

Performing the Real

is a critical biography-in-process of Robin Blaser's life and work. For those readers who haven't met him yet, Robin Blaser (1925-2009) came to cultural consciousness alongside Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer at UC Berkeley in the late 1940s. In 1966, he immigrated to Vancouver, B.C. to accept a teaching position at Simon Fraser University and then stayed on, becoming a Canadian citizen in 1972. His major works are *The Holy Forest: Collected Poems* and *The Fire: Collected Essays*. Besides long relationships with Duncan and Spicer, Blaser counted among his generational correspondents Don Allen, Frank O'Hara, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, John Ashbery, and John Wieners. His story begins in the Idaho desert, but it winds through the world's great cities and big books, wherever the modern spoke to him in poetry, philosophy, and art. "I'm so in love with art that / it will get me into the next / world, which, as you know, / is 'white mush,'" he wrote in *Pell Mell*, c 1988 (HF 305). One of his major contributions to the New American poetry is his translation of the sacred into secular language.

When Mike asked me for a piece of the biography for *Dispatches*, I proposed a serial. This is the first installment, lifted from Chapter 1, "Family Matters." That chapter has four sections; I offer the last two here.

Growing Up Absurd

Photo 1: The toddler in a metal frame walker is looking at a smiling, matronly figure who is seated on the porch floor, legs straight out in front of her. The porch is a raised platform beside a smallish looking house. The little boy is dressed in what looks to be a rumpled baby's shirt and trousers.



Photo 2: A wee lad is perched on a photographer's stool against a studio-neutral background in solitary, sartorial splendor. He is dressed in a suit with short pants, thick hair combed back from a high forehead and posed with legs crossed. A small serious face looks out at the camera. "Even in the middle of the desert," Blaser remarks, "they dressed me up to look like Little Lord Fauntleroy" (*AT* 36).



Photo 3: A head shot of a boy, smiling shyly at the camera, shirt buttoned right up to the neck under a vest.



Photo 4: A young man in tailored trousers and an unbuttoned white shirt poses for the camera, unsmiling. The face is already insultingly good looking in a Jimmie Dean kind of way.



The first photo hints at modest means; the second strips away context to present a little prince; the third says good boy; the fourth says trouble.

The Blasers were railroad workers of Mormon heritage. Although the sequence of moves that the family made over Robin's childhood years is not clear, it seems to have been Wapai, Kimama, Dietrich and then Orchard, all of them small railroad settlements in the Idaho desert. Grade one happened in Dietrich, the largest of these, and it "was the most awful thing," Blaser says, because the school seemed big and the students intimidating (*AT* 37). One memory that stuck was of standing in a corner of the schoolroom with his back to the class, rubbing one shoe on the other (*AT* 37). In 1931, six-year olds were introduced to the three "R's" plus Physical Education, Music, Drawing, and Phonics. Robin seems to have gone through a steep learning curve. His report card records Cs and Bs for these subjects in the first segment of the school year, but by the second, he was consistently earning As for reading and Bs for Writing, Arithmetic, Language, P.E. and Hygiene, Music, Drawing, and Phonics.¹ His school "citizenship record" climbed from Bs to As between the first and second terms as did his "preparation of lessons." He was promoted to second grade 12 May 1932.

Somewhere between 1933 and 1936, however, the Depression must have hit the family hard and everyone moved in with Grandmother Sophia in Orchard. By this time, Robin had two siblings, Gus (1927) and Hope (1928). Sophia Nichols worked as a telegrapher for the railroad and lived in company quarters, a converted railcar by the tracks. With her was her second husband, Simon Auer; her mother, Ina Johnson; and her Aunt Tina (Robin's great aunt). Mark Samac, Blaser's nephew, remembers that Robert

and Ina Mae slept in an unheated lean-to beside the house, piling on the blankets in winter, because there simply was not enough room for everyone (Interview 2013). Robin was moved to the one-roomed school in Orchard where, he would recall later, the teacher didn't seem to be a real one since he remembers learning nothing much except some Protestant songs and the Star-Spangled Banner (*AT* 38).

