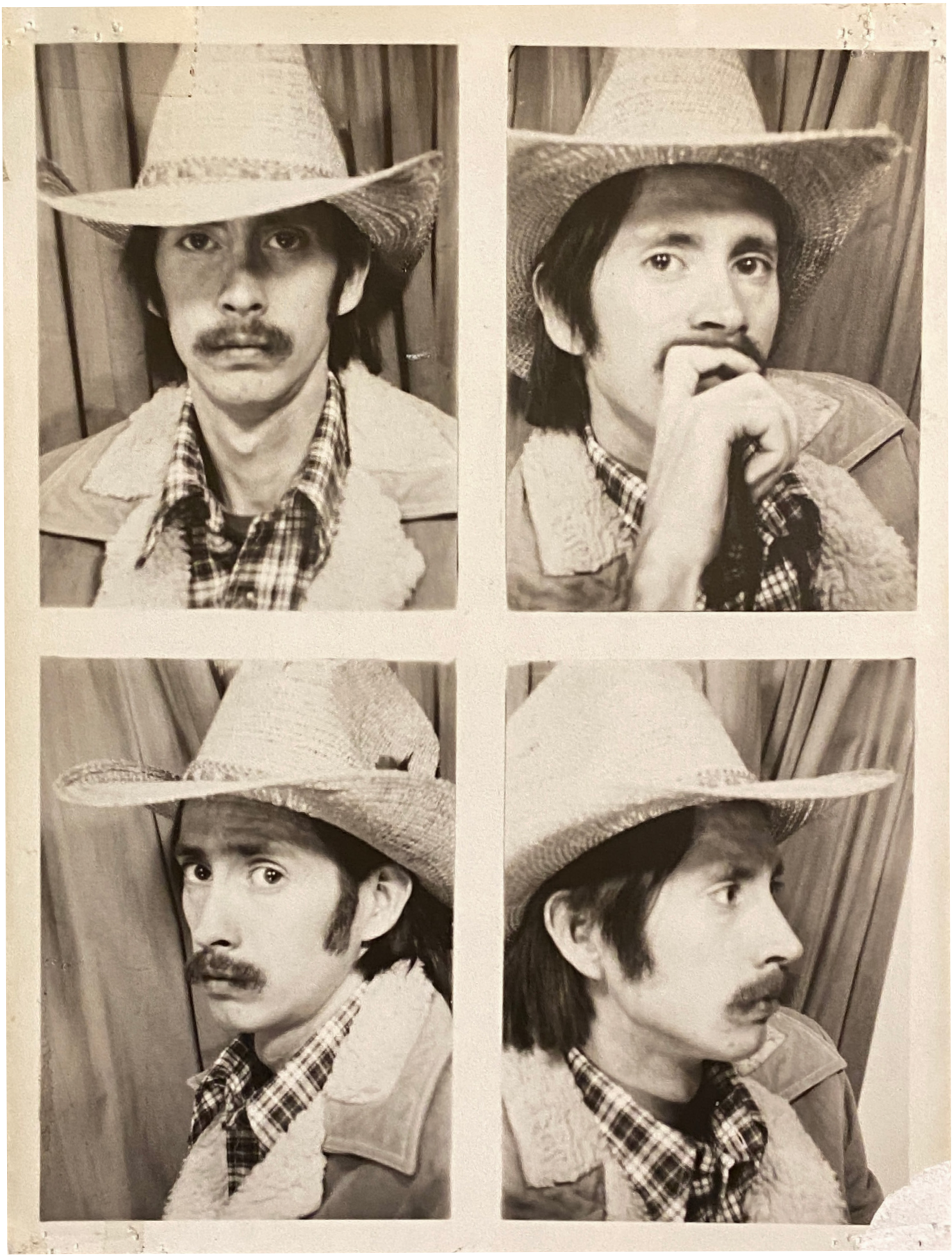


Bob Flanagan, Photobooth portrait, c 1980 / Dennis Cooper Papers, NYU Fales Downtown Collection

13 October 1990 Chelsea Hotel Raymond Foye interviews Bob Flanagan

FLANAGAN: I'd been painting since I was a kid. My parents paid for art lessons, so I was an artist: that's basically what I was.

