great Birth. It was again a snowy night and I remember the drug-store in Arlington Center with its enormous phallic monument outside dignifying everything around. I was the only one who actually came to the party. None of the other cars were able to maneuver in the storm or else older brothers advised fathers against it, but we, the hard core of perpetual celebrators, (seven of us) tramped to a lodge on the end of a lake, past iron fences, and down wet paths to wait but no one else came. A local boy invited us and the liquor to his home and we sang to his mother's accompaniment on the piano, kissed his lovely sister under the traditional mistletoe, urinated in the wrong basin and were sobered with the most penetrating black coffee ever brewed. It was more exhilarating than the previous liquor. Midyears came and the glamour of three-o'clock study sessions, endless cigarettes and arguments and theories and drives home as the sun was nearly coming over the visor passed me through my examinations except one. And then a minstrel show was sounded, and visiting ladies from the surrounding schools volunteered to dance in the chorus. It was show business for me, with rehearsals even for the chorus, learning lines and gestures, much activities and much singing on the backsteps of the library before morning classes and again the rides home with the rising sun and the cram of studies for the necessary marks. There was no discipline in us. Someone suggested, and immediately it was done. No matter what was asked, it was yes, yes, yes, now! And at last there were excursions into Boston or at least part of it. Someone had discovered a tavern called "The Ye Olde Garden Café" in the North End and it was and is our nostalgic meeting place. There, we met the woman with the crased face, the man who played songs with