Out of school, however, there were plenty of lessons. There was the time, for instance, when Robin built a cage for sparrows, thinking to keep them as pets. This turned out to be a disaster when the bull snakes climbed the legs of the cage and devoured the trapped birds. Robin responded with a rage, attacking the snakes with an axe until grandmother intervened and taught him that he had, in fact, set up the slaughter (*AT* 20). This was a lesson Robin would not forget. On *The Astonishments Tapes*,² he tells the story of flying into a temper decades later as a professor at Simon Fraser University. A Blake scholar and candidate for a romantics post at SFU challenged Blake's position that everything is holy:

. . . though I have a very funny response to snakes, my grandmother never really got me through into the kind of sense of them that she had. And she had this on all levels. It accounts for a recent rage . . . when a man came to Simon Fraser wanting to be hired to teach Blake. Now it became very clear to me, shortly after the interview started that he knew nothing about Blake, but the example that he used to show me how he knew about Blake--Blake had to be insane because "everything that lives is holy" could only be the remark of an insane man, "because," he said, "if a scorpion bites me

obviously it's not holy," at which point . . . drunken Robin Blaser threatened to hit him with the wine bottle, disgracing the Department of English at Simon Fraser, etc. I was in such a rage, and I only now realize . . . that he was touching a whole range of information that was coming to me out of something else that wouldn't be conscious to me on a fucking academic occasion. . . (AT 25)

During the whole of Blaser's childhood and adolescence, Grandmother Sophia taught a regard for the creaturely and provided an emotional rock for her grandson. In a letter of 31 July 1936, she replies to three notes from "Bobbie":

I received your three letters OK and my I was delighted to get them and so happy you like the bike. Always try and make people like you and one can get so much more out of life by making someone else happy.

When school starts I want you to be sure and join the boy scouts. It is such a great help to one and they go on these hiking trips and teach one so many useful things.

School will soon start, and I hope you can all come down and see me before[.] I would love to come down, but I simply must not leave Grandma alone. Am glad you like the books. Cultivate the habit of reading, for books are such wonderful company. (MsA1a 1.12³)



This is advice that Robin would take to heart. The family moved to Twin Falls when he was 11, and during his adolescence there he would learn to master the scared little boy in the corner of the schoolroom to become a star student and something of a social butterfly. In a childhood game that must have dated from somewhere between ages 11 and 12, he was already thinking big. The house on Main Street was situated next to a vacant lot which became a playground for Robin and his friends. The boys dug tunnels in the lot and played at being masters of the world, dividing the globe into kingdoms for themselves. He remembers the experience in *The Park*, a serial poem from 1960.

(Bill took out the atlas and began to divide
the world between us General William Halley

England, the Americas, Russia he used his
 own name, so I kept mind, but added Duc of
 Orleans because I held France, China and Africa

(We gave the imaginary kingdoms to the late
 comers Mu, Atlantis, the Arctics

(Then I held power in a vacant lot where I
 built a tunnel dedicated to their sex play

(Then I built a tunnel in a vacant lot dedicated to history

(where their sex play held power (*HF* 54-55)

On *The Astonishment Tapes*, Robin explains his penchant for France and China, although Africa remains a mystery. Grandfather Gus had told his grandson that he, Augustus, was the lost Dauphin of France, which would have made Robin heir to the French throne. This was doubly a fancy because Augustus' birth records show that he was Swiss rather than French, as Robin insisted into adulthood.⁴ On the *Tapes*, made at age 49, Robin says of his grandfather:

That was the secret between us, that he was the lost Dauphin which meant of course that I was the Prince de Paris or the Duc d'Orléans or something. In childhood the games we played with maps--we divided the world The few childhood friends would divide the

map and I would fight to have France. There were literally fistfights over that. I had to have France because I was the Duc d'Orléans. . . .

It was so extreme, the imagination of the--and nobody's ever caught this before and I certainly have it in my mind . . . it was so extreme my sense of that and the lost Dauphin thing, that I could carry that off in manner. One day in school, in Twin Falls, a girl . . . punched me in the back and she said, "I'm sure that you must be a prince or something." And I remember my response was that "I am." ("AT" 2.5, 22-23⁵)

The French connection would become lifelong. French became the desired second language and Blaser retained a leaning toward things French for the rest of his life. China, as well, had special significance. As Robin explains on the *Tapes*, his middle name was Francis after Saint Francis Xavier ("AT" 2.5, 9), and he had grown up on stories of the adventures of the Saint as related by Grandfather Auer. St. Francis (1506-1552) was a Catholic missionary, born in Navarre (now Spain). A co-founder of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) with St. Ignatius of Loyola, he traveled to India, Japan, Borneo, and the Malaku Islands. It was his ambition to reach China, but he died of a fever at Shangchuan Island before reaching the mainland. According to grandfather's stories, however, Francis was one of the great emissaries of the faith in China and he had the surprising ability as well to fly on Persian carpets across the Mediterranean ("AT" 2.5, 9).

