

Of Thought and Poetry:
Creative Encounters With the Life of Alan Brilliant

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Journeyman I

by Alan Brilliant

Inside the thunder and flash the firedance

the page was blank

My mind was fresh smelled paint and lime

my notebook ash

And then I thought of you dear reader

to share my art

The words began to form to grow to stretch

across my page

In one line long with affection and

a short smile

No one writes his dreams maps his imaginings

but your love

The mute voice inside joins audibly

can you hear

Within a melody is starch and glue but shared

is a measured peace

Do you feel its length and breadth does this cabinet

reach your ease

What I can't bear alone please hold with me

and I with you

Will tease each other into a harmony

of thought and poetry

On Binding

The most beautiful book I own is simply bound with waxed twine.

The green cloth of its cover has been tie-dyed in a diamond pattern made of overlapping shades. It's been carefully measured and pasted to the sturdy cardboard davier boards to form the book's cover, the edges of the cloth folded over with care, but not quite exactness. Its title, *Autobiography*, is printed on a slip of printer paper, and I have carried it with me in various bags so often that the glue holding it to the cloth has dislodged and I've had to repair it with a glue stick.

The stories within *Autobiography* by Alan Brilliant are mostly old friends. I have flipped through its pages so often that I can no longer remember if I met these stories first as they were written or as they were spoken by their author. Technically, the book has been made imperfectly, but its intent is enshrouded in perfection. It is a book made out of love—not just for the stories it tells, but for the act of creating.

Thin, arthritic hands have collated the pages into signatures, or groups of eight and folded them in half with a bone folder, a weighted stick used to make crisp fold lines.

These same hands have marked six places along the signature's fold, an inch apart, to make holes with a pointed tool called an awl. The black pen marks are still visible in the final product, near where the awl pierced the page.

A thick needle was threaded with squinted eyes and each group of eight were slowly, methodically stitched together, albeit a little loose.

The book's spine is loose, and when you flip through its pages, they fight against the twine's hold. The front end page is wrinkled in some areas, in others adorned with the occasional glue mark. The centerfold of each signature has black pen marks near where the awl pierces the

page. Its typeface is irregular at times, and some pages are written in a font that is bolder than others.

The text is riddled with the occasional grammatical error and the typeface changes by the page or sometimes by the paragraph, forming a mountain range of thick, bolded sentences that cast a shadow over other sentences in a thin type.

The book was made without a sense of urgency, mainly meandering through the creation and writing process. The content itself is as irregular as its type—most sections begin in the present day and amble through memories with the author, moving quickly through time and place. A section will begin in a bookshop, waiting for a friend to join for lunch, and wander several decades backwards, landing in New Jersey or California.

But sometimes, the typeface is clear and consistent, and it feels like a flash of purpose. I see it most in places like the dedication page, whose bolded letters are encircled by a rectangle.

Dedicated To:

Eliza Benbow

&

Daniel and Lauren Goans

To:

Charlie Headington

All of whom asked for it

This is the most beautiful book I own because it is perfectly imperfect. I can picture its maker, hunched over a crowded coffee table in a room full of books, binding as he has for over half a century.

In the prologue, Brilliant writes, “People who have listened patiently to all my stories for years have badgered me to write them down. What they don’t add or say is, ‘You’ve [*sic*] going to die soon, and they will be lost.’” My eyes snag on these words each time I scan the page because I asked for it, knowing he would die one day. I knew I could not remember all of his stories on my own and wanted to preserve not only their contents but his voice—how he told them and what details he thought mattered enough to preserve on the page.

This book is the most beautiful book I own because I asked for it. I craved the information it holds, the concreteness of its pages. I wanted to study it, to draw from memories that are not my own in order to fill every conversation with stories he once told me. I wanted to hold onto what I was afraid to forget: a voice and a life.

And now, this work you’re reading exists because I kept wanting more.

On Beginning

There was never enough room for all the books in Al Brilliant's academic bookshop, Glenwood Community Books.

They made floor to ceiling shelves sag under their weight, and even after they were stuffed and layered with spines, there were always more stacked on the floor or in cardboard boxes scribbled on with sharpie. They had been squeezed into every free space for years, cluttering the tops of shelves and tables, displayed in the windows and tucked into crevices on the thin yellow carpet. The bookshop itself was divided into sections that could be broad or incredibly specific, from a wall of books simply listed as "history" to a cabinet housing only Marxist theory and literature. It smelled of dust from old books and mildew from the ceiling that leaked and the cheap hazelnut coffee that was perpetually brewing in the corner, just in case a friend stopped in (and they always did).

Hidden in a small strip mall unit on Grove Street in the Glenwood neighborhood of Greensboro, N.C., the bookshop was rarely found by people who weren't looking for it—usually, old friends or students sent by their UNC Greensboro professors or friends of friends.

It was difficult to stumble upon the bookshop's unassuming wooden door and barred windows, but maybe that's why it felt so special when you did. If you made it inside, you quickly realized that there were infinite ways to get lost: aimlessly scanning thousands of spines, flipping through their pages, or, most often, in conversations with Al.

When I first met Al in 2018, he was 81 years old, sharp-minded, and rosy-cheeked. He dressed in worn, faded clothes that were handed down to him by his friends, and almost always had a beret covering his balding head. He spent his days reading, writing, drinking orange juice from the carton, and wrapping books to mail to online customers from his Amazon storefront.

He'd pause his solitary activities to play chess or eat reubens with friends who drifted through the bookshop's door, something that happened at least once a day. He loved telling them stories, and when he found something amusing, his whole body reacted, shaking with laughter that sometimes escaped from a tilted head and slapped knee.

By the time I met Al, his life was fused with the bookshop. He slept on the futon in the center of the room and always insisted he wanted to live and die surrounded by his books. For him, it wasn't an unusual desire—he had spent his life dedicated to learning, reading, and publishing. As a young man, he worked at avante-garde bookstores across the country and began publishing books by an international roster of poets, a process which he continued for 50 years. He loved to hear stories as much as he loved to tell them, and listened with rapt attention when you talked about the things you cared about. He was a lifelong learner, and I thought of him as a sponge that soaked up literature, political theory, the news, and ideas shared by others.

He was a creature of simple habits. Once a week, he walked to the Food Lion a few blocks away and bought groceries that he stored on the same wooden shelves used for books and in a mini fridge, cooking them on a portable stovetop. We used portable heaters in the winter and fans in the summer to regulate the temperature, and a bucket sat on the floor near the door to catch water leaking from the ceiling tiles. Al kept his clothes in a dresser in a back room dedicated to books on religion and philosophy and bathed with baby powder in his bathroom's sink instead of showering. He took walks up and down his block of Grove Street, clearing the sidewalk of trash and watering the plants he grew in front of the bookshop's barred windows. The inside space was coated in a layer of clutter and grime that never seemed to bother him.

A few years before I began working there, the bookshop was in a larger space a few units away, a part of the shop's history that I was not old enough, or present enough, to remember. I do

know that I was its first employee in several years when I was 14, an arrangement made by my father, who was Al's pastor at a nearby church that Al had begun attending. I needed a job to pay for an upcoming trip to Scotland and Al needed help shelving books and filling the Amazon storefront orders that paid his few bills.

My first day was a gray February afternoon, and I arrived at the bookshop with a friend who was supposed to work with me but eventually decided against it. I was enamored with the bookshop, which I'd maybe visited once before, and listened attentively as "Mr. Al" guided us through the maze of shelves, full of names I recognized but hadn't yet read. That first day, the bookshop felt huge. Its shelves were weighed down with opportunities to learn and be closer to a world of writing that I'd been longing to participate in for years. I began working as many shifts at the bookshop as I could after school and on weekends. I also lived in Glenwood, less than a mile from the bookshop, and on warm days would sometimes walk down the cracked sidewalks along hilly streets to get to work, all the while admiring colorful houses and yards along the way.