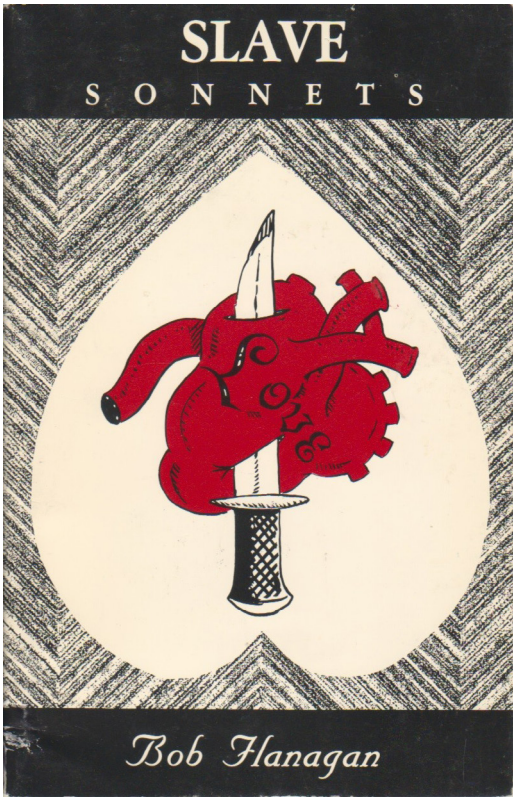
Q: So you were always having to amuse yourself alone, because you couldn't go out a lot...

A: I wasn't so much a solitary person, but because I was sick a lot I was home drawing, tracing cartoons, tracing coloring books. And I guess people liked what I did, so I thought, well that feels good. The adulation felt good, so I just kept doing it. And it just sort of mushroomed, by the time I was in junior high I was drawing portraits.

Q: Did you have the usual collage period?

A: The collages didn't start till later. Part of the problem was I was really influenced by Van Gogh, and I was doing Van Gogh type pictures, when I heard about conceptual art, which was just coming in. But I couldn't figure out what it was, so I knew I wasn't contemporary, I knew I was a hundred years behind my times in what I was doing. So I wanted to do something else. I started doing collages, plus portraits & figurative stuff. But I was a big hot shot in high school, all my teachers thought what I did was great, they bought all the stuff I ever did when I was still in high school, one teacher actually paid five hundred dollars for a portrait I did, which was amazing. It kind of saved me in that I was sick a lot, and sports were not a big deal for me, and because I was kind of skinny, kids would make fun of me. But I became big within the art community in high school, a little group of misfits, a little club where we all hung out together. I met my first girlfriend there, Becky. She was kind of wild like me, and thought I was drug addict, because I was all pale and skinny. She was an alcoholic, even then. So we hit it off because of that. The drama department was a big deal. I did posters for a lot of the plays. I was Ed Sullivan in Bye Bye Birdie. I did impressions then too. I always had this thing of entertaining, and doing art. Being a comedian, or some sort of singer, and doing art.

Q: How were you doing in school work?



A: Oh fine, B average, I was doing fine. I had a lot of absences...In 1967, my freshman year in high school, a cousin of mine came to stay with us, and brought a lot of his albums. Bob Dylan's Nashville Skyline had just come out. And I wasn't really into Dylan before that. But this just blew me away, something about it really struck me.

Q: The simplicity of the songs...

A: Yeah. Then I went out and bought the first album, then the second and third, until I had them all. Then I started buying the bootlegs, and reading everything I could about him. I recorded some History of Rock & Roll programs off the radio, about Dylan. I just ate up everything I could on the subject People thought I was nuts, and made fun of me... Most people I know hated his voice, but it gave me goose bumps. It didn't even matter what he was singing. And that's how I started singing. My girlfriend in high school had a guitar, so I wanted one. Then I started writing songs, imitating Dylan. The turning point for me was, I was playing pool in the garage with my Dad, and I'd memorized all the lyrics to Mr Tambourine Man, every word, every verse, and I'd recite it aloud, as fast as I could, and I'd just love the rush that it would give me to do it... That's what made me start thinking about poetry: that's poetry. And of course all the interviews mentioned that Dylan

read Rimbaud, Dylan was a poet, so I went back, and started reading poetry because of that--that was the turning point. I didn't come to poetry through literature.

Q: So actually that intense imagery and incantation-style of delivery did carry through in your work.

A: Right, it's still with me now. That energy still infuses my work... I went crazy trying to find out what the words to all the songs were, because there was so much that didn't make sense: "The Kings of Tyrus, with their convict lists, are waiting in line for their geranium kiss...". In the early days the lyrics weren't printed, so you had to really listen to the music to get what it was. This took place in Costa Mesa California, part of conservative Orange County.

