PAUL THEROUX

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES FOR FOUR AMERICAN POETS

‘Robert Frost was sitting right where I am now,’ said Denton Fuller, the American poet, in Amherst. ‘In this very rocking chair –’

In The Hub, A Magazine of Verse, Fuller’s biographical note read: Born Conway, N. H., 1922; attended Green Mountain School and Bowdoin College; after graduation, ‘army and Byronesque ramblings.’ Worked for PORTLAND (Me.) HERALD, wrote verse late at night and far into the morning on rolls of newsprint. First book No News (1946) followed by Barefoot Boy (1949); Good Fences (1956) won Mr Fuller a John Wheeler Fellowship. He is presently teaching part-time and writing. Married, two daughters. Hobbies: mushrooms, dogs, farming.

‘– just staring off this porch, looking meaningfully at the Common there. He could have been Tiresias, with his shock of white hair and that wise old clapboard face. And he said to me, “Denton, I once ran away from this college – there were so many things I wanted to do.”’

‘And miles to go before he slept,’ murmured Wilbur Parsons, the American poet.

In The Hub, Parsons’ biographical note read: Born Worcester, Mass., 1918; educated Worcester Academy and Harvard Business School; Rhodes Scholar (Oxford University, England) 1940–41; published first book shortly after joining Homemakers Mutual Insurance Co. (Boston and New York, with branches around the world); now Executive Vice-President of this company. In 1949 Mr Parsons founded The Hub, A Magazine of Verse, which he edits today when the world of finance is too much with him. Author of The Muse and Mammon (1943), Predilections (1950) and Bull and Bear (1957). Curtain Raisers (1965) is a collection of Mr Parsons’ translations from the Russian of Iosip Brodsky. Married, no children. Hobbies: wines, travel, yachting, golf.

‘I can’t say that I knew Frost,’ Parsons went on. ‘Of course we chatted dozens of times at Breadloaf. And I was responsible for putting lots of his stuff in The Hub. He was a marvelous old man. My wife used to say he was salty.’

‘Oh, he was an old salt,’ said Denton Fuller. ‘He could have been the skipper of some great sailing ship.’

‘I always thought of him as the yeast at Breadloaf,’ said Sumner Bean, the American poet. ‘I mean no disrespect.’

In The Hub, Bean's biographical note read: Born Kennebunkport, Me., 1921; educated at The Friends School, Cambridge, and Antioch College. A conscientious objector, Mr Bean served as an ambulance driver, 1942–45; published his war poems, Back to Front (1946), and taught for two years in Kyoto, Japan, 1949–51; published Enemies No More (1953). For some years he has been working on a verse play set at the time of Hiroshima and tentatively titled Seeing the Light. Presently teaching at Webster Friends College (Webster, Mass.). Married, four sons and a daughter. Hobbies: cycling, swimming, baking bread. Describes himself as 'The oldest "younger poet" in the USA.'

'It was his sense of humor,' said Wilbur Parsons.

'He said he wrote his poems in couplets' – Sumner Bean grinned brightly – 'because that's how the world goes on – by coupling!'

'I remember him chaffing Ciardi for telling him what "The Road Not Taken" meant,' said Fuller. 'I mean, symbolically, you see. He would say –'

Here Stanley Gold, the American poet, said, 'For God's sake, how long is this going on! You talk about Frost as if he was some old local druggist that made great banana splits.'

Gold's biographical note was long and breezy, and usually magazines only printed part of it. The Hub had never done that much, for Gold had never published there. But the New Republic, Harper's, Commentary and (once) The New Yorker had published his poems. His fullest biographical note appeared in the Beloit Poetry Journal: Born NYC, 1931. Educated PS 119 (Flatbush) and Brooklyn College. Awarded MA Columbia, 1955. Worked as bus boy, steamfitter, garage mechanic, welfare inspector, high school teacher. Nervous breakdown (1958) [once, a magazine in Iowa printed this as if it was the title of a book of poems] followed by a period of intensive 'lenitive, purgative, cathartic' writing. Mr Gold is the author of The Jew's Ruse (1960), Hitler Riddles (1962). A Guggenheim Fellow in 1965, Mr Gold traveled to Israel, which resulted in Ruthless in Gaza (1967), a travel diary. Divorced, no hobbies.