For the first year of working with Al, I was paid minimum wage under the table, half of which went toward book credit that I carefully tallied in my phone's notes app. I made almost nothing that first year, and I couldn't have cared less. I delighted too much in the tall plywood shelves, the rolling ladders that were reserved for employees, and the stories about Al's life that I would gleefully recount to anyone who would listen. I was, like many high school freshmen, desperate to understand myself and the world and nowhere near the discovery that required. I hadn't—and still haven't—lived enough to know.

I believed that Al did understand the world, or at least where he fit into it. He was a writer, first and foremost, but he was also an intellectual, a reader, a publisher, an activist. He'd managed to do something I longed for: he had carved out a life for himself influenced and

surrounded by the written word. I began seeing his life and stories as a roadmap for how to give myself up to creative work enough to be sustained by it.

My shifts would often start with “staff meetings” that were just an excuse for Al and I to talk. He would sit on his futon and I would face him, my back to the fiction section, and learn about random historical facts or hear stories from his life. Sometimes, I’d tell him about the fantasy novel I was trying to write or about my friends, keeping him involved in my life just by the anecdotes we swapped. Sometimes, these meetings stretched for an hour. Sometimes, I didn’t get much work done. I never cared.

My relationship with Al and the bookshop became mutualistic. He made me feel like I worked *with* him rather than *for* him, often asking for my opinion and eagerly accepting my suggestions. As time went on, I became more gently assertive, encouraging him to make small changes toward comfort and organization within the bookshop and, by extension, his life. Al didn’t like change, but wasn’t entirely resistant to it, and I learned he was more receptive to my ideas if I approached him slowly and with a detailed explanation.

I had never had that kind of relationship with anyone, but it was just how Al operated and had for decades. Everything was shared, even decision-making. I began living in a way that reflected what I was learning in the bookshop. My ideas and conversations began being shaped by what I learned within its walls, and I grew more thoughtful and curious—I often think of it as the beginning of my education.

When I was a senior in high school, Al began calling me the bookshop’s manager, and my 16-year-old sister began helping out after school and on weekends. Psalter was more interested in nature than books, but her eagerness to hear Al’s stories mirrored my own. She was,

and still is, wonderfully creative, and quickly took to Al. She often spent shifts pricing books or working on binding projects that Al found for her while I did bigger organizational tasks.

By then, I understood the bookstore's ecosystem and my role in it in a way I have never encountered anywhere else.

I knew that the phone would occasionally ring, but we never answered it. I knew that a person or two off the street might trickle into the shop to buy a book, but most of the time when the bell hanging in front of the door jingled, it was a friend coming in for a visit. I came to know them by name, and we'd talk briefly before I slipped into the back to quietly work, sometimes listening in on their conversation. When they left, Al would ask me if I'd heard a story they told or a conversation they'd had—if I hadn't, he would recount it for me, often laughing at some punchline or asking me what I thought.

I came to know the bookshop well enough that I could find books better than Al. He would often ask me, exasperated, where I'd stored something during a cleaning spree. I vacuumed, sorted boxes, dusted shelves, washed dishes, and cleared tables. I convinced Al to declutter by building a second storage shed behind the bookshop to store the cartons stacked on the floor. I reorganized the poetry and art sections, periodically straightened shelves, and helped him invest in a section of children's books. My sister and I took him grocery shopping and, eventually, to doctor's appointments. Together, we convinced Al to get a cat for the bookshop, a calico named Nuk who followed him around and spent her days and nights sleeping on his lap.

I never stopped learning at work. My shifts were often punctuated by staff meetings or lunches where we would sit for hours, the time mostly filled with stories that Al told. My quests for a specific title on an obscure artist or historical event would result in a lesson about its origin

and importance, which Al would also write in letters to the recipient of the books, wrapped in tissue paper and placed in a yellow mailer.

Despite being full of boundless intelligence and thoughtful ideas, Al had a way of making you feel as if you were the more important one. He'd gladly share what he thought, but ask for your perspective next. He was one of the first people to truly take me seriously, and would often thoughtfully consider everything I said, storing it away to revisit another day. I felt the most self-assured when I was around Al or in the bookshop, a space that served as an extension of his personality and ideas. It was there that I decided to become a writer, that I began to understand literature as a way to learn rather than to simply escape. I began to realize that what I read mattered, and what I thought about it and how I let it impact my life mattered, too.

The bookshelves have since been lovingly emptied and disassembled. The space has been gutted and cleaned, morphing from a thrift store to office spaces. There are a few similarities—the windows are still barred and the street still looks the same, but Al, the heartbeat of the bookshop, has been dead since 2022.

Both Al and the space as I once knew it are gone, but each time I open his autobiography or scroll through our old emails, it feels as if I'm opening the bookshop's creaking door, greeted by a thousand stories and an old friend.

*

It feels as if Al was destined to work with books. The youngest of four children, he was born on May 22, 1936 in St. Louis, Missouri to Jewish immigrants from Russia and Austria. Because of the Great Depression, his father, a pattern-maker, could not provide for the family in St. Louis, and they moved to a farm in New Jersey just six months after Al's birth in the hopes of finding a better life for themselves. Al grew up among cows and farmland until his family traded

fields for a life in the city, moving to Brooklyn when he was nine. From then on, he grew up around displaced survivors of concentration camps that his family would host in their home. Their stories, along with growing up in a tense global political climate, inspired his passion for social justice. Then, when he was in middle school, the family moved again, this time to a house on Mickle Street in Camden, New Jersey, which he described as the toughest town in America.

Al was young when he created his first publication, a handwritten newspaper that he distributed to his family and friends, bed-ridden after an appendectomy. But years later, the bespectacled, dark-haired boy who swaggered through the high-ceilinged hallways of Woodrow Wilson High School was a self-described jackass who had no interest in his classes, let alone bookmaking. He'd sit in the back of classrooms with tall windows, preferring to gaze out of them and crack jokes than to listen to his teachers. In pictures of him from college, his eyes reveal an endless curiosity, but in high school, he was also endlessly bored, and I imagine it was evident in his slumped shoulders and slow, listless steps.

These steps carried him to his English class, probably late, one day as a junior where he sat in his usual seat, expecting to daydream through another lesson. Instead, a substitute named Mr. Lowe walked into the classroom and asked where the class was in their textbook. When he got no answer, he began to read from a collection of poetry by Walt Whitman instead.

“He said Walt Whitman was the greatest poet in American history and he lived and died in Camden, New Jersey. He lived on Mickle Street,” Al once told me. “I lived on Mickle Street.”

Seventy years later, Al would describe this moment as the beginning of his passion for the written word. He would recite “O Captain! My Captain!” from memory, his voice catching on the first line, eyes shimmering with tears.

When I listen to this recorded storytelling, it is nearly impossible to think of him as anything other than this—overwhelmingly in love with poetry, living a life full of creation and admiration of the written word.

After graduating high school in 1953, a year younger than his peers, Al was desperate for independence and, according to his stories, traveled across the country to California to work at a steel mill. I have since found records of him attending Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania between 1953 and 1955, two years right after school, muddling this part of his history and the stories he chose to tell. Regardless of where he was during those two years, he wound up on the east coast in 1955, this time heading to Columbia University. Although he was generally disinterested in his high school classes, Al was incredibly smart and was accepted into the school with the endorsement of his high school assistant principal.

The love of books that had been reignited by Mr. Lowe sustained him in New York, where he lived in an apartment in East Harlem and worked at a remainder bookshop in Times Square. At Columbia, he took classes in art history, literature, and theology. He spent his evenings using his student discount to attend ballets and operas and wandering through art museums and galleries. He hosted art shows in his own apartment, much to the dismay of his landlord. He made friends who were artists and activists, attended rallies and marches, and spent evenings discussing politics and art with young, bright minds. I like to think that this is when the seeds planted in him as a child began to sprout. Al was surrounded by the culture and new ideas of the era, and many of the interests he cultivated then—like art, spirituality, and fine paperbacks—were carried with him throughout the rest of his life.