When in high school I started writing, I put out my first little book. Awful. The horrible thing in terms of poetry was I'd kept the romantic part, I kept the rhyming. It was pretty bad poetry. And the songwriting was bad Dylan imitations. So I put out a stupid little book. But because of that I started to see myself as a writer. I had a student teacher in high school who I showed my stuff to, and he said he didn't really like it. I was shocked. Up to that point all my teachers and everybody though everything I did was great. And he gave me, of all things, Richard Brautigan, and that got me out of rhyming, so that was good, and more into imagery. And he gave me Post Office by Bukowski, and that brought me into the real world, as far as writing was concerning. For the next few years I pretty much became Bukowski, as far as writing in that style. It was great, it was the best way to get out of the syrupy stuff I was writing. After that I gave up painting and people really got mad at me. I had a friend who wanted me to go to art school with her, and she wrote me a letter putting down people who were using the word instead of the image. I started going to poetry workshops and got good reactions from that.

Q: Was there also on some other track in your mind, about "What am I going to do as a profession?"

A: That's a funny thing, I have a line from the The Book of Medicine, called "Promise and Early Death." And now look at me, I've survived so long, I probably should have gotten a job. So I was always with this idea that I wasn't going to have a very long future anyway, so I was always just living for the moment. Two things impressed me: one teacher said, you're an artist, you don't need to go to school to learn art. And the other thing was that I was an artist, and I just didn't need a job, I was just going to do my work. That was the profession. So I was lucky to have that.

Q: At what age was that awareness of mortality a solid fact for you?

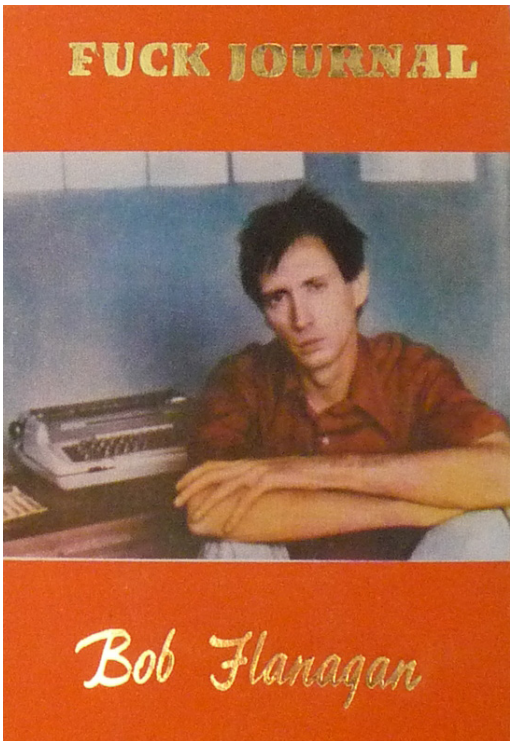
A: About ten... I always knew that I had this terminal illness. I had a brother who died, he was eight and I was probably ten, and my other brother said to me at the time, "You know you're going to die." The family had told the other children, but said, "Don't tell Bob." But it didn't strike me as a surprise. I thought, well, I know that. It was an awareness that I've always had. And as I started to hear more about the disease...my parents didn't try to hide it from me...there were articles written about me, in fifth and sixth grade, because there was some new invention where I could stay in my bed and go to school through some phone box at my bedside. I was really sick then. The story was on the front page of the local newspaper, and the stories always read, "He's stricken with this terrible illness..." And every time I read the article, if I was eight, then the expected lifespan was ten. If I was ten, then the expected lifespan was twelve. I was always two years ahead already, so I always had that awareness.

The future was always fuzzy. I never thought about life in normal terms. It was never real. I never saw myself as getting married and having kids.

Q: At what point did you start hooking up with people you thought of as serious writers? Was that Dennis Cooper and David Trinidad?
A: Dennis and David, yeah. Well, that was another big break like Bukowski was a big break. It was because of Bukowski that I started going to Beyond Baroque in Los Angeles, and hanging out with a lot of the post-Buk LA writers.

Q: Did you ever see Buk?

A: Oh yeah, several times. I was teaching a poetry class in my old high school, and naively wrote him. One of the women in the workshop was the mother of his daughter, I still see her. I though, oh wow, here's my connection with Bukowski, my hero. So I wrote this letter to him, asking him to read at my high school poetry class, which was so stupid, because he probably would have burned the school down, but he called me on the phone, and said he only reads for money, to pay the rent, so that was out. But in the meantime I wrote this poem to sort of exorcise him, I turned into Bukowski in the poem. It was one of my first successful longer poems. I sent him a copy and he wrote back saying he loved the poem, and included a little drawing. It was great. In his work his profession is being a writer, and that was verification that what I was doing was the right thing. I moved up to LA at 22, got my own apartment, here I was doing exactly what I had been reading about, meeting these people. All these connections were really good.