The game Blaser describes in *The Park* speaks to a vivid will to self-fashion. Later this passion for transformation would enter the poetry. In a poem called "Giant" from *Pell Mell* (1988), the vacant lot returns as "protean shape, the sacred vacant lot"

(HF 310). A recurring trope for Blaser, *open space* is significant both to the person and the poet. For the poet-to-be, the lot was a space for imagination. The tunnels he once dug there as a boy speak to the idea of hidden passages, like Idaho's Lost River which runs underground to emerge dramatically at Thousand Springs.⁶ For the Idaho boy, the vacant lot was also a source of family tension and perhaps rebellion, as well as a playground. Samac recalls Robert Blaser's anger when he drove his truck onto the lot only to have it fall into the tunnels the children had dug (Interview 2013). From the father's perspective the tunnels created a parking problem; from the son's point of view, the vacant lot was possibility.

A little "School Memories" book from 1937 confirms Robin's early interest in the creative arts. At age 12, his "social activities" included music and drama and his favorite subject was art ("School Memories"). In this little booklet are many parting verses from fellow students at the end of the term in May 1937, suggesting his popularity. Best friend Wayne Jepson's verse catches the general level of humour: "Dear Robin, Yours untill [sic] the dresser falls down stairs and looses [sic] its drawers." Other ditties reveal the social landscape of the period. For example, Jeraldne Carlson writes, "When you get married and your wife get [sic] cross / Pick up the broom and say (Im [sic] boss). Yours til Bear Lake has cubs." And this one: "Dear Robin, Long may you live / Happy may you be / Bessed [sic] with 14 kids / Seven on each knee. Yours truly, June Seaton." On the subject of race as well as sex and gender, this little autograph book underlines the fact that in 1937, civil rights as well as the feminist revolution and Stonewall had not quite hit the public imagination in Twin Falls, Idaho: "Robin, God made negros / He made them at night / He made them in such a hurry / He forgot to paint them white." Included as well

are congratulatory teacher's comments and this from Ina Mae: "Robin, Cultivate self confidence. Learn to say "No"! It is a great thing to be a man but far greater to be a master--Master of Yourself. Mother."

Although the 1937 autograph book offers a glimpse of a popular, engaged young man, Twin Falls would have provided plenty of cognitive dissonance for a gayboy with sexual stirrings. In a poem called "Curriculum Vitae" (*HF* 400), Robin mentions a nervous breakdown at age 13 and a "therapeutic" stint at a sheep farm in Wyoming meant to cure him of such nonsense (*HF* 400). The breakdown, he says in this autobiographical poem, was "actually sexuality edging towards the unknown, but I couldn't tell that to the doctor" (*HF* 400). The "therapy" would continue through Robin's teenage years. At this time, Robert was working as a trucker and Robin's job was to help load--"hundred-pound sacks of flour or tongs in either hand to carry as many bricks as I could handle" (*HF* 400). On *Astonishments*, Robin says that his father would assign him labouring jobs that would stiffen his hands when he had piano recitals scheduled (*AT* 44). Other jobs included window washing⁷ and seed sorting for the Globe Seed and Feed Warehouse (*HF* 400-01). These labouring jobs suggest Robert's view of suitable employments for his adolescent son. When Robert later started his own trucking business, the Trail Blasers, both Gus and Jimmy (the youngest brother and a late-comer in 1936) became drivers. Robin was otherwise inclined. "I was accused of every kind of faggotry before I'd ever heard of a faggot," he remarks on *Astonishments*, "except my father loved to use the term cocksucker and I knew what that meant before I'd ever done it" (*AT* 44). Sophia was the refuge, although she too supported manly self-sufficiency. In a letter of 15 May 1938, she urges her 13-year old grandson to stick it out with the new job rather than come to

Orchard. "If you come up this summer," she says, "you might lose out, and I would not have that happen for the world, for it is a little pin money and maybe you can get several lawns to mow this summer you know every little bit helps." Sophia, however, tempered Depression-era rigour with kindly indulgence. In a letter home dated 14 August 1940, a 15-year old Robin tells his mother about a "spree" in Boise with Grannie. This included an overnight stay in a nice hotel, dinner in a restaurant, and two movies, *Tom Brown's School Days* (Dir. Robert Stevenson, 1940) and *Vigil in the Night* (Dir. George Stevens, RKO Pictures, 1940).

