

# CRAZY FRIEND

by Jonathan Lethem

1.

There's a street corner in Brooklyn, Seventh Avenue and Flatbush, a place I associate with – well, I associate it with plenty of things. In my mind this corner hinges Park Slope and the neighborhoods on Flatbush's far side: Prospect Heights and Fort Greene, which were for various complicated reasons over which I've wrung my hands elsewhere, racially intimidating to me. As a white kid, I'd charted the safe hours and itineraries nearer to home, and forged a few vital truces, but in these Flatbush-north territories I'd have been without either passport or compass. Park Slope intimidated me too, but in a different sense. It felt more like Carroll Gardens, that other far border of my personal Brooklyn: the white Irish or Italian precincts had their own way of making me feel mocked, socially disjointed, or even in physical danger. Yet there was a hippie-Jewish-other trail to follow there in Park Slope, the sons and daughters of book editors and psychotherapists who'd settled there, to forge a less qualified, less bohemian, more posh and tree-lined version of the gentrification that made my own home turf so varied, enthralling, and treacherous. If I could crack this group of teenagers – and they were a group, the Slopies – I'd find untold friendships and alliances. My disadvantage was that



photo by Anne Dick

I went to public school, and the way in was through cliques joined at the various private academies, or at Catholic school.

And then, almost as suddenly as I knew I wanted it, I did find a way in. But this was loaded too: a pair of girls a bit older than I was (and all girls are older than all boys at the ages we were at, and I was especially young), and brilliant, and attractive to me, and well-integrated into the Slopies' network of influence

and high-level flirtation, play, and art-making. They might be curious about me, but they didn't need me the way I needed them. These girls, Deena and Laurene, were dancers, musicians, painters, writers – it wasn't obvious which, yet, but they might have their choice. They were crazily verbal, crazily charismatic, crazy with talent. They sang songs that were parodic and brilliant, which they'd written themselves and which were like a private language:

I memorized them, as I would a record by The Residents or Frank Zappa.

These weren't like my earlier friendships, found falling outdoors onto the sidewalks, nor did they clarify the way my friendships with male schoolmates did. I couldn't seem to get these girls on the phone. Months would pass. I'd change, or feel I'd changed, sexually, socially, artistically, somehow, and want desperately for them to notice, to get word of it. But I wasn't on their radar, it seemed, except when we were directly hanging out. And then, if I caught up with Deena and Laurene, they were changed too. I had to learn about the new black or Puerto Rican boyfriend, the new favorite band or other infatuation, and everything I'd studied in them previously had become old currency, not even fit to trade for the new. I had to remember not to mention what they'd left behind for fear I'd be next. These girls blew hot, and were often mockingly affectionate or even briefly lusty in my direction, but in their willingness to show disdain, to crush unworthiness like a bug, they were fundamentally cool, cool, cool. I had a lot to learn, and I put my own enthusiasms and provenances on the table very carefully, or so it felt to me. They had a name for what they despised – it was “green”, a word which seemed to encapsulate being lame, unenlightened, feeble, corny, overreaching or even imperfectly effortless, and so much else. I lived in fear of being cast in that shade.

The corner of Seventh and Flatbush was a meeting point, a

place I'd have to walk to get to their zone, if only because the crow-flies direction took me through too many bad patches. Most crucially, past Sarah J. Hale High School, which might as well have been a city block of pure quicksand. So I drew a triangle, up Flatbush to that corner, then over, as if walking into their neighborhood meant opening up Brooklyn like a door and slipping through. The subway stopped on Seventh and Flatbush too, so if the girls were going to sweep me up to Manhattan, as they sometimes did, the portal was there. And the corner featured a movie theater, a first-run palace called The Plaza, one safe enough to attend at night with friends, unlike those in Downtown Brooklyn. The theater marked the corner as a site of some first experiences to come. It throbbed with potential for 'a date'. In fact, in my mind, the corner was the Brooklyn equivalent of the Rolling Stones' lyric, from “Dance, Pt. 1”: Mick Jagger's sleazy, cursory intonation, “Here I am standing, on the corner of West Eighth Street and Sixth Avenue, Keith, and I'm asking you, I'm asking you...” The corner knew something about what I wanted to get over as, but couldn't yet.

So it was that standing there one day, under wider circumstances I could no better reconstruct than the tatters of some former civilization, that one of these girls made a random taunt that struck me as a meaningful bolt from the blue, and which I've never forgotten, but never completely understood either. I'd said I had to go meet a friend, I think, but left

the friend unnamed, whether out of shame or awkwardness or some combination of the two. Deena, the verbally wilder and more freely hostile of the two said, sneering in bogus accusation, “Who – Eldridge Palmer?” Deena didn't mean anything important by it, was just amusing herself, I think, by acting as if I was hiding something. Maybe it would provoke something funny along the lines of defensiveness from me, it certainly couldn't hurt to try.

The name Deena had plucked up from thin air seemed – if one was reasonable – to be a riff on Eldridge Cleaver, and therefore on the fact of my parents' radicalism, and the fact that a lot of the friends from my other world were black. But I didn't hear it that way. The new sensation in my life, the revolution in my cultural appetite and world-view, one I'd have probably been unable to coherently share with these two under even the best of circumstances, was for science fiction generally and for Philip K. Dick specifically. I'd just weeks before read, in order, and with tumultuous, revolutionary excitement, *A Maze of Death*, *Ubik*, and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. Each of these concerns, in different ways, the infiltration of reality by a single sinister and intoxicatingly malignant force. In *Three Stigmata*, that force is Palmer Eldritch himself, a sort of human-turned-monster-turned-God, a kind of living drug or cancer. By the end of the book, everyone and everything is showing Palmer Eldritch's face, like evil DNA. Now my friend had seemed to name him

by accident. Only it couldn't be an accident. Palmer Eldritch *was* everywhere, the novel was merely testament to cosmic conditions! I began trying to tell her about it. Gibbering, I'm sure it seemed from the perspective of the girls.

"Of all the possible names, how did you pick that one?" I demanded.

"It can't be a coincidence!" She immediately scorned my excitement. "Who cares?" she said. "What did I even say? Eldridge Hoover? Elron Seaver? Whatever!"

I'm guessing here, but I must have gone on trying to explain, ever more pedantically, grinding my axles into a morass of embarrassment. Science fiction, it turned out, was *green*.

You never forget the site of a schooling in shame.