'What do you mean by that?' demanded Fuller.

'That's how the world goes on, by coupling. Doesn't that sound a little cute to you? There was a lot of schmaltz in Frost. You must be kidding about Tiresias. Let's face it, Frost was a Yankee Harry Golden. You know, Enjoy, Enjoy! Except that Frost was writing for English department phonies, not fat Jews at Grossingers', so he wrote Provide, Provide! But it's the same cruddy ethos.' Stanley Gold started to recite 'Birches' in a Yiddish accent ('Ven I zee boiches …') but was cut off sharply by Fuller.

'You never met Frost, did you?' snapped Fuller.

‘Me?’ Stanley Gold shrugged under the severe gazes of the others. ‘I don’t know what you mean by met. I heard him recite his poems at the YMHA in Manhattan. Then I saw him on television, at Kennedy’s inauguration. His papers blew off the podium, remember? I saw him at Trilling’s house, too, I forget when. He read his poems in a crackly voice, a kind of Spencer Tracy croak –’

Wilbur Parsons’ finger had been pointed directly at Gold’s chin for some minutes. Gold frowned at the finger and cocked his head to the side comically. But no one laughed.

‘I’ll tell you something,’ said Parsons. ‘You don’t know the first thing about Frost and I’ll tell you how I know and you can correct me if I’m wrong, Denton.’ Parsons paused, sipped his drink, then said simply, ‘Frost never recited his poems to anyone, anywhere.’

‘I heard him,’ said Gold. ‘At the YMHA. Then at Trilling’s. I heard him recite his poems, I’m telling you. “Boiches,” for example.’

‘Frost never recited his poems,’ Parsons continued, as if Gold had not said anything. ‘Frost used to … say… his poems. Am I right, Denton?’

‘Absolutely, Wilbur. That’s what he called it.’ Denton Fuller jutted his jaw out and said in a rasping voice, ‘I am now going to say a poem called “Desert Places.”’

‘He never recited, he always said his poems,’ Parsons recited.

‘Said, read,’ Gold muttered. ‘It’s pretty cute, pretty stagy.’

‘Would you put your Hitler Riddles next to A Boy’s Will?’ Parsons challenged.

‘What is this, some kind of stock market?’ Gold snarled. Then he fell silent.

Sumner Bean steered the conversation to Robert Lowell’s world view. He ordered drinks for everyone, a grapefruit juice for himself.

The day had not started badly. In the car, driving to Bradley Field to meet Parsons’ plane, Fuller had said to Bean, ‘I’ve been excited about this seminar for weeks. I was writing night and day, night and day. I was on to something very big and very important to me personally. I knew I had to finish it in time for the seminar, so I could show you. And by God I did finish it. It’s back at the hotel. Frankly speaking I think it’s the best thing I’ve done, but I’ll let you be the judge of that.’

‘I want to see it, Denton. You know I do.’ Sumner Bean’s gentle Quaker voice soothed Fuller.

‘You look at this poem,’ said Fuller. ‘But be brutal, tear it to pieces if you want to.’

Sumner Bean smiled.

Fuller relaxed and drove the car with confidence, reducing his speed on the thinly iced road. ‘Working like a mule,’ he said. ‘I shut myself off completely when I work. Don’t talk to a soul. Just pick at my food. I go for long walks. Refuse to answer the telephone.’

‘We don’t have a telephone,’ said Sumner Bean. As he said it he sensed a stiffening in Fuller and was jogged by a thumped throttle. He realized he had hurt Fuller in making the nonownership of a telephone somehow virtuous. ‘We’re planning to get one installed, though,’ he lied. ‘Say, Denton, how’s the farm?’

‘Big Bertha’s calved,’ said Fuller proudly, recovering.

‘What a lovely verb,’ said Bean. ‘Calved.’