In adolescence, Robin took a sharp turn to Catholicism. In the desert there had been no priests or churches, but Twin Falls offered Saint Edward's and Monsignor O'Toole and there was his mother's relationship with the Holy Cross nuns at the Sacred Heart Academy that established a line to the Catholics in the household. On adolescence, Robin says,

I had two sides to me: one was that I had to be the leader, the top, the president of everything insofar as I could. There were a few defeats but not too many. On the other, was a very deep religious side. I mean I would kneel on my knees at fourteen, fifteen before the Virgin for hours waiting for her statue to nod-- like I had the whole Catholic thing that it was magical. (AT 46)

The piety was noticed and the Monsignor--a very "crotchety, very proud, very difficult and erudite old man" (AT 46)--began to mentor the boy who seemed like a good candidate for the priesthood. In high school, however, Robin ruined his chances with the Monsignor. He joined a fraternity called the Red Knights of which he became president.

Then it was the DeMolays:

. . . I'm out here trying to be president of everything and the DeMolays dig me so I joined the DeMolays. Now I wound up president of DeMolay. In some weird part of my brain I had so fixed it that I never let myself know that the Catholics burned DeMolay at the stake. . . . We had long velvet gowns and I wore a crown. By the time I was president each spoke of the crown had a jewel on it. I can't tell you I dug that scene something awful and we acted out the burning of DeMolay. (*AT* 46-47)

The connection between Robin's religious passion and the club scene is right here. Both the Church and the youth clubs offered a sense of belonging, of ritual, of sensual richness, and of social position. These graces were important to the point where the teenager did not let himself see the doctrinal differences between the masonic DeMolays and the Catholics. The story Robin liked to give of this confusion was Monsignor O'Toole's response to a newspaper picture of him as president of DeMolay. The priest was furious and gave Robin a full Latin exorcism. "It was the end of DeMolay," Robin says, "but . . . Monsignor would have nothing to do with me" (*AT* 47).

After Sophia's retirement in 1941, the Blasens bought a house at 191 Polk Street in Twin Falls and Sophia and Aunt Tina moved in with the family.⁸ Sophia helped with the purchase and Robert bought rugs and furniture. By this time, Robin had entered high school, taking English, Latin, French, biology, maths, and drama. Over the high school years, he was particularly active in drama. That year, he acted the part of Professor Williard in Thornton Wilder's play, *Our Town* (*Coyote* 1941) and the next year, he joined

the Thespian Club, playing Randolph-A in *The Magnificent Obsession* by Lloyd C. Douglas, and Clarence in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* by Mark Twain (*Coyote* 1942). He also began to make friendships that would turn out to be important later on. Frances Schweickhardt, Tom Jones, and Marlin Sweeley worked on the *Bruin*, the school newspaper that Robin would join later (*Coyote* 1941). Sweeley's father was a judge ("AT" 3.9, 4) and the trio was several years older than Robin. This was the social elite of Twin Falls and Robin would soon become an item himself. The society page of the local newspaper announces in a paragraph titled "Younger Set Entertains" that Dick Brizee and Robin Blaser were hosts of a dance party at the Sibyl Frazier party house, assisted by their mothers. In another society page noticing, Robin plays 'Lil Abner at a Sadie Hawkins day dance, costumed in a plaid shirt and carrying a jug. He is flanked by two girls, one of whom, Virginia Benson, has him firmly in hand. His fellow 'Lil Abner and Red Knight buddy, Jack Jordan, "is having a little more success in evading Rosie" according to the caption, but the really amusing thing about the photograph is that there is nothing of the hillbilly in Robin's style or demeanor. He looks more like Fred Astaire in drag than an Appalachian homeboy--one can almost see the suit beneath the plaid shirt. Devastatingly handsome, Robin charmed his fellow students. "When it comes to a perfect fellow--the kind every girl like to lean & depend on your [sic] tops! I hope we can have fun together next year," writes Grace Wegener in the Twin Falls high year book of 1942 (*Coyote* 1942).



Sophia Nichols

That year, 1942, the war arrived in Twin Falls, not just as the absence of men but also through the presence of POW and relocation camps. President Roosevelt had issued an executive order in February of that year, relocating all persons of Japanese ancestry away from the coast. The Minidoka War Relocation Center, 17 miles from Twin Falls, operated from 1942-45, housing more than 9,000 Japanese Americans, mostly from Oregon, Washington and Alaska. Too young for the draft (it was aimed at 21-25 year olds), Robin was part of a small group that created cultural liaisons between the Japanese and Twin Falls residents. He also worked in Men's Wear in the Idaho Department Store,

hired, he said, to serve those that others would not (*HF* 402). These included the Japanese, “allowed one day a month out of the Relocation Center to shop” (*HF* 402). It also included blacks from the Bahamas, brought in to do field labor in the wartime absence of men.