## 2.

Where Philip K. Dick had come from, for me, was my best friend's Jake's dad, Harry. Harry was younger than Jake's mom, and when they divorced, as everyone's parents seemingly did, Jake's mom retained the family home, the upstanding parental postures – in fact, she was one of the most reliable parents around if, in those prodigious slippery days in our unreliable neck of the woods, you were looking for someone to chide or encourage you or make you a sandwich, as if you were still a younger child. We counted on her for that. Harry, though, became like Jake's erratic and brilliant older brother, or his crazy grownup friend. He slipped back toward adolescent enthusiasms, and took

Jake along for the ride. Jake got to see all the Pink Panther movies, for instance, and *Kentucky Fried Movie* and *Groove Tube*, too. Harry took Jake out to Junior's Restaurant, the legendary Brooklyn cheesecake palace, for dinners consisting of little more than shrimp cocktail and an egg cream. And, seeing Jake's enthusiasm for comics, Harry started bringing around his own just-read copies of mass-market paperback science fiction. This wasn't the old 'classic' 1940's-vintage stuff I'd discovered on my mother's shelves, Ray Bradbury and Isaac Asimov, but the latest hip, psychedelically-packaged material: Roger Zelazny, Harlan Ellison, and fatefully for me, Philip K. Dick. The first of Dick's books I laid eyes on was *A Scanner Darkly*, from 1977; the second might have been *The Zap Gun*, or *Clans of the Alphan Moon*. From Jake's shelves I also recall *The Golden Man*, though this would have been a bit later, since that book wasn't published until 1980. A collection of Dick's stories selected by a young editor named Mark Hurst, *The Golden Man* was prefaced by Dick with a famous – at least to me – personal reminiscence called "The Lucky Dog Pet Shop". There, Dick defines his sense of his own status, the artist-as-deprived-outsider, knocking helplessly on the windows of "serious" literature, reduced to batting out pulp tales while eating horsemeat intended for dogs – acquired at the Pet Shop of the essay's title – because he couldn't afford human food.

Jake cared more for Zelazny, whose fantasies of superpower and martyrdom better dovetailed

with the 1970's Marvel Comics we both revered. And in fact, though I was alive to something in the presentation, I didn't plunge into reading Dick, not immediately. Rather, I circled the books, soaking in random vibrations they gave off. My actual reading of Dick began a year or so later, though it felt like a lifetime's distance from Jake's comics-lair bedroom, when I found in a used-book store my own paperback copies of *Ubik* and *A Maze of Death* and *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch* – in matching black Bantam paperbacks, less zany-looking, more enticingly ominous, than the books that Jake's dad had delivered to our attention. Reading these three novels, I made Dick definitively my own, forging a relationship into which I'd invest a tremendous amount of personal capital over the years, even decades that followed. But if I'm honest with myself about points-of-origin, Jake's too-fun dad hovered oddly in the background of the affair.

## 3.

I had a girlfriend by the last year of high school, Lorna. Timewise, we're talking about a scattering of months, perhaps at most two years from the scene of the kid who stood at Seventh and Flatbush trying so earnestly to explain to the Slopie girls who Palmer Eldritch was, but of course in the accelerated nature-footage of childhood memory, this is yet another lifetime's distance. For one thing, I'd somehow, absurdly, consumed another twenty or twenty-five Philip K. Dick novels in

that interval, taken the author into my body like wine and wafer. If, previously, I was alerted to Palmer Eldritch's presence all around me, now I was Palmer Eldritch, and I liked it. Also I had a girlfriend. That poor kid a year-and-a-half ago didn't.

I've written about Lorna elsewhere. She's the girl I pathetically stalked home from the subway station in an essay called "Speak, Hoyt Schermerhorn". Teenagers, you'd think, should enjoy themselves, but in fact Lorna and I had a neurotic and tempestuous on-and-off again romance, full of tricky betrayals and pleading arguments. The summer of 1982, the summer between high school and college, the year Philip K. Dick died, Lorna and I broke up three or four times, and we were in an extended fight that sweltering June afternoon when I took her with me to see *Blade Runner*, which had been released a day or two before. Of course we walked up Flatbush Avenue to Seventh, to see the film at The Plaza. I was in a funk, angry at her, angry at myself for reasons I couldn't admit or articulate. My expectations for the film were a tormented muddle – I'd already heard it committed injustices to the book, and that it wasn't going over well with those who didn't care for Dick in particular but rooted for science fiction movies to take over the culture. After *Star Wars* and *Close*

*Encounters of the Third Kind*, this film wasn't about to find any sort of comfortable place in the culture. Worse, I probably was crossed up in the opposite direction, too: like a fan who resents seeing his favorite underground band sign with a major label, maybe Dick was being stolen from my exclusive purview. I'd been planning to make a pilgrimage to California to meet Dick, and then learned he'd died, in



February that year. Absurd as it was to take his death personally, I did.

So, victim to all of this and our own toxic passion, Lorna and I fought outside the theater, right there at my thorny intersection, in sight of all the avenues crisscrossing

through my past and future. I threw a sweaty little tantrum because we'd arrived late, ponderously explaining how important this viewing was to me, and how much I hated being late to movies. Of course by the time I'd settled myself down and we purchased our tickets and went inside, the trailers for other films had obviously only just finished. We were probably exactly as late as the duration of my tantrum.

I watched the film with a grudge in several directions. Lorna's only real reaction was to find the violence disproportionate and upsetting, and as we left the theater in a worse funk than that in which we'd been as we entered, I couldn't defend the film against her distaste, nor adopt her rejection of it as an adequate response for myself. I'd sat there tabulating the film's failings against the book, and mostly failed to gather in what was sensationally vivid and original in the experience. In particular, I thought the hard-boiled voice-over embarrassing and derivative, totally green. I suppose if I want to forgive myself for that day I can still think it. Though I revere the film now, and have seen it in various versions probably

a dozen times, I still can't brook any suggestion that the voiceover is desirable.

Two months later I was in college in Vermont, self-exiled from my unresolved dilemmas at Flatbush and Seventh. Lorna,

and the Slopie girls, were still with me in ways I could and couldn't acknowledge. And I'd become an early member of the Philip K. Dick Society, the grassroots posterity-boosting coalition lead by the rock critic Paul Williams. One of their early newsletters was among the first mail I ever received at my campus mailbox, and I stared at the return address dreamily, already plotting some more extraordinary escape or exile, a leap to get me onto Philip K. Dick's map, and off my own. Dick might be dead, but I could still make a pilgrimage to the Lucky Dog Pet Shop.

#### 4.

The first time I wrote to Paul Williams to introduce myself, my pretext was an interest in adapting Dick's *Confessions Of A Crap Artist* into a screenplay. I don't know how I'd leapt to this particular ambition, except that my friend Philip, at Bennington, was writing screenplays, and he shared my enthusiasm for Dick's work. I thought *Confessions*, one of Dick's "mainstream" novels, was one of his best, and a truly fine novel, despite its marginal place even within his then-marginal career – I still do. I also really thought it might make a terrific film in the vein of a absurdist domestic tragedy set in '50's California, something an Altman or Hal Ashby might shoot – and I still do, despite its having already been adapted into a good French film which transposes the material to

contemporary France. It strikes me now that the urge to bring one of Dick's mainstream novels to light as a major film – I envisioned several Oscars – was an early glimmer of my yearning to rehabilitate him for traditional literary taste, rather than leave him in his funky SF cult-ure where I'd found him. The wish to advertise his brilliance as a writer *per se*, to institute him in a shameless canon, was inextricable



Paul Williams

all along with the wish to join my own weird enthusiasms to my highest aspirations as an artist, but also to repair the shame I'd learned to feel on Seventh and Flatbush, or any subsequent instant when I was reminded – and I was constantly reminded – that science fiction was a 'subliterary' interest.