‘Well, it’s mine,’ said Fuller, and he lifted his head and recited, “‘All around the green farm the acres are waking, / And hard by her stanchion old Bertha’s calved –’”

‘I thought that sounded familiar,’ said Bean.

“‘Good Fences,’” said Fuller, and he cheered up.

Parsons arrived tanned, an odd figure crossing the snow-swept runway, with jaunty, befeathered alpine hat and a trim topcoat, overnight bag and briefcase. He shook hands: ‘Denton, Sumner, good to see you again,’ and said that he had just returned from Nassau, where he had ‘dickered with some offshore properties, did a little fishing, and worked on a poem.’

‘You’re brown as a berry,’ said Fuller.

‘But not as dark as Berryman,’ said Bean.

‘Ha-ha,’ said Parsons. ‘But odd you should mention him. I was talking with John just this morning in New York. I’m anthologizing him.’

‘How’s business?’ asked Fuller when they were in the car and driving toward Amherst.

Parsons, in the back seat, said, ‘I’m working on a sonnet.’

‘I meant your company.’

‘Oh, that,’ laughed Parsons. ‘Going great guns. I’m negotiating a bauxite contract.’

‘How do you do it,’ said Bean with admiration. ‘It’s all I can do to keep up with marking the freshman themes. And you, with your bauxite and ballads!’

‘There’s a title for you, Wilbur,’ said Fuller.

But Parsons had leaned forward, resting his forearms on the top of the front seat, near Sumner Bean. He was looking meditatively at the dashboard. ‘How do I do it? Let me ask you something: how did Wallace Stevens do it?’

‘I’ve always wondered,’ said Sumner Bean.

‘I’ll tell you,’ said Parsons. ‘My secretary, Martha, takes my first draft down in shorthand, and then types it up with wide margins, triple spaced. I work like blazes on that, penciling in words, crossing things out, adding new stuff. It’s a beautiful mess when I’m through with it, like one of Balzac’s galley proofs.’

‘The Buffalo Library’s buying work sheets,’ said Fuller. ‘They’re paying well for them, too.’

‘They’ve got some of mine,’ said Parsons, ‘some early drafts of The Muse and Mammon. They’ve got some graduate students doing their Ph.D.’s on my work. But as I was saying. Martha’s the only one who can read my hand-writing. I give her my fussed-up page and she hands me back a clean copy. I mess that one up; she does another. And that’s the way it goes. I keep working the thing into shape until it’s letter-perfect. And, you know, the poem I start with is never the poem I finish up with – it’s a completely different poem. Take that sonnet I started in Nassau. That will keep changing and changing. I’ll give it to Martha on Monday. She says I’m a perfectionist. I don’t know what I’d do if she ever left the firm.’

‘How did Wallace Stevens do it?’ asked Sumner Bean.

‘Well, that’s my point. Exactly the same way,’ said Parsons. ‘But he did it in Key West.’

‘Eliot had his typist, too,’ said Bean. He chuckled.

Parsons dozed, his jaunty hat over his eyes, his hands folded across his briefcase.

‘I carry all sorts of scraps of paper around with me,’ said Fuller eagerly. ‘Some I carry around for years, with little bits and pieces of writing on them, phrases, words, you see. They don’t mean a thing to anyone else: it’s a kind of code. Then, when I get a free month, I go up to the farm and sit down and put it all together, scratching away

like mad on yellow legal-size paper with a four-B pencil.'

'I use a typewriter, an old Remington,' said Bean.

'It's so mysterious, writing poems,' said Fuller. 'I don't know how it happens. It's a kind of magic, I guess.'

'I haven't written a poem in three years,' said Bean sadly. 'Really, I haven't. It's terrible, isn't it?'

Fuller could not think of any words of consolation for Bean at first. But driving across a dry stretch of road near the greenhouses on the Amherst outskirts, Fuller was inspired. He spoke to the snowy corrugations of a distant field: 'We all have our dry patches. Be patient. It'll come bubbling up when the mood takes you.'