Q: Your first book appeared in 1978, when you were twenty-six...

A: My first book, The Kid is the Man, was really simplistic in lots of ways, it wasn't very good poetry. I have to credit Dennis, and Michael Silverblatt, who turned me onto the New York poets, John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara. I thought, this is many steps up from what I'm doing, and I started evolving into that. And just after that I was doing the programming for Beyond Baroque for three months, but the person who was running BB didn't like what I was doing and fired me. It was real sudden and unexpected, and I was hurt, and just railed against the place. Then I heard that Dennis Cooper, who I didn't know, but had seen around town, was hired to take my place. So I was really angry at Dennis, briefly, until I found out that he was lied to, was told that I'd voluntarily left. So he called me and apologized, and we became really good friends from that moment on. And he took my new Ashbery-esque work and put it in the Little Caesar Anthology, Coming Attractions. So that was again validation that I was a writer.

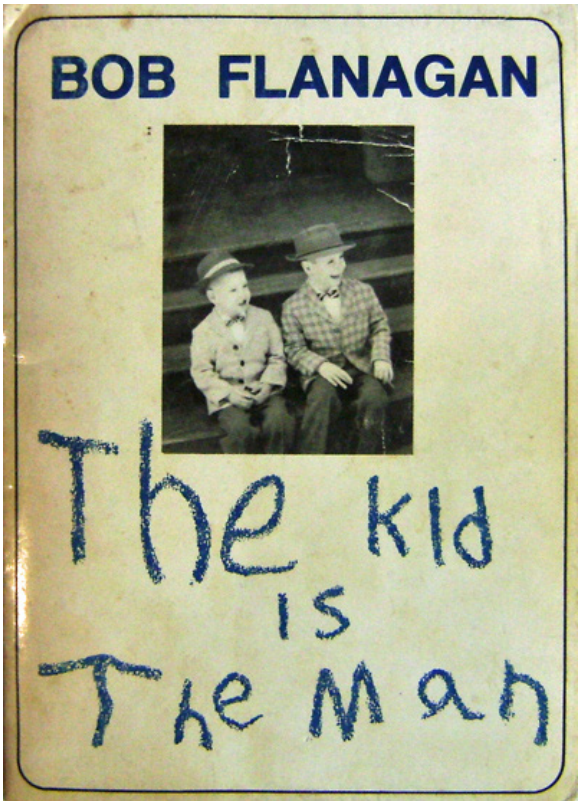
Q: So Ashbery was a big influence?

A: Oh yeah, a little too much. But reading interviews with him was really helpful, in terms of a way of working, not being so linear about certain things. He once described a title as like a big football field into which you can put things. That was an expansive idea for me, which I needed at the time. I loved just going along with his work, not worrying about whether I understood it on a linear level, just arriving somewhere. I saw him read a few times, which reinforced that. I was also reading James Schuyler, and he was right up there, that was a huge influence. The simplicity of the language, his directness, I like that. Writing style more than anything else, not subject matter, except for the Payne Whitney poems, those are devastating poems. Incredible.
Dennis was and still is incredibly generous about sharing the wealth. So as he became more popular, he pro-

moted the people he genuinely liked and encouraged, and made sure other people saw their work. We had great parties in his house...
The Wedding of Everything is where it all first came together. It's a ten-poem book that took me four years to write. One of the bad things is that I'm non-prolific, really slow. So a lot of the changes happen long before the books are around, like four or five changes may happen in a book of only ten poems. One of the big influences was that I met Sheree Rose, right around the time Dennis and I became friends, it was almost concurrent. So there were two things going: there was my sexual life, and my literary life, and Sheree was the focus for them both to become fused. We met at a Halloween party at Beyond Baroque. Dennis and Jack Skelly were hosting the party at somebody's house. I went with somebody else, but I saw her. I don't know how or why, but I ended up with her phone number and we saw each other afterwards. Someone told her I was a poet. Then she saw my work. The fact that she was so interested in me, made me interested in her...

Q: Were there any explicit sexual themes in your work at the time?