In February of 1957, Al took a leave of absence from Columbia. He was disillusioned with academia, a sentiment that he would maintain for decades, even when he eventually

finished his degree and eventually taught a handful of classes at UNCG. It was around this time that he began working at Eighth Street Bookshop, a Greenwich Village bookstore popular among Beat poets. That year, he hand wrote and illustrated a single collection of a dozen poems by Cecil Hemley—who would also grow to be a poet, editor, novelist, and publisher—in a maroon sketchbook. This handmade book may be the earliest evidence of Al's dedication to his craft, featuring 17 illustrations made by Al, the Earthworks artist Robert Smithson, and their friend Dick Fass. Each poem is carefully written on slightly grayed paper in pen or pencil, with a clear attention to structure and form. The handwritten copyright information lists the publication as *PAN*, a little magazine of poetry.

He began doing official print runs of *PAN*, a four-part collection of poetry, the next year. The magazine was stamped with type, not written by hand, and sold for 25 cents each at Gotham Book Mart, the avant-garde Manhattan bookstore that Al had begun to manage. The covers were printed with a design by Smithson and created the illusion of thick brushstrokes. These new editions were printed for a few hundred dollars by Igal Roodenko, an anti-war activist and member of the War Resisters League who distributed leftist literature. *PAN* featured a wide range of poets, from New York City-based poets Cecil Hemley and James Wright in the first edition and contemporary Canadian poets like Leonard Cohen and Louise Dudek in the second. This inclusion and intentional pursuit of Canadian poets served as the foundation of Al's interest in bringing poets from outside of the U.S. to American audiences.

Creating *PAN* was Al's first formal attempt at publishing and editing, so he took his tasks of filtering through submissions and editing drafts incredibly seriously. He was interacting with the literary world as a bookseller, a poet himself and, now, as an editor. He took his roles—and himself—very seriously, amusedly calling himself fanatical in a future interview.

“I wanted it so badly, I was so fanatical that I just devoured all of it,” he said.

Once, during a shift at Gotham Book Mart, a woman in a raccoon-fur coat appeared at the desk, holding a poem she wanted to submit to the magazine. Al took it without interest at the time, but fell in love with the poem when he read it. He called the woman to tell her that he liked it, and she invited him to her apartment for lunch and to show him the two new poems she’d written.

He arrived at her Greenwich Village apartment later that day. It was beautifully furnished with Chinese furniture and casually displayed art by Picasso and Braque on the walls. Al was taken aback by the beauty of the place and by this strange woman who wrote poems and served him a small plate of chicken and salad for lunch. Later, when she had to leave the apartment for an appointment, she simply asked Al to lock the door behind him when he left. It was incredibly unusual for someone in the city to do, leaving a strange young man in your space unsupervised. He did what she asked, though, and left a piece of paper with a large red heart drawn on it propped up against the salt and pepper shakers.

This is how Al met Teo Savory, a poet, novelist, and his first wife. She was nearly double his age and the picture of elegance, especially compared to Al’s beatnik lifestyle. Later in life, Al would describe his relationship with Teo as rocky, but they remained together for thirty years, sometimes unhappily, forming a complex partnership of bright, impassioned, and creative minds that often clashed.

For several years after their marriage, the couple divided their time between their shared apartment in Greenwich Village and their house in the Berkshires of Massachusetts. During this time, Al went back to Columbia, partially to finish his degree and partially to use his student status to avoid the Vietnam War draft. In 1959, after completing his undergraduate degree at

Columbia, Al attended Mexico City College to get a masters' in art history. The couple planned to have Teo move to Mexico to live with Al after some time in the program, but she ended up staying in the states and he eventually returned without a degree.

In 1965, Al and Teo moved across the country to Santa Barbara, California, where Al worked at Red Lion Bookshop for a year before becoming dissatisfied with its leadership. He left in 1966 with fellow employee Jack Shoemaker to create Unicorn Bookshop, backed with funds by Ken Maytag. They also created Unicorn Press, a small poetry press that designed limited runs of artfully-made books, broadsides, and chapbooks. Al largely managed Unicorn Press and Shoemaker handled the bookshop, but both were cooperative workplaces where everyone had a say and everyone took a vow of poverty.

“I wanted [Unicorn] to be a co-op. I wanted everyone to have the same wage, the same hours, the same spirit, the same work, and finally... I wanted it to be political,” Al said. “Not necessarily a political press, but I wanted the staff to be political.”

Along with press duties, which included secretarial and bindery work, Unicorn's staff participated in demonstrations and protests for various causes, from farmworker labor unions to protests of the Vietnam War. The press helped workers who were conscientious objectors avoid the draft, and Al and Teo spearheaded vigils for arrested protestors.

Conscientious objectors are able-bodied and of age to be drafted but stand opposed to war for ethical or religious reasons. Al himself had been a conscientious objector, petitioning in front of the Camden Draft Board in 1957 to avoid the draft. Over the course of the Vietnam War, conscientious objector status was based primarily on religious or educational grounds.

Still, applying for conscientious objector status was made purposely difficult and discouraging. Draft objectors were made to go through extensive paper trails as well as rigorous

interviews, often asked to answer degrading and unrelated questions about their views and lives. Guides were written by groups like the War Resistor's League, a secular pacifist group that supported and encouraged nonviolent protests of the Vietnam War, including draft resistance.

The way the system was set up, the objector could not win. In a 1970 guide to conscientious objection that he authored, Al uncovered a paradox to conscientious objection: despite being non-conformist when a draft resister reached their hearing, the board would only grant objector status to someone who was willing to conform to what they wanted.

In order to gain the status, Al said, an objector should be humble, speak respectfully, and dress formally. The act of conforming to not conform was frustrating, he said, "... I began crying out and striking out. I ended (years later) quite differently. But, then, as it turned out, I wasn't a conscientious objector when I started, but before they were through with me, I was."

For Unicorn Press staff, protest was a way of life and of work. They were all involved in peaceful protests against the war, often being some of the only participants in Santa Barbara. Al himself led monthly marches through the streets of Santa Barbara for two years, sometimes only drawing a handful of participants. Protestors spent one Thanksgiving in a public fast, and Al and Teo spent much of their time organizing protests for imprisoned protestors and convening with other activists. Protest was simply a natural part of Al's life—he attended his first when he was 12, and estimated in his autobiography that he'd participated in over a thousand since. For Al, caring for others involved protest and advocacy.

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Teo and Al took on the brunt of the press's stress and directorial duties, but decisions were made with the consideration of and approval from all the "Unicorns" that worked there. This strategy didn't always work, as people with varying interest and passion for the press came

and went over time, but the idea was pure and idyllic in a world that emphasized power and distinctive roles.

Throughout the 1960s and 70s, small independent presses began popping up across the states in what is now known as the Small Press movement, fueled by cheap access to machinery and a do-it-yourself mentality. During this time, many poets and artists became publishers, resulting in the distribution of handcrafted works by their peers, especially lesser-known emerging poets. Unicorn itself was made up of young artists and activists and the works they published often reflected their views and creative interests.

Unlike many other U.S. presses at the time, though, the press had a heavy focus on publishing translated works by international authors, filling its catalog with poetry and prose from places like Germany, France, Vietnam, Spain, and New Guinea. In 1967, they published “Viet Nam Poems,” a translated collection by Vietnamese monk and peace activist, Thích Nhất Hạnh — one of their best-selling titles. “Viet Nam Poems” is a perfect example of how the press balanced publishing quality poets and works that advocated for peace.

“We all came to feel that our main function should be to show our readers, including our own poets, the finest works of poetry and of fiction (when financially possible) in other languages,” Teo said in an interview I once found with her.