But I wasn't really a filmmaker, or even a screenwriter, or any kind of writer yet. I also didn't have any way of securing the adaptation rights Paul was obligated to protect for the interests of Dick's living

dependents – his three children, that is – so I was being a little silly with the request. Paul treated it kindly, as I'd later learn he'd tend to do with the tender postures of any young artist. He'd do the same for me later, when I began showing him my fledgling fiction. The exchange of letters between us, anyway, put an even more definite image in my mind, a shape for my defection to California.

#### 5.

It took me two years to carry out that defection, though I was falling through the safety net of a college education from the very start. I kicked against the aura of privilege and connection and tradition, of arts-insiderishness, that hung over the Bennington scene, instead of accessing those things as I was meant to. Between my resistance to being the same kind of high-brow artist my dad was, my love of pop culture, my legacy of radical politics, and my outer-borough, public-school identity, I seemed to need to work from what would appear to others, and myself, as a margin, a position of disenfranchised minority. Dick's margin, science fiction, was a working proposition I could use. I'd found other writers I relished who operated from inside that exile-zone, that quarantine: Disch, Delany, Ballard, a few others. Science fiction was a literary Brooklyn for me.

I introduced myself to Paul Williams in person at the Claremont

Hotel in Oakland, at an SF convention called SerCon One – I’ve described this meeting once before, in an essay called “You Don’t Know Dick”, but conveniently omitted the milieu. Everyone I’d spent my teenage years reading seemed to be there at the Claremont in person, from Delany to Terry Carr and Ian Watson, an intoxicating leap for me into the possibility of mentorship within a field of working writers. (I’d met Bernard Malamud and John Ashbery at Bennington, but hadn’t declared myself as an apprentice, just skulked around sniffing at them like a hound.) I did feel some reservations: the science fiction world looked like a solipsistic hot-house, a cultural cul-de-sac, detached from everything I was otherwise immersed in, in my life with my friends. Then Paul appeared wearing a Meat Puppets t-shirt – they were at that moment my favorite band – and I decided everything was going to be alright.

Though he must have had dozens of old friends to commune with at that conference, Paul wandered away from the hotel with me, down Ashby Avenue, and we got a soda and talked for half an hour or so. I announced my various schemes and intentions and by the end of the day I was nearly crowned the third-in-command at the Philip K. Dick Society. As I also mentioned in “You Don’t Know Dick”, this really just meant I could join in and sometimes even host the “mailing parties” for the newsletter. Paul and I would gather in my living room in Berkeley with two or three others and listen to music and seal envelopes and talk, eliciting

from Paul tales of spending time in Dick’s company, and about halfway through when we’d gotten well organized – there was a tremendous complication involving “mass mail” having to be ordered by Zip Code in order to get a favorable rate from the post office – we’d smoke a big joint and everything would get wonderfully confusing. This was a fair distance from Bernard Malamud. I’d located my margin, oh yeah.

## 6.

**M**y first five or six ‘published’ critic piece appeared in the pages of the Society Newsletter. They’re agony for me to reread, at once as stiff as a freshman term paper and as arch as an anonymous notice in the *Times Literary Supplement*, circa 1954; call this style *Overcompensating Autodidact*. The last of them, published in PKDS Newsletter #24, dated 1990, is both the least awkward and the most revealing. Here it is in its entirety (though I can’t swear I’ll be able to resist massaging some of the clenched syntax as I retype the thing):

### Two Dickian Novels

What do we mean when we call a work ‘Dickian’?

The novels of Philip K. Dick show the influence of science fiction published in the ‘40’s and ‘50’s. From Frederik Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth, Dick borrowed a satirical, dystopian near-future setting. From A.E. Van Vogt a predilection for reality disjunctions. From Robert Heinlein a measure of

solipsism and paranoia. Yet searching the works of these authors for a reading experience that is essentially Dickian is frustrating. Similarly, many of the newer writers in SF – I’m thinking of K.W. Jeter, Rudy Rucker, and Tim Powers, among others – profess an admiration for Dick’s work, and often employ Dickian elements in their own. But the ‘Dickian’ effect is rarely, if ever, central; these writers are, quite appropriately, busy with their own themes and motifs.

There are, however, instances of fiction that is more fundamentally Dickian; works that, rather than evoking Dick’s milieu, reproduce – in many cases unknowingly – the distinctly disruptive effects of a novel by Dick.

Let me describe a novel I’ve just read. The book’s main character is, without his knowledge, murdered in the first chapter. He proceeds to enter a bizarre and shadowy of the world he previously inhabited, and experiences there a bewildering array of ‘impossible’ events. He spends most of the novel in pursuit of an elusive policeman, who is supposed to possess the ability to free the protagonist from his dismay and confusion. Mysterious signs of this policeman are everywhere. At the end of the novel the protagonist learns he is dead – only to have this awareness immediately stripped from him. The novel ends with our character right back where we first found him: newly murdered, and about to undergo the events of the novel we’ve just finished reading.

The novel I’ve described is called *The Third Policeman*, and it was written in 1940 by an Irish journalist who published fiction under the name Flann O’Brien. The novel, though I

can't do it justice in this short space, is uproariously funny, linguistically brilliant, and to my mind, highly Dickian. Specifically, it's a sibling to *Ubik* and *A Maze of Death*. It also conveys a strong flavor of Lewis Carroll, which is a thread I'll pick up again in a moment.

Now, the chances of Dick having read *Policeman* (and not mentioning it anywhere) are very slim. It's almost certainly an instance of parallel development. What's remarkable is how perfectly distilled the Dick-effect is in O'Brien's novel. Freed of Dickian trappings (the so-called 'junk' elements that Stanislaw Lem identified), *The Third Policeman* is nonetheless unmistakably Dickian. This not to say anything against, for example, talking robot taxicabs. I'm personally fond of talking robot taxicabs. The crucial point (a point which Dick himself proves in *The Transmigration of Timothy Archer*) is that talking robot taxicabs aren't strictly necessary.

Then there's *Memories of Amnesia*, by Lawrence Shainberg, published in 1988 yet displaying no direct influence of, or knowledge of, Dick's own work. Again, the futuristic settings and artifacts familiar to Dick's readers are absent. In the case of *Memories of Amnesia* even the Dickian plotline, still available in *The Third Policeman*, is missing. Nonetheless, the Dickian essence survives. Dick perceived reality as a paradoxical, distorted, and even dysfunctional thing, and he sought, through his writings, a variety of possible explanations; political, religious, philosophical, psychological, even pharmacological. One of the very few he didn't pursue was a neurological explanation. (Since his death biographers have to some

extent explored that possibility for him; indeed, the proposed diagnosis of Temporal Lobe Epilepsy is a fascinating lens through which to consider his life and work.) Shainberg, previously the author of *Brain Surgeon: An Intimate View of His World*, has in *Memories of Amnesia* relentlessly explored Dickian themes in the fascinating and rich language of neurology.

