# TRUST

SAL CETRANO

In front of my set, I am the black hood,
The obliging executioner, *real* justice.
The talking heads all ask for my pity, as if
Anyone really believed their do-good
Crap, this electronic absolution;
But I have spent a gray day, shedding gray blood,
Watching prideless scum pissing in train stations,
And know hawks from handjobs when the light's good.

My set tells me the day's atrocities:
With door expensively buttressed, it can name names,
Show smirking punk faces, keep score of these grim games.
Chewing through each mea culpa, each gristly plea
By the latest crud's milk-fed amicus,
I pass bitter judgment with dessert and coffee.
A fair man, only lately cruel, I put my trust
In this: flick a switch, and the horror dies.

My first visit to the Colony, two years back, was made with some apprehension: might things have changed, been rudely moved about, eliminated? Had the precious feel of the place, wrought of singular moments like pearls strung through time, been lost?

Doing my best Inspector General from basement to aerie, it was gratifying to see that it had not. Flocked wall, lush linen, canvasses of Mailer women: everywhere, Norris's artist's eye warmly abides.

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Most personally gratifying, though, was the small study/TV room just off the kitchen, where he kept his current reading matter on a small table by that beat-up easy chair. Still clearly at hand were copies of some of the journals I'd religiously sent him over the years, bookmarked at my pieces. Hard by, there were several issues of *Poetry*, of Chicago.

That *also* made me smile.

While claiming any influence at all over a whirlwind like Norman might seem uppity, I *do* take substantial credit for his increased interest in verse over the last several years of his life. Whether or not it was simply kind indulgence, Norman had always taken my efforts and sensibilities as a poet seriously. Many are the Mailerites who showed up for Norman's readings. Norman actually showed up for one of *mine*.

But I digress.

It must have been nine or ten years ago—I can't place it exactly. It was a sticky July night, shrouds of mist roiling in off the water, the harbor lights vague suggestions. Norris, as was her fashion, cleaned up quickly after dinner and made herself scarce, safe from a further source of hot air. Norris understood how the anticipation of these summer talks with *hisself* fueled me through the classroom doldrums of winter. As kind as she was lovely, she always left us alone.

We settled in at the snug bar, he behind and I before, and my host set out a pair of heavy cut glass tumblers, followed by a bottle of single-malt Scotch. In baggy denim shirt and under white poll, the old man before me looked more Santa Claus than O'Neillian barkeep, but even at an advanced age, Norman could drink me under the table and halfway into the basement. I ritually grieved for all the gems I'd forget by morning.

Late the previous afternoon, a prankish Norman, with a simple "This is my old friend Bob—I'm sure you two will find plenty to talk about," had introduced me to Harvard's renowned Dr. Robert Lifton, then disappeared upstairs. For all I knew, the affable, shaggy-haired man in weathered overalls before me could have been an unhung horse thief from the next county. But, as with most of Norman's little jokes, this one turned out well. Lifton

and I hit it off famously, even wound up exchanging letters, and the conversation at the table had positively crackled.

This next evening, then, Norman was in high spirits, that indefinite urgency of his outpouring as he splashed two fingers into each of the glasses.

It started quickly: Norman the ringmaster.

"So tell me . . ." he intoned, smile billboarding his face, '*you're* a poet . . ."

At this I was ready to cash in and go home, but as my drink was fresh, I lingered, and struggled to look sufficiently rhythmic.

He continued: "Lately I've been reading more poetry." The keen eyes narrowed, brows bristling like sea urchins. "Getting into it." He pursed his lips in emphasis. "But I'm all over the place."

Norman, I knew, prospered from a habit he passed on to me, among others—that of putting in a short period of quality reading before attempting to write, juicing yourself on someone's excellence. Usually it was prose, Simenon or Roth.

Now he apparently felt a fresh hunger. Taking a sip, composing himself, Norman came to the point: what single journal might he depend upon to give him the best picture of what now constituted contemporary style? After all, he was a busy man!

Having by then collected a few hundred issues of the flagstaff publication, I recommended *Poetry* of Chicago, explaining its long history and generally formalist bent. Since Norman's taste in poetry, as far as I could suss it, was fairly populist—the kind of thing that might have set fingers to popping back in the days of bongo fever, or later given semi-literate young radicals illusions of gravity at places like the *Nuyorican Café*. I rather doubted that he'd pursue the matter, but he did.

First, I sent him a few issues, then by the next summer and in subsequent visits, I noticed more and more issues of *Poetry* about the place, well fin-

gered and kept close by. When he started to scribble verse again, it came as no surprise.

But back to the story. . . .

The recommendation had flowered into a discussion of "voice" in verse as distinct from that in the novel, what Ginsberg referred to as "the vibrating plane." This floundered. It was one thing to compare and discuss, as often Norman had, say, Hemingway's simplicity with the prolixity of Updike, but few novelists go far in exploring the weightless possibilities of the lyrical line. No matter how I struggled, though, I couldn't make myself clear. Frustrated, I suggested that if my host had a tad more music in his life, perhaps he'd understand.

Norman gave a little mock-guilt pout, paused a moment, shoulders bunched, then suddenly brightened, as if at something remembered. Whether or not it was the word "voice" echoing late in the great man's mind, out of deep left field he says: "So, what about this Dylan fellow—is he any *good*?"

While it would require instruments yet unknown to science to record my dumb-founding at this, I nonetheless managed the deft riposte: "You mean *Bob* Dylan?!" He nodded, retreating to a poker face at my wonder.

"You're kidding…" I stammered. "You, president of PEN, champion of the word, and you don't appreciate *Dylan*?"

Years later, I found out that Dylan had shown up at a party of Norman's, barely noticed him, and left Norman, ergo, feeling slighted, ala his oft-told Reagan-didn't-love-me-at-that-dinner-party story. Here's Norman, quintessential Duke of his Domain, and Dylan hasn't gotten the memo—a situation comedy for the gods! *Now*, of course, it's amusing, but then . . . .

Ever a beacon to the perplexed, I fortified myself with a swallow and undertook the unlikely mission of using Bob Dylan to drive home a poetic explanation I'd booted the first time around.

Norman and I had at least one poet acquaintance—his bond surely longer and deeper than mine—in common: Ginsberg, so I tried to use Norman's familiarity with the cadences of *Howl*'s creator as a bridge between the distant shores of Whitman's measured flow and the tracer-bullet delivery of Dylan and the later puerile derivative of rap.

Careful not to turn this short-cut to a dead end, the high school teacher on his second drink bloviated thusly:

When Allen in *Howl* famously declares his intention "to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose," he is essentially carrying on the business of Whitman, who as a young man had come away affected from a lecture in which Emerson had called for an American voice unique and distinctive to the breadth and audacity of the New World experience. He is credited endlessly, even mawkishly, with adjusting poetic sensibility to a longer narrative line, as well as democratizing its voice and subject matter; but though both sang truth to their instincts, it is nonetheless left to Ginsberg to realize the incantational gusto of song.

"Once you cross *that* bridge," I proferred, lacing my fingers accordingly, "you've got your boy Dylan." With that as the premise, Norman got the bit. The rest of the evening, what I can recall of it, went well. You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant.

A week later, following up with crusader zeal, I provided Norman with a Dylan mix CD, but as Norris often reminded me, much of what Norman requested on impulse wound up fortifying the Provincetown landfill.

The fun, don't you know, is in the trying: Grow or pay more for remaining the same.