The press still published a wide variety of U.S. authors, including Robert Bly, Diane Di Prima, and Thomas Merton. A large portion of the works they published had a political bend, advocating for peace through thoughtful stanzas and engaging images. They focused on connecting readers to people like Nhất Hạnh and ideas of peace and justice.

The books created by Unicorn were inspired by “the poem as the individual,” weaving art and poetry together into works that were sometimes outsourced to a print shop, but mostly

printed on one of Unicorn's own printing presses, including custom designs and illustrations. The paper and type used was always carefully selected specifically for that work, often with various colorful inks and thoughtful placements of stanzas. The press printed a specific number of each edition because they had to set each page of type by hand, one by one.

When I learned about printing by hand for the first time, I was captivated by its quiet intentionality. To set type, printers arrange small metal blocks with a raised letter on one end in a composing block, a sort of handheld metal box. Words are set backwards to print correctly on paper, and smooth metal spaces sit between, cementing their place in the work. Printing even just one poem can take months, because its format and design can change with every session.

I'm comforted by the idea that the words of the poem can remain unchanged while the way it's presented is ever-shifting. I find comfort in the malleability of form, that a work being done with the author does not mean it is complete. At the press, everyone was involved in the process of creating the poem—designers were editors, editors set type for certain poems, binders communicated with authors and bookstores about projects and orders.

I haven't seen many photos of Unicorn Press, but of the ones I have seen, one in particular catches my eye. In it, a Unicorn employee leans against a shelf of type, grinning in an apron. I like to imagine what it would feel like to be a part of the creation of a poem as its publisher, the unsung other half of a wholly artistic process.

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For as long as I can remember, Glenwood Community Bookshop had a cabinet dedicated to Al's binding supplies, despite having left Unicorn Press years ago. Its shelves were full of thick needles, the special glue he ordered from Japan, davie boards covered in cloth for

hardcovers (though in a bind he used cardboard), a wooden book press, and waxed twine and floss for stitching pages together.

Although he no longer had a printing press, he still loved to bind, and especially loved to teach others. Although my sister and I were hired to work at the bookshop, not as binders, he still taught us how to create signatures and to crisply fold them in half with a weighted folding bone. He showed us how to use an awl to punch holes in the crease of the fold for each signature, and guided us through the hypnotic weave of twine through the pages, each stitch pulling them closer together.

We used matted brushes and thick glue to cover the books, aligning them in the small wooden book press that we would tighten with thick handles.

In the fall of 2019, as a junior in high school, my friend Bella and I revived our high school's literary magazine, planning to bind it with the whole club at the end of the school year. When our classes went digital and it was too risky to gather a large group in the home of an immunocompromised person, our plans quickly shifted, and I found myself attending Zoom classes from the bookshop, sitting in front of the printer and impatiently waiting to collate the 50-page book. In the evenings, Bella and I would sit in handmade cloth masks six feet apart, binding together signatures and gluing covers made of cardboard and denim we'd cut from thrifted jeans.

During the pandemic, binding became an excuse to spend more time with Al, especially when his visits from friends had ground to a halt and I worried that he wasn't eating or seeing friends often. I found comfort in the monotony of binding, the ease of repeating movements I trusted my body to do without deep thought. I was excited to participate in the process, to stitch myself into a lineage of binders and artists.

Al supplied us with paper, his favorite waxed twine, and binding tools from his cabinet. He was delighted that we were interested in the craft, and was always willing to have people in the bookshop. In his eyes, there was always abundance. There was always room for generosity and kindness, especially when it came to enabling creativity.

Psalter would often get tasked with binding the random assortment of old Unicorn books that Al would come across in storage. Her hands, used to crochet and decades younger than many of the books she bound, stitched together history. While she worked, Al would sometimes sit and read “Anne of Green Gables” aloud, bookmarking the tattered copy with a rubber band. Other times, she’d read to him as he packaged online book orders, keeping each other company in an otherwise quiet shop.

Binding, a solitary act, became a source of community.

Community was at the heart of everything Al did — creating it, maintaining it, advocating for it — and Unicorn was no exception. Whenever Al was apart from his team of binders, he wrote them long, conversational letters about everything from press business to the books he was reading, and hoped to hear the same from them. He continued this practice to members of his community all throughout his life, taking shape as daily emails to friends, handwritten letters mailed to my dorm in brightly-colored envelopes, or lunches that lasted hours with whoever walked through the bookshop’s door that day.

Al had a desire to hear and be heard, and I often consider the press and binding as an extension of that desire.

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In November of 1969, Ken pulled his financial backing from Unicorn Press, leaving the remaining Unicorns, especially Al and Teo, to scramble. Al and Teo bought the press from him

for \$22,800, which was raised in six weeks, and set the press on a path of fighting to stay open, reliant on fundraising and grants.

After several years running the press as it was in Santa Barbara, pulling on every resource they could, Al and Teo were ready to leave. In 1973, they began seeking out universities to host the press, a move that would not only provide them with a fresh start but academic infrastructure to support the press's mission for a low cost. They visited various, but were welcomed with open arms by community members in Greensboro, North Carolina. They planned to move the press to a room in UNCG's library, where they would continue publishing books and Al would teach binding to students.

According to Al's autobiography, just as they were packing and preparing for the move, the university learned of their involvement in the Peace Movement in Santa Barbara and became convinced the two were communists. They pulled out of the contract, leaving Al and Teo to pick up the pieces.

Al and Teo were still eager to leave California, and people in Greensboro were eager to get them to the area. They found a community in Greensboro, and the Friends of Unicorn Press was established to help Unicorn move and thrive outside of the university. They steadily moved their heavy printing presses and type cases across the country, finally landing in the Fisher Park neighborhood where they rooted themselves in the local literary and social justice scenes.

The press became a non-profit under the name The Unicorn Foundation to Advance Modern Poetry and their team included three apprentices from nearby colleges, continuing Al's lifelong work with young people. To connect more with their new community, they hosted "At Home With Unicorn Press," where people could visit the press and learn how to bind.

They published more books, including Teo's novels, another collection by Thích Nhất Hạnh, and poetry by authors like Federico García Lorca, Robert Bly, Kenneth Rexroth, and Michael Hogan. They continued their poetry postcard series, which they'd begun in Santa Barbara as a way to bring art and poetry together more clearly.

Still, this was a tense time for Al and Teo. Their lives revolved around the press and its financial struggles and they often feuded, sometimes even in letters angrily passed back and forth across the office. They often disagreed on the best ways to navigate press duties and mourned having their own time to write. These letters reveal a version of Al that feels unfamiliar to me, and I often found myself getting nervous to read them. I couldn't find my friend, the person I had known, within these pages of tension and stress.

By the time I knew him, Al had mellowed into someone who, as he liked to say, saw the connection in everything. Spirituality, particularly his relationship to Christianity, was always a guiding light for him, but he began heavily relying on his relationship with God to inform the way he made decisions and interacted with the world in the latter half of his life. Many of his beliefs about social justice and the world were rooted in teachings from activists who were Catholic and Christian, and he was an active student of the Bible and regular churchgoer.

In 1985, Teo was diagnosed with lung cancer. Al spent the next four years caring for her and the press at the same time, a period that he described in his autobiography as the hardest years of his life. After she died, he had a vision that showed him how everything in the world, the pain and the joy, were all connected. This was a turning point for his outlook on life, he often told me: when he realized that everything was connected, he was no longer as quick to anger or tension.

I think Al had been living his life in this connection for years before his realization. When I look at his life, I see the interconnections, trace the way that narratives blend and webs form. Community is woven throughout each stage of experiences, forming a tissue between typed pages and handwritten letters. When I look at the life he lived, the tapestry is closely knotted.

*

Teo, who became bed-ridden and blind, continued to create up until her death. She would dictate stories from her childhood to Al, who would write them down and read them back to her for her to make verbal edits. The stories were never published and Teo died in 1989 at 82 years old.