The novel is the first-person account of a neurosurgeon who begins to experience symptoms of brain damage: in the middle of delicate surgery he bursts out singing "Oh, Susannah". What's more, he experiences his symptoms as an exhilarating taste of freedom from the constraints of rationality. The narrator is simultaneously doctor and patient – much like *A Scanner Darkly*'s Bob Arctor, who is both drug abuser and narc – and the distinctions between illness and health, sanity and madness, illusion and reality, quickly blur. The result is a deliriously unsettling excursion. The introspective, insistently questioning, and highly self-absorbed texture of this narrative bears an extraordinary resemblance to *Valis* and *Radio Free Albemuth* in particular. Perhaps needless to say, the novel ends on a note of almost unbearably unresolved tension.

Shainberg, like O'Brien, has been compared to Lewis Carroll. (Shainberg makes the connection explicit by quoting *Alice in Wonderland* as an epigraph.) Further, both Borges and Pirandello, two of the great international writers commonly cited as relevant to a consideration of Dick, are frequently compared to Carroll. Certainly, baseline adjectives like *dreamlike*, *menacing* and *surreal* apply equally to Dick and Carroll. Yet,

searching the indexes of various critical works on Dick, I failed to find a single reference to Lewis Carroll.

Two questions, then: might Lewis Carroll be an important and unrecognized common denominator for some of the themes and techniques manifested in Dick's novels? And might an inquiry into what we experience as 'Dickian' begin not with a survey of American science fiction of the '40's and '50's, but rather with an exploration of the history of 'strangeness' (or, 'cognitive estrangement') in fiction?

Let me be the first to point out that "Two Dickian Novels" is a fledgling effort in my gentrification-campaign on Dick's behalf – the effort that culminates, nearly twenty years later, with my editorial stewardship of Dick into the Library of America. With a nakedness that's almost endearing, the young critic scurries to recontextualize his hero in quality-lit signifiers: Carroll, Borges, etc. (I recall planning a follow-up to "Two Dickian Novels", in which I'd claim further examples from outside the precincts of science fiction – I know I meant to include Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince*, but I've forgotten the rest.) If you're feeling generous, note how I'm trying to carve out a zone in which my own fiction might hope to operate, a field of useful precedents, much as Borges describes in "Kafka and His Precursors". If you're feeling less generous, diagnose it as a case of contamination anxiety working itself out in (barely) public view. In other words: I wanted to woodshed with Dick and some other writers condemned to an SF ghetto, but I

didn't want to live there. If I could drag Dick out in advance, he'd be my stalking horse, maybe. There's a line running straight from this effort through my anxious, rather discombobulated Village Voice essay, "The Squandered Promise of Science Fiction" (title not mine, but my editor's – I only didn't fight back hard enough), from 1998; the question is whether incompletely-acknowledged personal necessities, projected onto writers other than myself, render these 'critical' efforts disingenuous. The same judgment could probably extend to describe the piece you're reading now. Am I green? No? Maybe? What about now?

7.

By mentioning Jeter and Powers, two writers who'd as young men had the luck of showing up on Philip K. Dick's doorstep and gaining his friendship, I might also have been negotiating my disappointment that I hadn't managed to duplicate their trick. I'd run out of time, so my own Western jaunt could only be to posthumous-Dickland. I'd have to make do with Paul and other residual traces. In suggesting that Jeter and Powers weren't particularly 'Dickian' in their work, I left a possibility open, that another literary heir might be coming along soon who'd more persuasively step into the great man's bootprints – never mind if he never got to sit at the great man's knees.

8.

I was so proud I'd written about a contemporary writer that I took the trouble of photocopying the piece and sending it to Lawrence Shainberg, care of his publisher. Years later, Larry and I became good friends. He admitted he was baffled by the piece, had never heard of Philip K. Dick, and that when he tried reading *Valis*, found it impossibly bad.



Philip K. Dick's house in Berkeley, CA

9.

That same Chestnut Street one-bedroom apartment in the west Berkeley flats where the Society gathered to fold newsletters into envelopes, and where I wrote most of my first thirty-odd short stories and three novels, happened to be three blocks from the small Francisco Street two-bedroom house where Dick lived from 1950 to 1958 – and where he wrote most of his first fifty-odd short stories and six or seven novels.

That also put me two or three blocks from the Lucky Dog Pet Shop and a number of other Dick 'landmarks' mentioned in his novels of that period. It was with Paul that I first walked over to gaze at the Francisco Street house, a stroll that soon became a regular ritual of my daylight writing hours. Though the house refused to yield any secrets, there was something eerie in the mere action of walking from one negligible address to another in a neighborhood where no one ever walked, where barely anyone drove – the streets were uncannily empty. I also once veered past the address at three or four in the morning, tripping on Ecstasy, but at that moment I was for once more enthralled by the live human being at my side than with my dead crazy friend Phil, and I gave the house barely a nod.

I did visit Lucky Dog, too, and try to get the clerk to admit that the shop knew its place in Philip K. Dick's personal mythos. Did they know a great man once bought horsemeat here? Yes, they agreed, someone had mentioned an article like that to them once, and had promised to bring it in and show it to them. But that person never returned. I promised I'd bring it in and show it to them, and I too never returned. I made another unsatisfying, incomplete pilgrimage to Tupper & Reed, one of the two music shops Dick had worked at in the period just before making the perilous leap into life as a full-time freelance short story writer. Art Music, the other of the two

shops, had gone out of business. But Tupper & Reed revealed no important traces – it was Art Music that had been the really important site for Phil, Art Music whose owner had been the model for so many loveable, tyrannical father-boss figures in Dick’s fiction, including Leo Bulero from *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*. (I bought my then-wife an electric guitar at Tupper & Reed. Imported into our house the guitar exuded no Dickian essence, but we each learned three or four chords; I could play Bob Dylan’s “Tangled Up In Blue”, while she could play Elvis Costello’s “Two Little Hitlers”. Eventually, a photograph of myself beside this guitar would appear on the jacket of my arguably-least-Dickian novel, *You Don’t Love Me Yet*.) Phil Dick’s Berkeley, everywhere I tried to pin it down, evaporated like the locations in *Time Out of Joint*, to be replaced with thin strips of paper labeled with the names of the missing items: *Pet Shop, Music Store, Two-Story House*.

In that same period, I impetuously went into a tattoo parlor and had the spray-can logo from the first American edition of *Ubik* tattooed on my left upper arm. Well, medium-impetuously: the day before, my then-wife and my sister had together gotten tattoos at that same parlor, so it was familial peer-pressure that made this decision for me. I wasn’t certain I wanted a tattoo, actually, but if I was going to have one I was certain what tattoo I wanted. My then-wife was tattooed with an ampersand (still her trademark), my sister with a plate of green eggs and ham from the

Dr. Seuss book of the same name, a tattoo which has become famous because my sister wears sleeveless shirts. I accidentally echoed my sister’s choice by selecting a gooey fictional substance that gives title to the book in which it appears – I dare you to think of another example.\* I never wear sleeveless shirts, but word of my tattoo has circulated, slightly, a viral rider on my own moderate fame, and I’m occasionally called on by sly interlocutors to sheepishly exhibit it while signing at a bookstore. In two decades I’ve watched my spray can swell, shrink and grow slack with the changing contours of my arm, gain hairs, survive mosquito bites. The simple colors haven’t faded badly, but the blue outline has blurred, victim of the entropy the spray-product *Ubik* was supposed to combat. Dick ensured *Ubik*’s immortality; I’ve ensured its mortality.