After lunch (roast chicken, new potatoes, fresh corn, Indian pudding) they adjourned to the hotel piazza, where in the chill afternoon air they sat and waited for Stanley Gold, who had said he would be driving up from New York in his own car.

'They must think we're a bunch of crazy bohemian poets,' said Parsons, rubbing his hands and tossing his head in the direction of nearby windows. Lunching couples sat at festive tables, watched the poets, and chewed. 'They're staring at us because we're doing what we damn please.'

'I was looking at that tree,' said Fuller reflectively. 'It's a willow tree. When I was a boy I used to pretend I was a bell ringer and pull the branches of willow trees down, dong-dong-dong.'

'A weeping willow,' said Bean.

'It's supposed to be a sad tree,' said Parsons. 'But I don't think of it as a sad tree. For me it's a happy tree. Look at it.'

Rooted in the Common, the tree was a cold fountain of black leafless wires, the trunk battered and icy.

'Yes, it is a happy tree,' said Fuller. 'Not a weeping tree at all.'

'It droops, of course,' said Parsons. 'But that's part of its charm. No, it's not a sad tree.'

'Like' – Bean struggled with a phrase – 'like … so many … graceful …'He could not go on. He had not written a poem for three years. He drank his juice.

When Stanley Gold arrived they were still watching the tree and discussing the happy aspect it presented. Gold seated himself with them (he wore a thick woolen scarf and an army jacket; his hair was wild and bushy, his ears bright red, his glasses iced with frozen crystal needles of scattered breath). He listened for a while, blowing on his fingers, then asked, ‘Say, in the winter, how can you tell which trees are dead and which aren’t?’ and here the conversation turned to Robert Frost.

At six-fifteen that same evening on the steps of the Amherst town hall, Parsons, Fuller and Bean waited for Stanley Gold. They had arranged to meet at six; Fuller said that he had ‘a little surprise’ for them before their early meal, a pizza and a pitcher of beer at one of the local hangouts. Parsons said he had not had a pizza for years; Bean said he was game; Gold had nodded and said (rather too quickly, Fuller thought), ‘Okay, okay.’ Parsons said that it was customary for the English department sponsoring such seminars to give a cocktail party before the talks and a little cold buffet afterward (‘They had quite a spread for me when I read at Swarthmore’), but added that he was frankly quite anxious to see what Fuller’s surprise was. There would be drinks at Professor Bloodworth’s after the evening session. At six-twenty Fuller said he didn’t think Gold would show.

‘Nothing gold can stay,’ said Bean. He was dressed for the weather: a fur hat and thick duffel coat, corduroy trousers stuck in high, freshly oiled lumberjack boots, heavy woolen mittens. The others paid no attention to Bean’s compulsive pun. Bean himself had been ten minutes late: Parsons, watching Bean approach, had said, ‘Look, Denton, he even dresses like a Quaker!’ Fuller had replied, ‘Sumner’s got a heart of gold,’ and Parsons quipped, ‘Let’s hope not.’ They were laughing softly even as Bean joined them.

Now Parsons was saying, ‘I’d never take that young man on my firm. Oh, I know he’s supposed to be a good poet – very popular with campus audiences, they say – but in business punctuality is essential. If he were coming for an interview right now I would simply say to him, “Sorry, the post has been filled by a prompt applicant,” and that, my friends, would be that. I say we push off.’

‘Let’s give him another five minutes,’ said Fuller, flashing his watch crystal toward the streetlamp and trying to read it. ‘Starting now.’

‘What’s the hurry?’ Bean asked inoffensively. ‘Maybe he’s doing something important, a call from home or something.’

‘Very charitable of you, Sumner,’ said Parsons, ‘but don’t waste your charity. Five’ll get you ten he’s inside the hotel sitting on his butt. I’m telling you, I know an unreliable man when I see one. Besides, he’s divorced – so we know he’s not calling his wife, don’t we?’

Bean did not reply.

‘Dylan Thomas was always late,’ said Fuller. He detected that Bean disapproved of Parsons’ remark about Gold’s divorce. Bean made a point of counseling unhappy couples and, discouraging gossip, trying to patch things up.