It's hard to not think of Al, of his autobiography, when I think of Teo's death. I can't help but see parallels between the two artists who were so desperate to create that they continued to do it in sickness. Artists who realized they may not be able to tell their stories to others for much longer and who turned to the written word, their reliable friend, to preserve them.

By the end of her life, Al recorded in his autobiography, Teo had written 11 volumes of fiction, 5 books of poetry, and 24 volumes of translation. By the end of his, he had completed 43 books since meeting her.

Al deeply mourned Teo for five years after her death, in a period where he wrote that, "I didn't feel much like working, didn't feel much like anything." I believe it's around this time that the press was downsized, though this part of its history is still hazy to me. I know that Al slowly began to get back on his feet with the help of his friends, and began working odd jobs as a security guard, a Santa Claus, and in academia.

Following his period of mourning Teo, Al married again, this time to Liz Brown, who became a Unitarian minister. Together with Liz's daughter, they moved to various parts of the country, including Texas, California, and Virginia.

By 2003, Al had returned to Greensboro to stay, weary of moving. He began teaching bookmaking at UNCG and opened the bookshop's first location on the corner of Glenwood Avenue and Grove Street. He'd cemented himself within the Greensboro community, and many of the people he met during this time were his friends for the rest of his life, friends that I would wave to when they stopped by with lunch or to play a game of chess. It was one of Al's strengths, finding and cultivating community. He always seemed to know someone in a room, and if he didn't, he made a new friend.

In 2007, Al taught several students getting their MFA in poetry at UNC Greensboro how to sew books in a spare room he was renting from a friend. Among them was Andrew Saulters, who is now a professor at UNC Greensboro and the publisher of Unicorn Press. Before the students began sewing, Al asked them to pick up a book in the room that was interestingly made. The book Andrew initially picked up was what he now calls upholstered, a book that was perhaps beautiful, but not substantial, he told me in retrospect. Later, he would change his answer to *5 Detroit's* by Philip Levine, a Unicorn Press book. He'd begun looking at books with more intention toward their design, the details of their covers and the spacing of their margins and the type used to convey the author's message.

It wasn't until four years later that Andrew began officially working with Al at Unicorn Press and working toward taking over ownership. The way Andrew began working for Unicorn was as unconventional as the press itself. In 2011, Al asked him if he knew anybody who could take over his job, and, after a few days, Andrew offered himself up. He said that Al, then 75, had

become concerned with legacy around that time, possibly because of a health scare, and began more seriously seeking out someone to take over the press and the bookstore.

Andrew collaborated with AI for five years before taking it over in 2016, on the press's 50th anniversary.

Today, Andrew has a graying beard and long, brown hair he usually keeps up in a bun. He wears glasses and button down shirts and thinks deeply about the questions you ask, as if determined to answer you as best as he can. He often gets around by bike and almost always has something he can bind in a brown leather satchel. If not, he has something to read. He's a professor at UNCG and teaches students how to design books of their own. In many ways, it feels like his life reflects the press, reflects AI's own life.

The way Andrew describes publishing feels as if he is directly collaborating with the writing itself, not the author. He honors the contents of the book through the way it is designed, and to him, the publisher's creative freedom lives in how a book looks: the cover design, the spacing of lines, the margins that cradle the text. He understands the writing, not as its author, but as its publisher, and his creative autonomy comes from teasing out the writing's ideas through its design.

Both Andrew and AI appreciated the autonomy of publishing, and when Andrew first began at Unicorn, AI let him spend ten months designing and binding his first project, a collection of poetry by Mark Smith-Soto, to perfect his skills.

Since it began, the ethos of Unicorn has been *why isn't this already out there?*

It's the question Andrew still looks for when he reads manuscripts, and the simple reasoning given by Teo when she explained the practice of bringing translated works to American readers.

It's Al's advice to Andrew: publish works that wouldn't have a home somewhere else. Andrew has since folded this idea into the press's mission, using it to consider unconventional works that are doing something besides just being beautiful.

*

Al's vocation was working with the written word.

I have always believed that a vocation is holy, divine, and destined. Growing up in church, I fell in love with the word's weight when it was spoken in sermons, but I've come to realize it is, most simply, a job. I still like to consider Al's love of books, from writing to printing, to be fated. He revered the artistry of writing and publishing, and his unique spirituality intertwined with his creative mind until working with books became a calling, a ministry, a work of faith.

Throughout his life, no matter what stressors bookmaking caused, Al always returned to it. He always strove to create visual art out of words and to share poetry from fresh perspectives with readers. By the time I knew him, his days were sometimes spent crippled by arthritis, but he continued to print and bind the journals he wrote for enjoyment, ending with his autobiography in late 2021.

I often think about how much he loved to make books, how binding something he'd created often filled him with a sense of purpose during the final years of his life. I like to think of it as proof of his devotion to his vocation, a sign that it was somehow holy.

Somehow divine.

*

Artists often talk about how their art takes on a new life when they release it to the world. I like to think that this happens not just with readers, but also with printers.

Letterpress gives the poem on the page a new life, fills it with movement and color and depth that you can see and feel. With each line set by quick fingers, the printer becomes a new artist from the poet, one that is bringing their work into its physical form. It exists beyond the author, is cradled by ink-stained hands and pressed into handmade paper. When something that was once a seed of an idea in our minds becomes something physical, something shifts in the artist. The abstract becomes concrete. It becomes sharable.

I love to feel hand-set poems, particularly those where the indent is clear on the page. Involving my hands adds a tactile layer to the act of witnessing the work. I only recently learned that early printers strove to avoid this texture, that it was considered a sign of good bookmaking if the type blended seamlessly with a page. Now, people like me look for the indent, searching for evidence that someone else's hands have touched the same paper.

Physical details have been unexpectedly important to me as I've been studying Al's past, and it's rare that someone preserves their life so well that you can walk through their memories. Since his death, finding tangible traces of the person I knew in pictures of him and his wife or recognizing certain quirks of handwritten words, has woven me into his life in ways I did not expect. Seeing work he printed is similar—it is surviving evidence of an action, a cathedral of words, built out of passion.

I still vaguely remember the binding steps, but am missing some of the intricacies. I want to believe it's something that is impossible to forget, that it has seeped into my own creative vocation, but without the routine action, it feels impossible to remember the little things. I forget details easily, allow them to become muddled—it feels like I have perhaps tugged at memories too frequently, have covered them in my fingerprints and tainted the evidence. And yet, I continue to take memories out of their jars, intensely examining them and writing in circles until

I am left dizzy, wondering what is still preserved in amber and what has been touched too many times.

The books Al published have become my touchstones, bridges between past and present. I can hold my copy of *Journeyman*, a collection of poetry he wrote, and know that it once sat on a shelf that I organized in the bookshop. I flip to the copyright page of the Unicorn books I own and see that some of them were typeset by Alan Brilliant in Santa Barbara. I run my hand along the denim of my literary magazine and know that its existence is owed to the same mind that ran Unicorn Press.

I'm always looking for evidence that Al's work is still alive.

I scan the poetry section of every used bookstore I visit for the books Al published, often enlisting my friends to do the same. I have found Boris Pasternak in Washington, D.C.; Queneau in Providence, Rhode Island; and James Tate in New Haven, Connecticut. No matter how many times it's happened, I still feel a rush of excitement to see him in the world, my friend's work continuing a life beyond him.

When I find the books, I have to stop myself from gushing to the cashier that they were created by someone I knew. I satisfy myself by running my hands over the words, feeling the way they have indented the page, a stamp of proof.



Interlude: Filling Phantom Shelves

It's June 2022. I am home from my freshman year of college, coming full circle from the sticky summer days in high school that I spent in the bookshop. It is exactly the same as it was two months ago, but it feels empty. Each time I enter I am acutely aware that something is missing, and what is still there feels lifeless. I am helping sort through Al's belongings, some days with the company of Daniel and Lauren Goans, who took charge of his estate, other days by myself. When they're there, we listen to the CDs Al collected and work on separate tasks, coming together to marvel at a particular find from a rogue box or hidden crevice of a shelf.