Perhaps the tattoo helped, but in any case I quit wandering over to Francisco Street. The action I required, the essence I sought, wasn’t located on the exterior of that building, but in the interior of my own – and, just as anyone wandering past the Francisco Street house in 1956 would have no notion what was being hatched inside that drab façade, no one passing Chestnut Street could have known what I was up to, typing up on a Selectric typewriter in quiet, ignominious joy draft after draft of novels with working titles like *Apes in the Plan, White Lines, Fractal Days, and Satisfying Lack*.

\* *Tono-Bungay*, by H.G. Wells.

## 10.

Also short stories, in many instances more nakedly derivative of Dick’s work even than the novels, though my own material of course kept leaking through. Most of these went unpublished; a few slipped into print in science fiction magazines or poetry journals; all precede “The Happy Man”, the story which I chose to open my first story collection, and so have been essentially excluded as juvenilia from my ‘collected works’ (except for four which were absorbed as raw material in *Amnesia Moon*). I’ll include two here, both circa 1990, not for their lasting quality but for light shed, however galling. Here’s “Ad Man”, a pat little fable in which I labor to update Dick’s ‘aggressive-advertising’ theme with the then-fashionable motif of nanotechnology.

### Ad Man

“Look here, man. Closer.”

The two men bent in together over the magnifying glass, their shoulders hunched, their breath held. The detail of the painting blurred at the edges of the lens. What they examined now was nothing more than a single brushstroke, magnified tremendously.

As they watched, both trembling, the painted line slowly began to move, to thicken, and change direction. Then the artist’s breath misted over the lens.

“Crap.” They both stood up, abruptly. The artist put his hand to his forehead, and looked at the other man for reaction.

The other man pocketed the glass

and said: “Advertising. I’m sorry, man. The painting’s definitely infected.”

“Infected,” said the artist flatly. “What the fuck does that mean?”

The other man smiled sadly and gestured towards the table in the corner of the artist’s ramshackle house. The artist nodded, and they went together and sat there. But when the man reached out for the Mason jar of water on the table the artist said: “No. That’s for cleaning with. It’s no good for drinking.”

It was a lie. The water in the mason jar was fine. The artist just wasn’t in the mood to share it with the stranger.

The man smiled and said: “Never mind. I’ve stopped making the distinction.” He tipped the jar back and took a long drink, then lifted the jar as if for a toast.

The artist made a sour face. “What’s happening to my painting?” he said.

“Microprocessors,” said the man, wiping his lips. He put the jar down. “Little invisible robots, with tiny little hands, and tiny little tools in their tiny little hands. They run around rearranging things at a level we can’t see.”

“What? Like the medical things?”

“Exactly. Only this is another type, not medical. Commercial. Something the Americans were fooling around with just before the war. We didn’t think it had crossed over here, at first. Now it’s turning up everywhere.”

“Commercial.” The artist narrowed his eyes. “What does that mean?”

“Corporations manufactured them. They’re programmed to redesign existing artworks into advertising. The companies got tired of waiting for talent to sell out, I guess. And the costs are lower.”

The artist couldn’t believe his ears.

“You’re saying my painting is being transformed into an *advertisement*? For some American product that doesn’t even fucking exist anymore?”

The man nodded.

“Well, that’s ridiculous!” blustered the artist. “Advertising—for what?”

“We’ll have to see how it comes out, won’t we?”

“Shit!”

“It takes days to finish,” said the man. “But we’ll be able to tell before that. There’s two main companies involved in the outbreak here. Fazz and White Walnut, two drinks. White Walnut has the classier campaign, a couple of white-suited pimp-like guys reclining on a tropical beach. Fazz has this manic clown-donkey thing, with big pinwheel eyes...”

The artist groaned.

“Anyway, they’re easy to tell apart. I’ll know in half an hour.”

“How did this happen?” asked the artist incredulously.

“Imported records, I think. The first outbreak was a radio station playing American hits. All the songs started to evolve towards the Fazz theme:

*Fazz!*

*Nothing as good as*

*Fazz!*

or else the White Walnut music, this thing with coconuts dropping onto drums, and Hawaiian guitar. Whoever was singing on the record, they’d suddenly be pushing this product. We burnt the station’s whole collection. But the things had already escaped, I guess.” The man smiled to himself. “They got to some films. We had Jay Gatsby drowning his sorrows in Fazz, then so cheered by the stuff that he got up and did a little song and dance.”

“Is mine the first painting?”

“Oh no. I saw this big Hieronymus

Bosch thing, hundreds of characters on a gigantic landscape, and both products had gotten to it. They were competing, trying to wrest away control of this sort of battlefield in the painting, and the characters were all divided up into two armies, the Walnuts versus the Fazzians—”

“Jesus! How did you become the big expert?”

“I was a technician in a hospital. I worked with the bloodstream ones. I recognized this other type when it turned up, that’s all.”

“It’s such a fucking joke,” said the artist. “Their whole culture was fucking leveled.”

“Yes,” said the man cheerily. “I may never have the pleasure of tasting a Fazz.” He pointed over the artist’s shoulder. “Look.”

The artist turned and looked at his painting.

His radiation sunset had grown donkey ears. And out of the swirling orange underneath, features were beginning to resolve. Cartoon eyes, and a gigantic grin.

“The Fazz donkey,” said the man. “Oh god.” The artist’s head fell into his hands. “It’s horrible.”

“I wonder how it got all the way out here,” said the man, getting up from the table. “Have you shown this painting?”

“No,” said the artist. “It isn’t even finished. I took some others to Sydney last week, though—”

The artist saw the man glance quickly over at the racks against the wall.

“You aren’t saying—” The artist jumped up, but not before the man had walked over and pulled a painting from the rack. It showed the Fazz donkey, in full splendor across the landscape, a bubbling, frosty glass in hand, his eyes dazzling op-art pinwheels, and over the

artist's sky a word balloon:

SEX AND FAZZ  
AND ROCK AND ROLL!

The artist flipped frantically through the rack. Each image was different, but each featured the leering donkey and plastic bottles of the green drink.

"Everything's ruined!" wailed the artist.

The man knelt and squinted closely at the canvases, but didn't say anything.

"I can't ever paint in here again, can I? It'll all come out Fazz."

"Until we eliminate the microprocessors, yes," said the man musingly.

"Is there a way?"

"It wouldn't be easy, with so little technology at our disposal anymore. They're programmed to defend themselves. But I've had an idea... If it worked, we might even be able to reclaim your artwork."