‘Stanley Gold is not Dylan Thomas,’ said Parsons. ‘I met Dylan at Williams College back in – was it fifty-two? You could excuse that man for anything, anything at all.’ Parsons blew a jet of steamy breath into the night air and said, ‘I’ve had it. Gentlemen, shall we lead on?’

‘I don’t see,’ said Bean, ‘how you can be so hard on Stanley. He strikes me as a very sincere person. And I’ve read his poems. They’re darned good.’

‘Well, I haven’t read as many of his poems as you have, I’m sure. He’s never sent any to The Hub,’ said Parsons, aggrieved. ‘But I’ll tell you something. I stand here waiting for him and I say to myself: This isn’t how poems get written. With poetry it’s fish or cut bait. It takes discipline, application, plain old work. Gold would probably call me an old fogy for saying this: it takes a lot of things that young man doesn’t have.’

‘I don’t think Stanley would call you an old fogy,’ said Bean.

Parsons continued. ‘That’s why Stevens will always be a greater poet for me than, say, Hart Crane. One basic reason is that Stevens knew about discipline, and there was no nonsense about it. He ordered his life. He invested wisely. He ordered his poems. There’s something very, very American about that. Hart Crane was a sot. Granted, his death was tragic. I’m not saying it wasn’t. But Wallace Stevens knew how a poem is made, the way real poets do.’

‘I haven’t written a poem for three years,’ said Bean. He said it with a certain pride.

‘Marilyn Monroe was always late,’ said Fuller. ‘I’m thinking of writing a poem about her. She was America.’

‘She had a lot of talent,’ said Parsons. ‘But hasn’t someone already done a poem about her? Was it Thom Gunn?’

‘He did Elvis Presley,’ said Fuller, piqued.

‘They say Marilyn Monroe had a very unhappy childhood,’ said Bean.

‘The worst,’ said Fuller. ‘Boy, could I tell you some stories. They’d stand your hair on end.’

Bean had been watching the distant sidewalk. He saw a figure loping along. He said, ‘I think that’s Gold, isn’t it? He’s headed in this direction.’

Parsons squinted. ‘Could be.’ He turned to Bean. ‘I tell you what. I’m going to ask him where he’s been. Watch him squirm. A fellow like that never gets asked why he’s late. It’ll be a good experience for him.’

‘You might call this a threat,’ said Bean in a steady voice, facing the much taller Parsons, ‘but if you ask him that I will go straight back to the hotel in protest. You have no right to ask that man for an explanation. None whatsoever.’

Parsons turned away. When Gold came near and Fuller led the way down the icy sidewalk, Parsons paired up with Fuller and Gold fell in with Bean. The four poets shuffled, so as not to fall.

‘You see a lot of stars around here,’ said Gold.

Bean obligingly indicated several constellations.

Up front Parsons talked about Nassau. They walked two hundred yards, then Fuller said to stop right where they were and to look across the street. There was a high wall of shrubbery – evergreens – some bare trees, and just visible the large-windowed top floor of a very old house. Gold and Bean caught up. They all stared at the house.

‘What I want you to look at,’ said Fuller, ‘is that upper right-hand window over there.’ He pointed to the window with a gloved hand. The window gleamed black. ‘A great poet lived there her whole life. Barely stirred from her room. Great poems were written right up there behind that window.’ Fuller paused, saying with some emotion, ‘The poems of Emily Dickinson.’

‘When I was reading my poems in England,’ said Parsons, ‘an Englishman came up to me and said, “I know you have Edna Ferber, but we have Emily Brontë.” I looked him straight in the eye and said, “We have Emily Dickinson, and they don’t come any better than that.” He shut up, of course.’

But Bean had started reciting ‘Much Madness is divinest Sense’ and Parsons’ story went unnoticed. Fuller followed with ‘After great pain, a formal feeling comes,’ and Parsons, with a glance at Gold, recited ‘A narrow fellow in the grass.’ And then they went for their pizza.