It's therapeutic to be in the bookshop with Lauren and Daniel. Daniel is full of energy and Lauren's presence is gentle, but both approach preserving Al's legacy earnestly. Our loss is fresh but when we're here, it feels as if we are easing ourselves into recovering. Being surrounded by an extension of Al, one that is peaceful and not in pain, is like a balm for delicate grief. When they are there, the work feels like a final act of love, as if we are laying a bouquet of flowers on his grave.

When I am here alone, the silence is crushing.

It's wrong to let myself in with a key and it is unnatural for the futon to be empty. The quiet, which I am used to sharing with Al, has become selfish and cannibalistic. It claws at my ears, trying desperately to burrow somewhere deep within me. I wonder if I can be swallowed by something whose defining trait is nothingness. I wonder if there is anything for it to consume.

Sometimes, I feel empty too.

*

It's December 2022. The bookshelves are truly empty this time, aside from a few that are lined with books that Daniel and Lauren have left for Al's friends to peruse and take home. The

rest are packed away in a storage facility, along with the Goans' dream of turning them into a library resource for artists one day. The bookshop itself is fuller than I've seen in several years. Al's friends wander through the door as they have so many times before, saying one last goodbye to the space we loved.

With me are friends from college who have never met Al or the bookshop. I am desperate for them to know some part of him, to see it at least once, even if it is empty. I walk them through the space, much like Al did on my first day. I carefully point out each section, explaining each way that I once reorganized or interacted with it. I show them how the shelves still bear labels — fiction, history, women and gender studies, philosophy, art criticism — that I helped print and glue to the wood. I smile at familiar faces and chat with the people I recognize.

Scattered across one table are a collection of Al's trinkets, and I leave that night with a wooden chess piece from one of his boards over the years, a glue brush, and a mass market copy of Jane Austen's *Emma*. I take a photo of the door, which has a torn piece of printer paper taped to it that reads "AL is out back" before closing it behind me for the last time.

*

It's October 2023. The bookstore, once full of color in my mind, has faded, packed in boxes and painted over with the white walls of what is now a thrift store. They are dotted with purple accents, a lovely touch that matches shelves displaying shoes and purses. The yellowing carpet has been replaced by light linoleum wood flooring, and racks of clothing have replaced the towering shelves of books. The landlords fixed the leaking ceiling tiles for the new tenants. Light pours into the space through the full wall of barred windows.

I wander slowly through the shop, brushing my fingertips along sweater sleeves and phantom shelves. The space has grown without the bookshelves lining the periphery and creating an aisle down the middle, but somehow it feels smaller, tighter, more constrained.

It's less the space and more my own body. I am overly aware of how tense I feel as I wander through the once-familiar space. My breath is tight and my whole body feels stiff as I frantically quiz the bounds of my own memory in an attempt to reconstruct what I once knew.

“What shelf was here, and what was it labeled?”

“Was there artwork hanging on this wall? Was it a poem or a photograph? Of what?”

“The cabinet full of Marxist theory would have been here — right?”

The woman working today sits in the corner, scrolling on her phone, unaffected by what, to me, feels like a monumental loss. I am painfully aware that I have already lost details that I can't even remember to quiz myself on, but also that she is painfully unaware that any of those details ever existed.

The thrift store is not devoid of Al's touch. Perpendicular to the back wall is the same wrapping table we scarred with box cutters and made sticky with tape residue from wrapping Amazon orders. Tucked in the back corner is one of his wooden chairs, light wood with a curved back that rounds into armrests. Someone else's tote bag sits in it, and it is missing one of his bright red cushions. I wonder if the back door still has the screen we installed so that air could flow through the space but not let Nuk escape, though I do not step outside to check.

Outside, the bench I built for Al to sit on among his small, potted garden has been taken by a neighboring unit. A small piece of silver wire is strung from a nail in the brick wall just outside the door, and I distantly recall Al explaining to me that he wanted a vined plant to grow along a wire and drape over the entrance to the bookshop. It got close, as far as I can remember

from faulty memory. The vine is gone, as is most of the wire, aside from this small piece, flashing in the sun.

*

A year later, even the phantom shelves and shimmering wire are gone, replaced by office cubicles. It truly feels empty now, nearly every trace of Al and the bookshop erased from the space.

Grove Street has moved on and in many ways, so have I.

In many ways, I have not.

On Archival Work

Last summer, I lived out of a blue hiking backpack.

It was first packed for a study abroad in Ireland, bursting with a yellow rain jacket, sweaters, and hiking boots. A week after I returned from Galway, I re-stuffed my bag, this time with light skirts and stacks of library books for my first long-term solo trip to Providence, Rhode Island, where over 300 boxes documenting Al's life were carefully stowed away in Brown University's archive.

I haven't been able to stop writing about Al since he died. Most of my essays for class have revolved around him, especially when my grief was fresh and my curiosity about his life was insatiable.

One essay was based around a smattering of brightly colored envelopes stuffed with letters on lined paper, the start of my own personal archive. Al wrote to me daily during my first year of college, keeping a stack of paper on a clipboard next to his futon and carefully denoting the date and time each time he picked up a pen. His handwriting on the envelope varied by day, and the pages of writing within vary in strength. Some letters were written during bouts of arthritis, letters shivering into piles of words that snowball into sentences. Others were written with such enthusiasm that the words blend together, as if he cannot express his ideas quickly enough. Some are calculated and distinctly legible, when he is pensive and carefully plotting each stroke on blue, lined pages.

In each letter, he'd tell me about the visitors he had that day or carefully record interesting vocabulary he encountered in the Jane Austen novels he was rereading at the time, and spent pages describing political movements he was involved in or was reading about.

Revisiting these letters, which were keys to his life when I was not able to be present, were my first informal experience with archival work. They traveled with me everywhere, from Carrboro coffee shops to a porch swing in Hendersonville to my family's home in Greensboro to the grass beneath oak trees on UNC's campus. They became a way to invite Al into my life as he invited me into his, putting us in conversation in a way that I hadn't had since he died. I became acutely aware that there were gaps in my understanding of his life. Going to Providence felt like one of the only ways to fill them in, and I leapt at the opportunity to travel there, even if it meant barely seeing my family for nearly two months and containing myself in an unfamiliar state hours away.

My existence in Providence was quiet and contemplative, and I spent more time with Al's words than I did with any physical people. I lived in a studio within walking distance of the archives, charting a quick and sure path each morning, afternoon, and evening between my quiet rented apartment and the quiet of the library.

I brought photos of Al and my family tucked in the back of a notebook, and laid them out on the side table to look at as I got ready each day.

On weekends or holidays, I explored what I could get to on foot — every bookstore within a two-mile radius, a café in an old house, the art museum at the Rhode Island School of Design, a free neighborhood concert hosting a local jazz band. I now like to consider my time there a study on what Al called *aloneness*, a pursuit and delight in intentionally doing things alone, rather than doing them with others.

“Often, like now, I'd rather be alone,” he once wrote to me in a brightly-colored envelope sent to my college dorm. “This is a new ‘old age’ feeling. . . . Relief when someone says they’re NOT coming.”

At the time, I could not fathom that he truly felt content in his aloneness, sure that his decreased appetite and health was a sign he was depressed and lonely. I didn't dislike being alone, but I couldn't imagine him pursuing it as a first choice. I'm not sure that I'd sought to do anything by myself intentionally in years, if at all. Providence brought my socializing to a grinding halt—some days, I didn't interact with another person.

Most days, I barely spoke.