A: Not at all. I didn't know how to be honest about the sexual stuff at the time. There was only one poem like that in The Kid is the Man (1978). With Ashbery and Schuyler the craft more than the subject matter was important to me. I worked on getting the craft down first, and then ventured into the subject matter. I really try to keep that balance. A lot of people can write the sort of stuff I'm writing about, but I don't like it much because people think if you just tell a good story it's enough, and I don't think that's true. The craft is really important for me. A lot of things I want to use, a lot of thing I want to tell, I can't, because I just can't find the right form to do so. For a long time I was trying to write about the subject of piecing, it disassembles that feeling of wanting to get away from it.

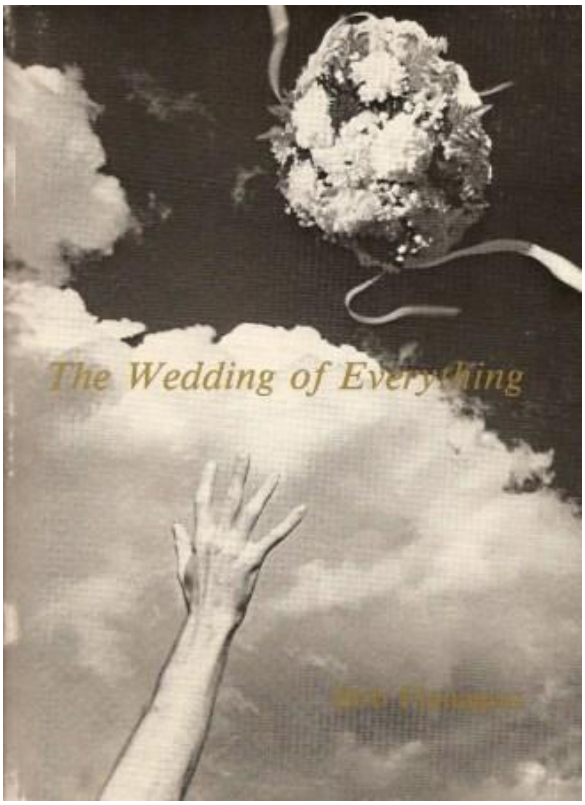


I never wrote the Fuck Journal (1987) to be published. It was literally a diary of fucking. Shree ordered me to write it. The relation ship we had, and still have, is that I follow orders from her. She gave me this literary calendar for my birthday, which is the day after Christmas, one of those dorky calendars with drawings of authors in pen and ink, showing when their birthdays are. When New Years Eve came, she said, I want you to write down every time we fuck. And that was a great year for us! We fucked a lot, and in some pretty strange ways. And with some strange implements and influences. So the actual first one was on New Year's eve. We had a party at the house, we were on acid, fucking in one part of the house, while people were partying in another part. So it starts there, and it ends just before New Year's the follow ing year. On the final New Years eve, Sheree suggested I read the Fuck Journal at a party...I never thought of it as literature. But having it published, and people liking it, that became influential on my subsequent writing. Also I was getting tired of poetry at that point. What matters is that people get something out of the work that has nothing to do with me. Or they can be entertained by it, as I was writing it. I was questioning myself all the time—it's so personal, why would anyone be interested in what's happening to me? And I started to realize that like the Impressionists, who are dealing with a certain subject matter, it doesn't matter that it's an apple on the table, but rather how is the apple painted, and what does the person gets from looking at it? The thing that people are wowed by is the honesty of it, and I realized that is what I was setting out to do: to be as completely honest and make it with as much craft as I possibly could. Because people are so unused to anyone being honest about anything, we're surrounded by lies all the time. I'm much more interested in things that really happen to people, than stuff that's just made up. That's why I couldn't really write fiction, I couldn't bear the idea of making up some character, or veiling events in some false situation.

Q: How did your sexuality develop, to lead up to this point?