"Tell me."

"The surgeon micros. They work by assuming the expertise of the doctor, by recording a version of his brain into their own programming. In essence they become miniaturized copies of the human surgeon. If we could have them instead record your impulse, towards protecting these paintings..."

"What does that involve?"

"It's simple if you're not squeamish. I inject a vial of blank medical micros into your bloodstream. They'll work their way to your brain, and document, in place of further medical skills, your painting expertise. If I'm guessing right they'll also pick up your care for these works, and your dislike for the Fazz micros swarming over them. Then, once they've reproduced sufficiently, you touch them to the painting. With luck they'll become your little avenging angels..."

"I'm game," said the artist grimly. "I've got nothing to lose. My work is all I have."

"Who knows," said the man. "We may invent a new art form. You may get to put your brushes into storage. If your micros get strong enough they can go transforming all the old moldering advertising into your imagery. Hah! Then we'll have you to deal with." "A good deal more sightly than this crap," muttered the artist. "When can we start?"

"I've got the stuff in my car," admitted the man. "I packed it up when your friend called and told me about your painting. I'd been hoping for this chance."

"You haven't tried it before?"

"No."

"But there's no danger?"

"None except failure. The medical micros might not adapt. But they're used quite routinely by now."

They stepped out onto the porch together. By coincidence it was sunset, and the colors in the sky were incredible. They stopped and stared together. The visitor hadn't much taste for painting, but he could see how this recent development in sunsets would make a fit subject.

When it was over he went to the car and unpacked the medical equipment.

Once the vial was injected the artist went downstairs and brought up more of the good water, for celebration. On sudden impulse he brought up two of his last remaining beers as well. "Here," he said, tossing one to the man. "This won't interfere, will it?"

"What, the alcohol? No." The man laughed. "The medical micros can fend for themselves; that's the whole point." He pried open the bottle and took a sip. "God, that's nice. It's been months."

The artist didn't say anything. The two men sat together in the twilight, savoring the beer, waiting. After an hour had passed the visitor said: "Try touching your hand to the painting. If they're ready they'll crawl out through your pores and go to work."

The artist shuddered, then did as he was told. No immediate effect was visible.

"Don't worry," said the man. "They'll have jumped. I just hope they understand the assignment."

They went back to the table, though the beer was now long gone. The artist got out a checkerboard and the men played. It was hard, though, to keep from looking over constantly at the painting, and neither man resisted much. In the dim light it was too easy to imagine change that hadn't actually occurred. After a while the visitor went over and took out his magnifying glass.

"I don't know," he said. "The lines of the donkey are still thickening."

"What do you mean? Are you saying it didn't work?"

"Let's hope your little soldiers are still marshalling their forces, surveying the enemies positions. They certainly haven't attacked yet. The advertisement is still taking shape."

The artist paced the room angrily, while the man continued to pore over the canvas with the glass.

"When—"

"Be patient," said the man. "This is a new process. It's probably still too soon. In the meantime, I'm exhausted. Is there a place I can lie down?"

The artist scowled. He went over to the painting and lifted it from the top. "Sure, sure," he said. "I'll unfold the cot—Ow!" He dropped the painting and held up his hand, wincing.

"What's the matter?"

"It stung me! Look at this!"

The man hurried over. The artist's palm was dotted with tiny incisions, all beading with blood.

"What did it do? What's going to happen?"

The man sighed. "It's failure, worse than I expected. The Fazz micros must have defeated the medical ones, and, what's more, appropriated their skills.

All we've done is add to their arsenal, I'm afraid. They've got the talents of a million tiny surgeons at their disposal now. The nip you took was just a warning. Hands off. They're protecting their territory."

"You mean I can't even touch my own paintings?" said the artist, incredulous.

"They're not your paintings anymore," the man pointed out. "They're the work of Fazz."

"Fuck the work of Fazz," said the artist. "I want to destroy them. I don't even want to see this ugly face again. I don't care, I'll give up painting if I have to."

"It's probably better," agreed the man sadly. "We shouldn't let these new surgical ones spread. That's nasty what they did to your hand." The two men spent the better part of the night loading the paintings into a pile on the lawn, then lighting the pile into a bonfire. At the end they staggered back into the house, exhausted, faces streaked with sweat and ash.

"I'll get out the cot," said the artist. "You shouldn't have to drive back like this, before you've slept."

"That's good of you, man. It's been quite a night." The man paused. "You know, you ought to come back to the city with me in the morning, get your mind off this thing for a few days. Your friend was asking about you—" The

man stopped, his jaw hanging open, and stared at the artist's forehead.

"What?" said the artist.

"Your flesh," said the man, dumfounded. "Your head." The artist reached up and felt his head. At first he thought he'd put on a hat. But no. Whatever the knobby protrusions were, they were sprouting right out of the skin.

What's interesting and uninteresting here is mostly plain, but I'll mention that the aggression of pop culture on the fine arts – on a painter of oils-on-canvas specifically – looks to me now like a rehearsal of matters of my own creative paternity – after all, I am a painter's kid. On the one hand, I've given my dad's artistic medium the unmistakable high moral ground; on the other, I've fated it to drown in banality or be thrown on a pyre. More generally, the story looks ahead to my exploration of notions of influence in the arts, the propagation of cultural stuff by automatic and viral processes. The story's not completely unrelated to my essay "The Ecstasy of Influence"; it just isn't good. But here's another.

### Walking The Moons

"Look," says the mother of The Man Who Is Walking Around The Moons Of Jupiter, "he's going so fast." She snickers to herself and scuttles around the journalist to a table littered with wiring tools and fragmented mechanisms. She loops a long, tangled cord over her son's intravenous tube and plugs one end into his headset, jostling him momentarily as she works it into the socket. His

stride on the treadmill never falters. She runs the cord back to a modified four-track recorder sitting in the dust of the garage floor, then picks up the recorder's microphone and switches it on.

"Good morning, Mission Commander," she says.

"Yes," grunts The Man Who, his slack jaw moving beneath the massive headset. It startles the journalist to hear the voice of The Man Who boom out into the tiny garage.

"Interview time, Eddie."

"Who?"

"Mr. Kaffey. Systems Magazine, remember?"

"O.K.," says Eddie, The Man Who. His weakened, pallid body trudges forward. He is clothed only in jockey undershorts and orthopedic sandals, and the journalist can see his heart beat beneath the skin of his chest. The Mother Of smiles artificially and hands the journalist the microphone. "I'll leave you boys alone," she says. "If you need anything, just yodel."

She steps past the journalist, over the cord, and out into the sunlight, pulling the door shut behind her.

The journalist turns to the man on the treadmill.

"Uh, Eddie?"

"Yeah."

"Uh, I'm Ron Kaffey. Is this O.K.? Can you talk?"

"Mr. Kaffey, I've got nothing but time." The Man Who smacks his lips and tightens his grip on the railing before him. The tread rolls away steadily beneath his feet, taking him nowhere.

The journalist covers the mike with the palm of his hand and clears his throat, then begins again. "So you're out there now. On Io. Walking."