*

Tucked in a closet in my parents' house is a plastic yellow box with a metal clasp that falls open when you unlatch it. It's full of envelopes that vary in size, stuffed with nearly every birthday card I have ever received and stacks of letters from friends bound together with twine. It was given to me by Al early into our friendship - I'd been helping him store materials for his archive, and he wanted me to begin keeping my own.

"Save everything," he told me. "Someone may want it one day."

It's one of the instances where I didn't understand his belief in me. To assume that someone would want to parse through my notebooks and journals one day felt, and still feels, absurd. But I took everything Al told me seriously, and I began to fill the yellow box, tentatively at first, eventually overflowing to other storage. I've saved away an entire world of words, preserving over a decade of drafting and plotting and melodramatic journaling.

I often have to remind myself that this is archival work.

The word *archive* has a strictness to it, conjuring images of wood-paneled libraries and brittle book pages. But to Al, everything was archival, and no archival thing was too precious to be used. He often sold books that had been gifted to him and constantly gifted books he could have sold. Priceless original copies of Unicorn Press chapbooks collected cobwebs on a bottom

shelf of the poetry section, and rare edition hardcovers sat on shelves next to mass market paperbacks. The line between personal library and bookstore was blurred—almost every book in the shop was one he thought worthy of reading, and he would often read the books he purchased to sell before they were priced and shelved.

Al's sense of possession was delightfully skewed—he often sold books that had been gifted to him and constantly gifted books he could have sold. They were at once everything he needed and easily dispensable. When I was 17, I annotated his favorite book, *The Queen's Gambit* by Walter Tevis, for his 85th birthday, and a few days later, I found it shelved in Fiction. I now can't remember if it had a slip of paper with a price stuck to the cover (if it did, it's gone now), but I remember the feeling of bewildered amusement seeing it among the books Al sold.

On a recent visit to Greensboro, I talked with Tad Skotnicki, a friend of Al's who teaches sociology at UNCG, about Al's detachment from possessions. We sat in the sunroom of his house, which is full of books and records on shelves and in cartons on the floor, where we were joined by Nuk, who was taken into Tad's care when Al died. Al had a willingness to pare down his life to its barest bones, Tad said, and I know exactly what he means: sleeping on a futon at the bookshop, living off social security money, wearing hand-me-downs and bathing in the bookshop's sink with baby powder.

It's clear that Al held on to things—the hundreds of cartons of carefully-packed boxes at Brown University are evidence of this desire to document and preserve. Still, he preserved them with the knowledge he would eventually give them away, and never seemed to mind sharing things that most people would consider precious.

*

In the archives, I quickly learned how to let the words I read wash over me. There was too much to be done, too much to process, and Al's intense, careful preservation felt overwhelming to digest and filter. Some days, I blindly took photos of what I thought might be important to revisit, filling my Google Drive with hundreds of scanned pages of correspondences and drafts of essays or novels I have only skimmed.

On my first day in the archive, when my excitement was fresh, I could not help but linger on the collection of a dozen sketchbooks that documented Al's early twenties in New York City between 1957 and 1959. Home to sketches of strangers and friends, their spiral spines were rusting, the pages were brittle, and bleeding colors stretched artwork from one page to three. On their covers, he pasted photos of other artists and their artwork, or drew with pencil or oils on the cover. My favorite cover is light pink, with a postcard of Van Gogh's *Portrait of Joseph Roulin* glued in the center and 1957 written in pen in the top right corner.

The pen lines of Al's sketchbooks preserve memories I will never fully understand, but still draw me to the people and places from his youth in a few quick quick strokes. Many of his drawings are attentive, rushed portraits of strangers he has selected on the street for how the pattern of their overcoat hangs, the roundness of their beer bellies, the lines on their faces, or how they hunch over a book or newspaper. They are a testament to Al's sharp eye, made of quick, imprecise lines that are mostly drawn in pen or pencil, though the occasional colored page brightens the books. The faces often appear slightly distorted, as if being reminded by the artist that they only exist on the page. They are familiar to me, evidence of a love of eccentricity that Al always nurtured and a comforting glimpse of the people he found interesting enough to draw.

Each sketchbook only lasts Al a few months at a time, quickly filled with doodles and observations. I imagine that he carried it with him everywhere, under his arm or thrown in a bag

with a tattered paperback, observing the world through his pen. His observations are sharp, and remind me of the stream-of-consciousness journals he published decades later that told detailed stories about his everyday life in Greensboro.

Littered throughout the sketchbooks are drawings by and of different friends, like Earthworks artist Robert Smithson. Some drawings have notes from Al that they were drawn by Dick Fass, who lived with Al and Kay Jordan at 1265 Park Avenue in 1957. Robert and Dick worked with Al on many of his creative projects, including *PAN*, and it feels fitting that they are present here, too. Their names disappeared from Al's carefully-preserved archives by the 1960s, but the sketchbooks are tangible proof of their friendship, a sign that they had once existed and created art in harmony.

*

I am often acutely aware that I will forget moments as they are happening. I try to stave off forgetfulness by diligently recording moments, either in journals or the notes app of my phone. I quiz myself on details of scenes or conversations, rewinding moments on a loop to ensure I won't forget them. In Providence, I tried to rewind memories of moments that I hadn't experienced myself and always came up short.

As I spent more time in Al's archive, it felt as if my knowledge of him shrunk instead of expanding. I was left with questions I wanted to ask him, and a certain emptiness when I remembered I couldn't. I tried to diligently catalogue my findings in my notebooks after each session in the archives, but always bumped against the limits of the archival work I clung to, resenting how physical reminders were so rigidly stuck in the past.

I began taking long, meandering walks through the neighborhood surrounding Brown, bossa nova in my headphones and a notebook perpetually in hand. I was determined to preserve Providence with my pen, to not let a detail slip past.

One weekend, I pulled myself out of the archives to navigate the grid of New York City streets. I was tired of paper, film, and cardboard boxes, and was desperate to understand Al outside of the archives and encounter things he may have seen, too. I loved studying his life at Brown, but I had grown disconnected from the emotion behind it. I wanted to situate myself in the world connected to these sheets of paper and pictures, to see what he might have seen. In Providence, I acutely felt the loss of the bookshop's familiarity, of knowing where I stood.

When I got to the city, I walked to the Museum of Modern Art, fresh off the train because I knew from stories that he would go there frequently with his Columbia student discount. I began wandering aimlessly through its galleries, wishing for a profound feeling of clarity to leap from the canvases. In the corner of one room, *Portrait of Joseph Roulin* by Vincent Van Gogh caught my eye. One of a series of six portraits of Van Gogh's friend, the postman, this particular version is set against a moss-colored background with swirling white, orange and pink floral designs. Roulin gazes at his audience with bright green eyes, pleasantly indifferent. Plump, rosy cheeks sitting above a dark plum beard swirling with strokes of cerulean, viridian, violet, and gold. I find myself gazing at his lips, which are somehow full and soft, despite Van Gogh's wispy brush strokes.

I'd seen Roulin before in photos online and on the cover of Al's sketchbook, but in person I sought solace in the details—the texture of brushstrokes of light colors and overlay of crisp lines that created the connective tissue of the work. To see the texture of Van Gogh's brushstrokes felt like confirmation of reality, of the painting's longevity. In order to feel as Al

felt, I longed to be present and surrounded. I wanted to press my nose to the frame and trace the paint with my fingertips. I wanted to be close.

This portrait of Roulin has not changed in over a century, no matter how drastically his audience does. He will always be a swirling paint and canvas fragment of a human whose cheeks were once warm to the touch and whose beard was once frizzy and thick. He quietly watches from his golden frame as Al and I pause, 65 years apart, to meet his steady gaze. Roulin's eyes still find me from a glossy postcard taped to the cover of my journal — unchanging, soft, full.