I bent on one knee to measure, with trepidation, the inner leg
for the bright green and sharp blue suits they bought on Saturdays
after work--I still imagine them--as I found them later in back-country
enclaves dancing stunningly to country music with the lonely wives. (*HF*
402)

The other social outcasts that Robin would serve were the prostitutes from the Paramount Hotel. The Men's Wear Department curiously stocked silk stockings for men to give as gifts. The only people who bought them, Robin remembers, were the prostitutes.

One of them became a close, secret friend, and it was she who gave me
my first lesson in countering clichés--"Never,' she said, 'tell anyone
I'm a whore with a heart of gold.'" (*HF* 401)

In Twin Falls, Robin was very much in the closet, although he remarks that one of the salesmen at the Department Store commented on his red lips, saying "You know that always means you're queer" (*HF* 401).

Robin's high school poems, several of which were preserved by his mother, suggest both the handsome, popular thespian and the rather more introspective and religiously inclined young man who could not yet express his sexuality openly. The first of these is suggested by Robin's take on Chaucer's *Wife of Bath* in a poem that begins,

My what a woman was this wife of Bath.

Though a wee bit shady was her trodden path. (“Wife”)

Like the Wife, Robin had a gap between his top front teeth and this he carefully preserved through adulthood and many trips to the dentist. The Wife was one of his lifelong personas--sociable, well-dressed, flirtatious, earthy, and ready to sinfully enjoy the social opportunities of religious occasions. Her pilgrimage to Canterbury, she lets us know, is more to catch another husband than to atone for her naughtiness. When he wanted to show it, Blaser had a social side that was broad and bawdy, part Wife, part cowboy father. The tone of this untitled, undated poem, however, is quite different:

Find you the path in night, perhaps,
to walk upon and crowd the brush
that cut your face.

Throw you the rock you touch upon
and stoop to drink the discs begun
in stone on space.

Think on the song a nymph has sung;

Christ was born in night
And I, to him, have sacrificed
An ox with golden horns.

Christ was born in night
And I, to him, have sacrificed

Four trees in cruciforms.

then laugh to see the gaseous stars

fall out of place ([“Find”])

The first image suggests a difficult passage through brush and the inability to see where one is going. In the second stanza, the time and space frame seems to shift from close to far—to “stone in space.” The last line, in which the “gaseous stars / fall out of place,” reinforces the cosmic perspective and speaks of disruption, perhaps the epoch-making birth of Christ in stanza three. In hindsight, the poem does contain elements that look like a Blaser poem. There is “the path in the night” that suggests a proceeding without knowledge of the final goal, a premise of the serial poem. There is a hint of the cosmicity that would later displace Catholicism in Blaser's thinking. There is the attraction to myth and ritual and in the “I have sacrificed” there is also something of the priestly. Countering all this is a certain rage against order when the speaker urges the reader to laugh when the stars fall out of place. I do not know whether Robin would have so identified these elements as a teenager, but this juvenile poem breathes a certain *weltschmerz* and an attraction toward religious feeling that represents a side of him that would later become focused on a retelling of the sacred.

Exody

On graduation from high school, Robin received a scholarship for a summer program in journalism at Northwestern University. He had studied English and Journalism with Mercedes Paul at Twin Falls High and had been involved in the high school paper

(*Coyote* 1941, 1942). Journalism may have seemed like the most likely career path for a young man interested in drama and the arts, although Blaser says on *Astonishments* that he never had a deep inclination toward the profession: "I got a scholarship in journalism, which I could never write--I was never able to write a decent descriptive line in my life" (*AT* 48). He did, however, have an inclination for getting out of Twin Falls. Robert was not about to make that easy. When it came time to leave for the train to Chicago, he took the car, leaving Robin to scramble a ride with friends from Twin Falls to the station in Shoshone (*AT* 48). He was off, though, and the letters home over the course of the trip and summer program at Northwestern are full of excitement.

A high point of this trip was a visit to Saint Mary's College at Notre Dame to pay respects to Ina Mae's mentor, Sister Mary Madeleva.⁹ In a letter home on 19 June 1943, from the Hotel LaSalle at South Bend, Indiana, Robin tells his mother that he has dined at Saint Mary's with Sister Madeleva and the nuns. On *Astonishments*, he remembers the visit vividly. With money that Sophia had given him for the trip, he had bought two dozen roses for the Sister which she then instructed him to offer to the Virgin because the Holy Cross nuns may not accept gifts. Such austerity, however, did not extend to church property, and Robin found himself handsomely accommodated. "Notre Dame is a dream world," he writes (19 June 1943), "elegant beyond belief . . . with Persian rugs and old paintings and you know the whole rich Catholic trip" (*AT* 42). At dinner, the sisters had prepared a separate table for him because their order precluded dining with men (*AT* 42). Each of the nuns, however, asked him a question over dinner about his life and vocation. They were interested, Robin remembers, in whether he would join the priesthood. The visit concluded with mass at Notre Dame in the morning and then a return to Chicago for

school. "Oh, folks, it's grand!" he writes. "I'm having a hilarious time and I haven't been spending wildly" (19 June 1943). Given the roses, the spending bit may not have been true, but the elegance of Saint Mary's struck deeply. This was the kind of world that had drawn Robin, ironically, into DeMolay with its robes and crowns.