"Mr. Kaffey, I'm currently

broadcasting my replies to your questions from a valley on the northwestern quadrant of Io, yes. You're coming in loud and clear. No need to raise your voice. We're fortunate in having a pretty good connection, a good Earth-to-Io hookup, so to speak." The journalist watches as The Man Who moistens his lips, then dangles his tongue in the open air. "Please feel free to shoot with the questions, Mr. Kaffey. This is pretty uneventful landscape even by Io standards and I'm just hanging on your every word."

"Explain to me," says the journalist, "what you're doing."  
"Ah. Well, I designed the rig myself. Took pixel satellite photographs and fed them into my simulator, which gives me a steadily unfolding virtual-space landscape." He reaches up and taps at his headset. "I log the equivalent mileage at the appropriate gravity on my treadmill and pretty soon I've had the same experience an astronaut would have. If we could afford to send them up anymore. Heh." He scratches violently at his ribs, until they flush pink. "Ask me questions," he says. "I'm ready at this end. You want me to describe what I'm seeing?"

"Describe what you're seeing."

"The desert, Mr. Kaffey. God, I'm so goddamned bored of the desert. That's all there is, you know. There isn't any atmosphere. We'd hope for some atmosphere, we had some hopes, but it didn't turn out that way. Nope. The dust all lays flat here, because of that. I try kicking it up, but there isn't any wind." The Man Who scuffs in his Dr. Scholl's sandals at the surface of the treadmill, booting imaginary pebbles, stirring up nonexistent dust. "You probably know I can't see Jupiter right now. I'm on the other side, so I'm pretty much out here

alone under the stars. There isn't any point in my describing that to you."

The Man Who scratches again, this time at the patch where the intravenous tube intersects his arm, and the journalist is afraid he'll tear it off. "Bored?" asks the journalist.

"Yeah. Next time I think I'll walk across a gassy planet. What do you think of that? Or across the Pacific Ocean. On the bottom, I mean. 'Cause they're mapping it with ultrasound. Feed it into the simulator. Take me a couple of weeks. Nothing like this shit.

"I'm thinking more in terms of smaller scale walks from here on in, actually. Get back down to earth, find ways to make it count for more. You know what I mean? Maybe even the ocean isn't such a good idea, actually. Maybe my fans can't really identify with my off-world walks, maybe they're feeling, who knows, a little, uh, alienated by this Io thing. I know I am. I feel out of touch, Mr. Kaffey. Maybe I ought to walk across the cornbelt or the sunbelt something. A few people in cars whizzing past, waving at me, and farmer's wives making me picnic lunches, because they've heard I'm passing through. I could program that. I could have every goddamn Mayor from Pinole to Akron give me the key to their goddamn city."

"Sounds O.K., Eddie."

"Sounds O.K.," echoes The Man Who. "But maybe even that's a little much. Maybe I ought to walk across the street to the drugstore for a pack of gum. You don't happen have a stick of gum in your pocket, Mr. Journalist? I'll just open my mouth and you stick it in. I trust you. We don't have to tell my mother. If you bear her coming you just let know, and I'll swallow it. You won't get in any trouble."

"I don't have any," says the journalist.

"Ah well."

The Man Who walks on, undaunted. Only now something is wrong. There's a hiss of escaping liquid, and the journal is certain that The Man Who's nutrient serum is leaking from his arm. Then he smells the urine, and sees the undershorts of The Man Who staining dark, and adhering to the cave-white flesh of his thigh.

"What's the matter, Kaffey? No more questions?"

"You've wet yourself," says the journalist.

"Oh, damn. Uh, you better call my mom."

But The Mother Of has already sensed that something amiss. She steps now back into the garage, smoking cigarette and squinting into the darkness at her son. She frowns as she discerns the stain, and takes a long drag her cigarette, closing her eyes.

"I guess you're thinking that there might not be a story here," says The Man Who. "Least not the story you had mind."

"Oh no, I wouldn't say that," says the journalist quickly. He's not sure if he hasn't detected a note of sarcasm in the voice of The Man Who by now. "I'm sure we can we something up."

"Work something up," parrots The Man Who. The Mother Of has his shorts down now, and she's swabbing his damp flank with a paper towel. The Man Who sets his mouth in a grim smile and trudges forward. He's not here really. He's out on Io, making tracks. He's going to be in the Guinness Book of World Records.

The journalist sets the microphone

back down in the dust and packs his bag. As he walks the scrubby driveway back to the street he hears *The Man Who Is Walking Around I Moons Of Jupiter*, inside the garage, coughing on cigarette fumes.

Okay, that's a little better. I liked the mood and voice of this piece when I wrote it, and still do, despite the blatant failings: the slipshod, second-hand misogyny – not a welcome influence from Dick – and the hint of body-horror, as though a trickle of urine disqualifies anyone's dignity (this writer obviously hadn't yet changed a loved-one's diaper). *The Man Who* strikes me a recursion of Dick's shambling-sacrificial anti-heroes, like Mercer in *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, or Molinari in *Now Wait For Last Year*, but he's enough my own, enough a product of observation and even self-inspection, that I can simply take pleasure in him, especially when he requests the chewing gum.

What interests me most, though, is how the relationship between the callow journalist and *The Man Who* now looks like an early, guilty allegory of my own attempts to enlist Philip K. Dick or any other 'crazy friend' for my lucid artistic purposes – an unconscious warm-up to what I'd later consciously pursue in stories like "Planet Big Zero", "Interview With The Crab" and "Phil In The Marketplace". For that matter, the relationship between

the two forecasts the betrayal enacted between object-friend and subject-friend in *The Fortress of Solitude*. This short story hangs in there for me finally because in it I see myself knocking on my own door (Chestnut Street), not just Dick's (Francisco Street).



Hampton Francher

11. Believing I'd written a breakthrough piece and, knowing knew what kind of breakthrough would mean the most to me, I sent "Walking The Moons" to Gordon Lish at *The Quarterly*. He rejected it flamboyantly. I sent it to Howard Junker at *Zyzzyyva*; he subjected the story to two tantalizing rounds of edits, cutting several pages, before rejecting it. When the story was published in a tiny SF

magazine out of Austin, Texas, called *New Pathways* – Junker's edits intact – it was picked up for *The Year's Best Science Fiction*. Whether this was vindication or an epitaph for my literary aspirations, I couldn't say. Self-marginalization was well underway; self-gentrification would wait.

12. Ten years and several personal revolutions later I sat in a Sushi restaurant in Brooklyn with Hampton Francher, the screenwriter of *Blade Runner*, who wanted to persuade me to let him adapt and direct a version of my Dick-meets-Chandler first novel, *Gun With Occasional Music*. In his attempts to persuade me of how deeply he'd responded to the book, describing the details that had electrified him, Hampton inadvertently made me laugh – much of what he was recognizing was *Blade Runner's* direct influence on my novel, of course. Hampton and I were trapped in a circular influential mirror, admiring our own distorted reflections. And each of us shadowed by another, a face like Palmer Eldritch's seeping through.