The seminar (‘Poetry: Meaning and Being’) was held in the overheated chapel. The poets spoke in turn. With a rustic twinkle in his eye, Fuller talked about his own poems (‘Who knows where a poem comes from?’) and his ardent cultivation of cabbages (‘And that’s a kind of creating, too!’). Parsons was candid about the rat race and said there

was no money in poetry, but writing poems was ‘a lot cheaper than paying five grand to a headshrinker’; he told about his secretary and how he often composed poems right in Wall Street itself (‘Who needs a vernal wood?’); and he read some of his Russian translations. Bean spoke movingly of Vietnam: ‘At this moment a young poet in Bienhoa is trying to unstick fiery napalm from his fingers,’ and he finished with a sequence of verses written not by himself (he confessed his three-year barrenness) but by Ho Chi Minh, Dag Hammarskjöld, Mao Tse-tung, the wife of Harold Wilson, Léopold Senghor and John Kennedy. The Kennedy was prose, but he read it as verse. Gold shouted love lyrics scattered with references to elimination; he refused to comment on or explain any of them. At the end of the seminar the questions, mumbled by admiring students, hairy and in greasy jackets, were all directed at Gold. The chairman, closing the seminar, said confidently, ‘I think we’ve all learned something this evening,’ and he led the four poets to a party at Professor Bloodworth’s.

The party continued for nearly three hours, climaxing in a magical but unfortunate sudden hush in the din during which the young wife of a graduate student was heard in an insistent voice to say, ‘I wouldn’t mind if Mailer buggered me!’ Guests winced. One associate professor said, ‘Well, I guess that about wraps it up.’ There was laughter; the room emptied.

At the front door, Mrs Dorothy Margoulies, M.A. candidate (‘Ferlinghetti and the Coney Island Ethos’) and wife of the witty associate professor, said good night to Parsons and Fuller. She was moved to a violent nervous shuddering. She caught her breath and said, ‘I haven’t felt this way since William Golding read here. I don’t know what to say –’

She prattled. In the living room someone clinked ashtrays, emptying them; in the kitchen, someone else was stacking dishes in the plastic-basket innards of an automatic dishwasher; in the study, Sumner Bean thumbed a book he had been wait-listed for at the Webster Library for months; Stanley Gold, slumped in a wing chair, tried to tune in on the conversation at the door.

‘– So enjoyed your talks and readings, and I can’t tell you how much –’ There was a false pause as her voice fell, the low pitch making a purring silence. Gold heard his name, and laughter.

Then Parsons. ‘– Must get back to New York tomorrow –’ A pause. ‘– No, ha-ha, not exactly. You see, Stevens worked in Connecticut. I guess that’s your only major difference.’

‘My farm’s at Ripton,’ said Fuller. ‘I’m going to shoot right up there as fast as I can.’

In a cheerful frame of mind, Parsons and Fuller entered the living room. Stanley Gold stared at Parsons, then asked, ‘Kak viy pozhivaete?’

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Parsons, still wearing the warm grin with which he had sent off the grateful Mrs Margoulies.

‘It’s Russian,’ said Gold.

‘If you say so,’ said Parsons. He looked at his watch.

‘It’s a question.’

‘I thought I detected an interrogatory note there somewhere,’ said Parsons. He checked his watch again.

‘So what’s your reply?’

‘My reply’ – and here Parsons glanced at Professor Bloodworth and Fuller – ‘is I don’t know what the hell you’re up to, but I’m going back to the hotel and get some sleep or I won’t be able to do a lick of work tomorrow.’

‘Why?’ Gold’s eyes were big behind thick lenses. ‘Are you thinking of doing a few translations tomorrow?’

‘See here,’ Parsons began.

But Gold had already started speaking: ‘I’d like to know where the hell you get the right to pretend you do translations from a language you don’t know! Just tell me that and I’ll be satisfied.’

‘Auden translated Markings and he doesn’t know a word of Swedish. He said so.’ Bean called from the study.