A: That's a long story. That's what The Book of Medicine is about. Probably the most influential part is my health. What is funny is that both my writing and my sexuality develop out of the same source, for the same reasons. Being alone a lot, I was fantasizing, and it became an accepted way of being for me. Also I had really bad stomach aches, especially in those days, I didn't have the right digestive enzymes to counteract that, and one way of alleviating it was rubbing my stomach up against the sheets, which turned into masturbating, which connected pain and sexual relief all at the same time. And added to that, when you're sick a lot, all these doctors probe you, there's a lot of humiliation to that, authority is thrown in, there's piercing. I want to use this in The Book of Medicine, or in a performance some day: you know how in medical books they have those transparencies where first you see the bones, then you have the nerve structure, then they put the muscles on, and the skin and the hair. That's the way I see the book, one layer after another. You can pull one sheet out and it's totally different. As opposed to "I'm a masochist, I'm submissive, because of this one thing..." It's a pseudo medical encyclopedia based on myself. It's a lot of things together. Added to that is my parent's love. They were really loving, and supported me in whatever I was doing. My mother had never seen the Fuck Journal. She saw Slave Sonnets (1986), which I thought would be a big revelation to them. They didn't know about the masochist, only because I didn't want them to feel guilty. My brother is gay, and I guess when he came out of the closet, he must have been eighteen, they were just… nothing against him, they thought "What did we do wrong." Maybe we shouldn't have done this or that...and so seeing that, it was unnecessary to come out to them about S&M, because it was something I did in private, it didn't interfere with our relationship in any way. They know that Sheree and I have a weird relationship, but they love her for that, and they love me. We always joke about my being weird, but nothing specific. And I think it would really hurt them to see me in the way I'm writing now, to see me being hurt, without understanding the context. That's what keeps me from being so open to them about it, as much as I think that's a good thing, as much as I like it. But eventually they're going to read it, because they want to read everything that I write.

The Slave Sonnets are ten sonnets, all focused on S&M, and sexual relations with Sheree, and pretty difficult ones, because Sheree and I have a difficult time getting along sometimes, and that's what that book was about, more than anything. So my mother read it and really thought it was beautiful, but I think she read it all as metaphor, and didn't see it as real. She said to me, "Your father and I really liked it, and we have some of the same kinds of problems." And I though, "What..!?" So maybe I'm not understanding them. But I think they see it as metaphor.



The first year we met, Sheree started taking photographs of all the poets in LA, and then we came to New York City together for the very first time. I hadn't been to New York since I was a kid. I was born and grew up here but we left when I was six. So we came back to do a reading at the Ear Inn... I think '82, we stayed at the Chelsea Hotel. Dennis Cooper was already a name here, people knew who he was, and were interested in his work. I think he had a reading with Alice Notley... so we met Alice and Ted Berrigan and everybody. There was no LA scene for us, after that, the LA scene was just our friends. It was amazing in NY to be somewhere and see poetry 'stars' walking around. It was a real dazzling time.

Q: By then your work was coming together for you?

A: The Wedding of Everything, I was really pleased with that. I had the title for a year or two. It just flashed into my head. I thought of it as a long poem, which was the direct Ashbery influence. And the freedom of Ashbery is that since it doesn't have to make sense, you just go on the energy of it. I start with a wonderful title that encompasses some big big thing, then I can write small details about it, and it will still be a big thing because of the tile. It's one of my favorite poems, still. Actually the poem is more of a Schuyler poem than an Ashbery poem, although it has an Ashbery title. Tim Dlugos encouraged me in the writing of that. I'd write two lines I'd like, and then everything after that I'd throw away. Then the next day I'd write another two lines, it was agonizing, one line after another. In those poems I would keep reading the lines until I trusted them: OK I trust those. Then I'd drop others. Cutting lines out, and waiting for it to be true. I'd keep reading from the beginning to the end, until I trusted it all the way through. It sounds like the words really fit the music, the rhythm of it. I didn't know what the poem meant. It was one of those weird poems where it had such a vague meaning, but it had this feeling, where everything is joined together, I don't even know what it means.

With the Slave Sonnets, I was tired of the poems taking forever to write, and I didn't know when they were going to end, so I thought, If I write sonnets I know they'll be done in fourteen lines. I thought that would speed things up, but it actually slowed things down, because then I started really being true to the Shakespearean form, without the rhyme, where each four lines would be one piece of information, then I'd wrap it up in two lines at the end. Which is harder to do without rhyme, I think. The Berrigan sonnets didn't do that, but they were really influential. I love the form, I love looking at them. I don’t know where I got this idea, but I wanted to spell out secret messages in acrostics. I guess in my sexual as well as my literary life I like disciplinary things, false disciplinary things, rules that I have to follow. So I set myself these ridiculous rules I had to follow, and I was going to write a hundred of them. Well, I only wrote ten in four years, and only two of them follow this rule with acrostics, it spells a message down on the left side, and it spells a message down on the right side, two of them.

Q: Can you sum up what S&M means for you right now?

A: S&M it's more than a sexual thing, it's a religious thing. It's about transcendence. It's a really crazy thing, where the lower you go the higher you get. There's a line in the Slave Sonnets: 'Each reduction makes me all the more huge.' The loftier I feel, the more the out-of-the-body experience. That's where I'm going with it.

END