At Northwestern in 1943, the Medill School of Journalism offered a four-week summer session for high school students through its National Institute for High School Students (*Northwestern University Bulletin* 67). The 13th annual program of the Institute ran from 22 June to 17 July 1943. It included a preview of university training in journalism, contact with professionals, lectures and laboratory exercises in news reporting, writing, feature writing, editing, and make-up. Students would write about "plays, dances, beach parties, lectures, major league baseball, and scores of other activities in the Chicago area" (*NUB* 67). They would also take field trips to publishing houses. On 24 June, Robin sent a postcard home from the Museum of Science and Technology. In a 5 July letter, he writes of plans to hear the Chicago Symphony and remarks on a visit to the Lakeside Press that then published *Life*, *Readers Digest*, *Fortune* and *Time*. Another trip on 9 July was to hear speeches by the Office of Price Administration officials and a lecture from AFL-CIO Union officials (American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations). "I didn't agree with everything," he writes primly, "but it was broadening. I reiterate broadening but biased" (10 July 1943). There were also visits to the Chicago Art Institute and the Board of Trade. On another occasion, he attended a pacifist meeting whose speaker was being watched by the FBI: "He feels that it is the fault of the older generation that we have a war today. His whole theory is based on kindness. Interesting but too idealistic," he

decides (n.d. June 1943).

Thirteen boys and 45 girls were accepted into the program in 1943 he writes to the folks (22 June 1943). Lodging in Holgate House with the 13 male students in the program, Robin quickly began to assume the leadership role he had taken in high school. The boys elected him House Counselor (25 June 1943) and he began to excel in his studies. "The competition here is tremendous," he writes, "because everyone is so smart, but so far I have gotten along rather well. Today I wrote an editorial and they said it was so good and the narrative style so different that I had to read it to everyone--I get a thrill when something like that happens" (7 July 1943). He also comments on the ethnicities of his fellow students. There was a German girl who was a refugee ("She . . . has a lovely accent" (7 July 1943)), many Jewish students, and a girl from China. His roommate was a Polish Jew. There was one other Catholic boy and several girls who attended church with him on Sunday. On *Astonishments*, however, Robin is rather less upbeat, discussing the discrimination he and another student faced for being fey.

They pulled me in with six faculty members and I had no homosexual experience. I daydreamed but those had never been spoken to anybody. ("AT" 2.7, 59)

The other gayboy fared somewhat worse. He was expelled for lying. Apparently he had written home, claiming honors that he had never received, and his proud parents had published these fictional accomplishments in the local newspaper along with a picture of their son. A copy of this landed on the mail table in the fraternity house at Northwestern and the boy was expelled. "I led a protest," Robin says.

I was called in and asked, "Do you like girls," and all the trick

questions and all of this thing and then the attacks start on my poetry. Well, in my mind I had no way of separating what it was that was being attacked other than to destroy the poetry and I became very sick and returned and was sent to the College of Idaho. (“AT” 2.7, 60)

Robin enrolled at the College of Idaho in the September following the summer program. The fusion of homophobia and criticism of the poetry, however, would remain a vivid and transformative memory. Robin claimed an early facility in poetry:

It was Whitmanic, which means that it's a large, long-running line, which I've only recently been able to use again. It's about the sounds of trees, it's extremely--I even picked up on sexuality in Whitman. What I picked up was the nature and the imagery of being inside all the sounds and so on. (*AT* 49)

Mrs. Arpan read and critiqued the poems. This would have been Eleanore Holferty Arpan, wife of Floyd G. Arpan, the founder of the high school program at Northwestern and Director of foreign journalism at Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism. Eleanore Arpan ("Holly") was a writer too and she taught journalism at Northwestern. Although she is not listed as faculty for the summer courses offered in 1943, her husband was, and she must have played the role of mentor. Floyd Arpan was known for his friendly support of students. For her comments on the poetry, however, Mrs. Arpan became something of a bugbear:

I was then attacked for this [Whitmanesque poetry] by Mrs. Arpan who told me that I should be a priest and not a poet--that my poetry

all moved toward the questions why, when, where, and whither and only priests ask such questions. So as a consequence why in the fuck-- she didn't put it that way, but she did put it sort of that way--why didn't I stop writing poetry and go become a priest because it was just no place as poetry. (*AT* 49)

Mrs. Arpan also pointed out some plagiarism: Robin had used the phrase "simple separate souls" from Whitman ("AT" 2.7, 62). His response was to burn the work. For the rest of his life, he would point to this incident as the end of his ease in writing. Blaser did not go to Berkeley as a poet despite his subsequent role there in the literary scene. In fact, he was a late bloomer, remarking in "The Fire" essay that he did not begin to assume the role of poet until he was 30 years old (*Fire* 9). When the poems did begin to come, quotation would morph into method. "I am still that way," he comments on *Astonishments*, "[I] will just take something. I usually underline them [citations] or something" ("AT" 2.7, 62). Robin returns to the subject of Mrs. Arpan several times on the *Tapes*, and she turns up in *The Moth Poem* in uncomplimentary terms as "the wife of a sailor" (*HF* 67). Floyd Arpan had served in the US Navy as a photographer, on leave between 1943 and 1946 ("Journalism").

Blaser's response to Mrs. Arpan suggests a combination of fragility and defiance. The Northwestern experience would have been Robin's first encounter with serious academia and it seems possible, at least, that Mrs. Arpan was merely trying to save a young man some time. Was it because Robin could not entirely separate his sense of self, his sexuality and his poetry that he responded so dramatically? Not quite all of the poems were destroyed. In the letter home on 5 July, Robin includes this one:

Blue shadows and greenish hills made up the scene.

A few noticed perhaps and wondered,

What of the protective screens

Made by the rolling soft, white clouds?

The blues and greens slowly faded

And a hellish machine rolled by.

Now the beauty is gone forever,

Changed to a hole and a dirt pile

Under a smoke-filled sky. (Letter, 5 July 1943)

Read by image as an emotional landscape, the poem is about the destruction of serenity and beauty after the loss of a protective cover. If people can see the landscape, they will destroy it. (The Lost River runs underground until it pours out of a mountain side with force and glory.) The link between the trauma over Mrs. Arpan, the untitled poem sent to Ina Mae, and the remarks on *Astonishments* may be avoidance of emotional exposure and a corresponding search for refuge. If nature provided one such space in Robin's youth, the life of the mind would become the go-to at university.

A letter to "Mom, Gran and folks" from the College of Idaho in September of 1943 begins with a description of Blaser's room at 1910 Hazel Street in Caldwell. It was in the basement "of a rather nice house" on campus and it had "rugs on the floor and a fireplace in the sitting room," shared with a roommate (Letter, 19 September 1943).

Robin had enrolled in Sociology I, History III, French I, English Composition I, Freshman Orientation I, and Physical Education I (calisthenics and obstacle courses). He

kept up with the journalism by working on the *Trail Coyote*, the college newspaper, and he was able to secure a regular piano practice room through the Dean of Men. Part-time work on Saturdays at Alexander's, a clothing store, provided the essential pocket money (40 cents an hour) and perhaps an excuse not to go home (Letter, 28 September 1943): the job, he tells his folks, may require that he work through the fall and winter holidays. As if this weren't perky enough, he tutored French and kept up his social life. His campus nickname, he writes, was Frank Sinatra (19 October 1943). In the Caldwell letters, there are signs of withdrawal from the family although not so definitively that Robin could not accept home baking: "Could you some one of these days bake some cookies or a potatoe cake and send it to me. We are always hungry just before we go to bed," he writes (28 September 1943). There was also the convenience of sending laundry home, facilitated by the family's railroad connections: "I'm going to have to pack up something one of these days to be washed and ironed," he says. "I find that my plan to do my own laundry is not too satisfactory" (10 November 1943).

In the spring of 1944, Robin received a conciliatory visit from his father. Writing to the folks on 19 March, he says that Dad offered him a cigarette for the first time, took him for dinner, and gave him \$20. "Tell him thanks again, will you?" (19 March 1944). At the time, Robert was trucking for Pillsbury. On *Astonishments*, Robin remembers his father arriving at the door after delivering sacks of flour, covered in the white powder.