Hampton, like Paul Williams, like Jeter and Powers, had enjoyed the opportunity denied me: to know Philip K. Dick personally. But unlike those others, who claimed friendship with my paranoid, prickly hero, Hampton Francher – who'd appeared out of

nowhere as a new crazy friend for me, a patchouli-reeking flamenco-dancing Hollywood hipster, boyfriend of starlets, sulky child-star in exile, and who'd endear himself to me again and again with his shambolic frankness – stated flatly, “Dick didn't like me.” The remark, so simple and indisputable, entered my body as a kind of decades-delayed electric shock: why should I ever have assumed Dick would have liked *me*? Our kinship, presumed since I was fourteen years old, was a one-way street, an imposition of my desire.

By this time I'd become an ambassador for Dick's work, defending it to serious readers in serial essays, introductions, panel discussions and so forth. More than once I'd joked that Dick's rehabilitation – his gentrification – was made possible only after death had cleared the awkwardness of his personal presence, with all its *you-can't-fire-me-I-quit* defensive vanity about his literary status, his persecution complex at being appropriated for theories or causes, from the landscape. If he'd stuck around, Dick surely would have found a way to dishearten and derail his would-be enshriners. (Actually, I think this observation originated with Paul.) Yet how rarely had I bothered to consider that Dick might have loathed me, renounced my striving on his behalf?

### 13.

When I was ten or eleven I made a friend in school, a kid who'd somehow been saddled with the nickname *Aardvark*. Whether that

name was awarded to him by his family or by other friends, I don't know. Aardvark had long hair, longer even than mine; a foolish, loping gait; an open reverence for Jim Henson's Muppets and a stated aspiration to become a puppeteer; and a strange, shy confidence. I fell in love. I brought Aardvark home after school one day, to present to my mother, and in front of her I called him, with open admiration, '*really weird*'. I don't remember how Aardvark and I spent that afternoon, and I doubt there were many like it. Before long Aardvark had grown out of his nickname, and loped on to interests beyond Muppets and me. As it happens, under another assumed name Aardvark became one of New York City's celebrated white graffiti writers – for a time, he was King of the A-Train. He shifted into legend, so I went on knowing of him after our brief, weird friendship.

What I remember best about that day was my mother's reprimand, after Aardvark had gone home. Barely a reprimand, really, just some food for thought: was I so certain my friend liked being dubbed '*weird*'? Might it be better to restrain from making my friends self-conscious of their eccentricities, from locking them into pre-appointed roles? I was abashed, but also confused by my mother's censure. For one thing, I associated this kind of open celebration of bizarre behaviors specifically with my parents – in fact, my mother was famous for awarding her friends baroque nicknames (“Captain Vague”, “Jerry Cheesecake”, etc.), monikers etching this or that

personal episode into legend. And I thought it obvious how adoring my use of *weird* had been. For what it's worth, I've never completely shed my sense that *weird* or *crazy* were typical hallmarks of quality, of the characters and artifacts I'd spend my life relishing and collecting and, if I was lucky, originating, crazy books, crazy movies, crazy thoughts. To have a crazy friend was to have waded into the crazy world and given it a soul kiss. For wasn't ours a crazy world?

### 14.

I've been given a lot of opportunities to talk to Philip K. Dick without him talking back: time works that way. I've built a few of my palaces on his shambles, and no one can ever tell me I shouldn't have. There are days, though, when I wonder whether I'm like Gordon Lish to Dick's Raymond Carver – Lish, seemingly so calculating and urbane, forcibly enlisting ‘the natural man’ Carver in his editorial schemes, dressing him up like a pet bear. Or (speaking of bears) maybe I'm like Werner Herzog, editing the dead bear-enthusiast Timothy Treadwell's footage into the documentary *Grizzly Man*, then puzzling over the marionette I've got up on his feet and dancing – his aspect so remarkable, his private face still and forever hidden from view. But Lish and Herzog, they're crazy too, even if they're better at getting through days, better at talking on a telephone or balancing a checkbook, than Carver and Treadwell. They're crazy with love, for one thing, even

if it is love of a kind of colonizing, acquisitive variety.

15.

Sometimes, also, I think I hate Philip K. Dick for not loving Hampton Fancher. How could you be so *small*?

16.

Dick tended to give his main characters powerful but unsteady father-figures, often resembling Dick's boss Herb Hollis at Art Music – men both bullying and charismatic, generous and treacherous. Another version of this archetype recurs in the films of Orson Welles, with the 'big father' often played by Welles himself, as Falstaff, or Kane, or Quinlan. I've fooled with this motif myself – most obviously, in *Motherless Brooklyn's* Frank Minna – but more often have defaulted, in my writing, to a primary relationship more like siblings, or friends: pairs linked by bonds of guilt, yearning, and mutual betrayal. This may be typical of the difference between the post-war, 'boomer' generation of which Dick was part – those whose parents were toughened by the depression and World War Two – and my generation, we who experienced the questing, self-revising boomers as

our parents. For myself and Jake, there were times when our parents were less like parents and more like crazy friends. As a result, our friendships involved a measure of mutual parenting or, at least, since mutual parenting was really impossible, the impulse to rescue one another from our parents' squishy legacies (cf. *The Fortress of Solitude*). And truly, for all my reverence, I never really looked at Philip K. Dick as a literary father, more like a brilliant older brother whose brave and also sometimes half-assed forays charted wild paths for me to follow.

17.

Dick's defenders – other than me, I mean – frequently bristle at hearing him called 'crazy', or at the rehearsals of his human frailties, his drugs and divorces, which tend to accompany the laurels the larger culture keeps draping on his tomb. I've never understood the problem. Apart from the dopey emptiness of the question – was Melville crazy? Was Malcolm Lowry? Kafka? – I suppose I'm residually inclined to hear the term as a shred of beatnik exultation: "That's *crazy*, man!" I'm still looking for the crazy wherever I can find it. It's hard enough to kick against the plastic Victorianisms of

our culture, the social sarcophagus of daily life. Even trying can make you crazy, let alone succeeding as well as Dick did. For me, I *like* helpless braggarts, obsessive fools, angry people. My ears perk up at the word 'pretentious' – that's usually the movie I want to see, the book I want to read, the scene I want to make. Nearly anyone I've found worth knowing was difficult enough, vivid enough, to qualify at some point as my crazy friend.

The Slopie girls are women now. I'm stone, dependable, lifelong friends with Laurene. I could write a hundred pages about that friendship; this isn't it. Deena, on the other hand, is still out there raging, shaming me with flippant satires of my passionate greenness, wrecking our friendship as often as not, forcing me (it seems to me) to wreck it in return. We've gone many months and, once, nearly a decade, in the dark, not knowing whether we'll ever speak again. I'm furious at her now, but I'm writing this as a kind of valentine, I'd like to think: Come back, crazy friend. I'm big enough for you still. I've got what it costs to know you, and if I'm sometimes hard-pressed to spend it, I'd hate to die with it in my pocket.