‘Shakespeare didn’t speak Latin or Greek,’ said Fuller. ‘And he –’

‘A little Latin and less Greek,’ said Bloodworth in humorous reproof. He gave the quotation its source.

‘Settle down, young fellow,’ said Parsons. ‘Oh, I know you’re thinking I’m a faker. But, hell, Kunitz doesn’t speak Russian.’

‘I’m not talking about Kunitz. I’m talking about you, Daddy Warbucks.’

‘If you can’t talk in a civil manner I’m not going on with this. You have no right to ask me for an explanation for anything. I stand by my poems and my magazine. If you think you can do a better translation of Brodsky you’re welcome to try.’ Parsons

calmed himself and added, ‘And while you’re at it, you can send your poems to The Hub. We’d be mighty pleased to get them. You’ve never sent us any, you know.’

‘And I don’t intend to,’ said Gold.

‘Come on, son,’ said Fuller, as if to a juvenile delinquent. ‘Parsons is trying to help you.’

‘Your magazine is financed by you, isn’t it?’ said Gold to Parsons; he did not wait for a reply. ‘And your money comes from your insurance company, right? A company that for the past five years has owned controlling interest in a chemical plant that produces defoliant for the Defense Department! Who are you trying to kid!’

‘Hold on a minute,’ said Parsons.

Bean appeared at the study door. ‘Say, Wilbur, that’s a very serious charge. You never told me anything about that.’

‘Let me say this,’ said Parsons. ‘We’re Americans. Each of us, in his own way, directly or indirectly, whether we want to or not, has something to do with war. I’ll give you a small example. Do you know where your tax money goes?’

‘I don’t pay taxes,’ said Gold. ‘I don’t earn enough.’

‘I haven’t paid taxes for ten years,’ said Bean. ‘It’s downright immoral, contributing to a corrupt government. I’m prepared to go to jail if necessary.’

‘You’re off your head,’ said Parsons to Bean. ‘It’s your business, I know that. But if you ask me –’

‘It’s been a long day,’ said Fuller sheepishly to Bloodworth.

‘– I’ve endowed a lot of magazines,’ Parsons was saying, ‘a hell of a lot of them. That doesn’t mean I agree with their editorial policies, no indeed! I have nothing but respect for Dr Spock’s views, don’t think I haven’t –’

‘What about your chemical plant?’ asked Bean.

‘I didn’t come here to talk shop,’ said Parsons. ‘I came here as a poet. We’re all poets. I don’t know why we’re behaving like this if we’re poets.’ He stopped momentarily and looked at Bean’s face, Gold’s face, Fuller’s face; he saw something witless and fatigued on each one. He guessed that the same thing showed on his own face. He spoke again, his tongue feeling very large in his mouth. ‘Come to my office. I can explain everything.’ He turned to Gold. ‘And as for you, I can tell you that I’ve been getting

together a little anthology, and I was sort of counting on using your poem “Moshe Dayan’s Other Eye” –’

‘I wouldn’t let you print that poem if you gave me ten grand,’ Gold said fiercely.

‘The fee was fifty dollars,’ said Parsons. He strode to the kitchen; before Mrs Bloodworth could dry her hands on her apron Parsons took them both and shook them, thanking her for a delightful evening. He bade good night to Professor Bloodworth, and, still urging Bean to come and see him, left with a shaken Fuller.

Sumner Bean and Stanley Gold left the house together. It was four in the morning; they walked in the middle of the street. They did not speak; at one point, and without warning, Bean crooked his arm through Gold’s the way a stiff old-time lover might. This was the way they walked to the hotel, silently, arm in arm, feeling frail, as poetry was. And when they went to their separate rooms they did not say good night, but bowed slightly, trying to smile. In his bed, Gold continued the poem he had put aside the previous evening at 6:30. At his undersized hotel desk, Bean fiddled with headed note-paper; he did not begin writing immediately, but a poem was arranging itself in his head. Bean’s and Gold’s were only two of the poems Bloodworth later claimed as the seminar’s own. There were two more: ‘A Night Call on Miss Dickinson’ and ‘Pizza – A Sonnet.’