. . . he's at the door of this little room and I won't come home from Caldwell which is 140 miles or something like that from Twin Falls. I won't go home and he comes to the door and asks me to have dinner with him. And when I looked at him I don't know whether I was

slightly ashamed--I know he was--because how do you--Christ, your father covered with flour. And so anyway in the evening, there he is in a suit and I'm offered my first cigarettes and so on. (*AT* 49-50)

It would take the better part of a lifetime to process the relationship with Robert. On the occasion of his father's death in 1978, Robin wrote a poem called "Tumble-Weed" for

the flour-man, powdery, at the door
becomes finally, a sweat-body of spiritual
enemies, drunk on the plane-fare,
who walks nowhere (*HF* 200)

Syntactically, this is a difficult poem that makes an uneasy effort to "move speech to its violent / marvelous teeth" in memory of a father who had become "a sweat-body of spiritual / enemies." Robert was everything Robin was not: macho, homophobic, and Mormon. And yet. Someone cries out at the end, "father / of wax" and kisses the still forehead. The syntax of the poem twists away from the speaker of that cry, but the emotional intensity surely belongs to a sad son, who by this time knew how to take cover under the pyrotechnics of language.

Caldwell ended for Robin with a letter from the Dean of Women to his mother:

. . . she gets ahold of my mother, writes her a letter and says: "Don't leave him here, there's nobody here, he's all by himself." And it's true. All I did was A+, the top in Caldwell, Idaho. . . . Now I get pulled out of Caldwell and get sent to Berkeley because the Dean of Women told my mother I was too bright and I needed some competition. . . . I not only run into Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan but I get my . . . ass in a sling everyplace.

(AT 50)

With Sophia's support--\$75 a month from her pension (AT 55)--and the encouragement of old high school friends, Schweickhardt, Jones, and Sweeley who were already there, Robin was off to Berkeley in the fall of 1944. He had wanted to go to Bowdoin College as a boy because Nathaniel Hawthorne had gone there. Then he favored Black Mountain, but as far as *Time* magazine and Ina Mae were concerned, it was communist and that was that ("AT" 2.6, 40). So Berkeley it was. In a talk on Jack Spicer, delivered at the 1986 Spicer conference in San Francisco, Blaser would write drily that he arrived at Berkeley "quite frankly, dressed as Hiawatha" (*Fire* 253). This was not, of course, entirely true. There was the lost Dauphin of France, the kick-ass cowboy, the Wife of Bath, the Catholic priest, and Frank Sinatra. There was also, perhaps, something left of the lad in the corner of a schoolroom who rubbed the polish off his shoe. None of this crew, however, was quite prepared for the shock of the new that was about to hit hard.



Notes

1. Blaser's grade one report card comes from the private archival collection of Mark Samac, Blaser's nephew. Samac has lent the archives to me for this biographical project.
2. *The Astonishment Tapes* is a collection of autobiographical audio recordings Blaser made in 1974 at the request of Warren Tallman. The *Tapes* were recorded in the company of small group of Vancouver writers and have now been published in an edited edition.
3. MsA1a 1.12 is the call number from the Contemporary Literature Collection at SFU. It is an abbreviation of Robin Blaser fonds, MsA1a, Box 1, File 12.
4. Mormon church birth records show that Augustus Blaser was born on 6 October 1871 at Geneva, Neuchatel, Switzerland (Blaser fonds MsA1a 31.1).
5. "The Astonishment Tapes" is the manuscript version of Blaser's 1974 audiotapes. I reference this unpublished manuscript for citations that I edited out of the published version. At 840 pages, the raw manuscript was simply too long to publish. However, I have placed a copy of this manuscript in the Contemporary Literature Collection, Simon Fraser University, along with a digital copy of the sound. These full versions are available on request. There are 20 cassette tapes with 40 sides, recorded over 10 sessions. Charles Watts, a curator at CLC, numbered them by recording session and side, so session one is 1.1, 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4; session two is 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, and so on. I preserved this numbering system in my transcript of the "Tapes" and divided the transcript into 10 sections, corresponding to the sessions, for easier reference. The citations from the manuscript will thus have session, side, and page numbers that look like this: "AT" 2.7, 60, meaning "The Astonishment Tapes," unpublished ms., session 2, side 7, page 60.

6. Idaho's Lost River is part of the landscape of *The Park* (HF 49-50).
7. See *Cups 2* (HF 32).
8. Ina Johnson, Blaser's great grandmother and Sophia's mother, died in 1939, before the family moved.
9. Sister Mary Madeleva Wolff mentored Ina Mae, Blaser's mother, when the latter was resident at the Sacred Heart Academy, Ogden, Utah. Then the Sister moved to Saint Mary's at Notre Dame University where she founded the first graduate school of theology for women: Saint Mary's College School of Sacred Theology. A Chaucer scholar, she was also a distinguished poet.

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