*

Back in the archives, I began to notice a weight settling in my stomach as I paged through letters and documents representing who Al had been. It became hard to hold so many versions of him at once — the person I knew, the person I heard stories about, and the person I was meeting. I was, and still am, afraid to lose sight of the friend I loved.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Joan Didion writes of her husband, over a year after his death: “My sense of John himself, John alive, will become more remote, even ‘mudgy,’ softened, transmuted into whatever best serves my life without him.” Although we had a very different relationship, my sense of Al has become mudgy, too—I worry that I have tugged at my memories too frequently, covering them with my fingerprints and clouding the pictures beneath. Still, I continue to take them out and examine them intensely, writing and reading in circles around them until I wonder what is still preserved in amber and what has been handled too many times.

*

A fragment of Al's bookstore now resides down a country road just outside of Charlottesville, cared for by Daniel and Lauren Goans. Daniel and Lauren were perhaps Al's

dearest friends — they met in 2009 and lived together for several years, during the early parts of the Goan's marriage. Their friendship continued to grow even when they moved to Charlottesville, carefully documented in the lengthy emails they exchanged daily. When Al's health rapidly declined and him staying in the bookshop became a wistful idea, they put their lives on hold for months to be by his side at hospitals and in hospice, advocating for his care and comfort in a system that does not prioritize it.

When he died, they inherited his bookshop, and Al's community helped them organize and deconstruct the place we loved so deeply.

Lauren and Daniel are musicians, creating quiet folk music under the name Lowland Hum. Their lives feel dedicated to art, both in the music they create and the way they delight in the beauty of nature and creativity of others. In the log cabin they call home, nearly every spare surface is covered by something interesting— books, records, butterfly wings, a small mammal's sun-bleached skull. I think Al saw himself in their passion for not just making art, but living creatively and simply.

An old barn sits a few yards from their house, which they turned into a studio for recording and producing their own albums and the work of others. Inside the barn is a small loft accessible by a ladder with a bed tucked into the corner for visitors. In the studio itself, tall wooden shelves line the walls, filled with books from the bookshop. The books pad the studio's walls for a better sound, Daniel explained, by refracting echoes of singers and instruments into hundreds of little sounds to dampen their harshness.

I took the winding roads to their house one fall weekend, relishing in how the air bit at my car windows and the passing trees blurred into warm reds and oranges. Like Providence, I spent my days quietly, sprawled with notebooks and a laptop on the studio's oriental carpet and

watching the sunlight move through the window, trekking to the main house in the evenings to cook and shower.

In the studio, the books I had once known so well didn't just refract sound – they also splintered into hundreds of echoes of memory. In the blur of colorful spines, familiar colors and titles leap from the shelves, catching me in fragments of moments so quick and miniscule I could barely place them before they flitted away.

There was *Gulliver's Travels*, bound in bright red cloth and decorated with a painted yellow castle and man with a black hat and cane, that became a staple of the bookshop, a sentry keeping watch over the fiction section.

A history book written by Tom Brokaw had a red and blue striped spine with Brokaw's name spelled in gold lettering. It used to reside on the bottom shelf closest to the bookshop's front door, right where Nuk, the bookshop's cat, would stretch out in sunbeams on nice days.

On a top shelf, a thick collection of Ted Hughes poems gazed down at me. My fingertips still remember how it felt to jut up against its spine in the poetry section, usually inhabited by small, stabled paperbacks.

Sometimes, I pulled books I remembered from the studio's shelves, and when I opened the familiar thick, cream-colored *History of Modern Art*, I found a price written in my own handwriting.

Suddenly, I was back in my favorite summer of high school, when I would walk a mile from my house to the bookshop to work. That summer, I spent long days cleaning and repricing the heavy art books in sticky heat, accompanied by the hum of a box fan. I'd only take breaks around lunchtime, when I would share a frozen pizza with Al and sip on a lukewarm Dr. Pepper that tasted like the styrofoam cup he poured it in. He told me stories of growing up in Camden,

New Jersey or running around the streets of New York, only pausing to take miniscule bites of his pizza or to tilt his head back in rich laughter. Our lunches would stretch into hours, my work set aside for the more important lessons at hand.

Memories melt from these shelves, pouring out of covers I have never opened but that still feel like familiar faces. On my first night in Charlottesville, I ate dinner with the Goans and their two young sons. After they were put to bed, I eagerly showed Daniel and Lauren pictures I took in the archives, and they passed my phone back and forth with comforting reverence. We spent several hours in their living room telling stories about Al, oscillating between laughter and beats of silence. The stories were about his wisdom and love, but they also circled his imperfections – moments of anger and spite and frustration that we thought of with a strange sort of fondness.

“He was so human,” Daniel said, a simple truth that has, at times, felt difficult for me to remember.

I have met so many versions of Al throughout my months of researching and writing about him, all along desperately trying to unravel them as separate beings. It’s hard to remember that the people you admire are human, that every phase of someone’s life can be true, albeit not all at once. The person I knew at the bookshop was changed from who he was in New York or in Santa Barbara, but they were still him.

As I’ve interacted with his archive, my memories of Al and his bookshop have been reupholstered by new details and additions to his story. For the longest time, I’d been afraid of losing the version of Al that I *knew* in my search for information about his life. I had been straining to preserve a version of him that was familiar, but I did not consider that it could be incomplete.

In the warm lamplight of the Goan's living room, our stories became a rapid current, each leading into the other with eager ease. There is so much to remember, so much to discuss, so many echoes of a life lived and shared with others, and it felt like we were desperate to hear and be heard.

This, too, is archival work.

*

In Brown's library, I exchanged letters that made my head swim to spend a few hours with a box full of film strips in bright envelopes and developed, sepia-toned pictures; two photo books; and small collections of slides.

I was given white cloth gloves that made my hands sweat and a portable lightboard, where I would hungrily splay batches of slides from a box labeled "Berkshires," referencing the Massachusetts mountains where Al and Teo would retreat in summers and occasionally throughout the year. Glowing pink peonies and white roses set against greenery sprouted into view and in the light, a cat named George gazed indifferently away from the camera. A church's steeple set against blue skies glowed white and the harsh sides of a marble quarry near their summer home scratched at the edges of the frame. Al and Teo, dressed in summer clothes, grinned proudly in their yard.

In some developed photos, Unicorn Press workers shared a meal outside together or proudly displayed type cases to the camera, grinning. In some photos, Al was shown in the middle of printing, head bent over the press. In others, he listened to music on a record player, or one of his cats lounged on top of press paperwork in the Santa Barbara office.

I had to fight the urge to tuck these pictures into my pocket. I wanted to take them home and put them in an album of my own, to run my fingers over the pen ink on their backs and to

hang them on my wall. Instead, I carefully scanned each photo, angling my phone to block the archive's overhead lights. When I look through them later, I still find traces of myself in glistening reflections, coating them in a layer of disconnect.

*

After visiting MoMa, I met my aunt, who lives in Hoboken, to wander the city's confusing streets with a reliable guide. We eventually ended up at the Village Vanguard, a famous jazz bar in a Greenwich Village basement whose dark green walls are covered with black and white framed photographs of jazz legends.

Al often told me stories about seeing Thelonious Monk and Ella Fitzgerald perform in crowded New York bars. The stories went that he was too young and poor to drink, so he nursed a soda or water on a barstool, content to just be in the room for a show. I was eager to go to a show of my own, and it was my only request for the trip. As we settled into our seats, I tried to picture Al at one of the nearby tables, waiting for the Terrell Stafford Quintet to begin their performance.

When he lived in New York between 1958 and 1959, Al began experimenting with drawings that were abstract and modern, and his sketchbooks from the time are filled with curling lines done with colored pencil. One page, perhaps my favorite, was split in half by hasty colored pencil strokes in yellow and blue, with a burst of lines and shapes in red pencil in the middle. On top, he scribbled a poem in capital letters with a pencil — “Jazz is not an essence but an enjoyment / ‘the people’s opera’ / the poet’s winds / the prophet’s ‘what I was saying all along.’”

In the Vanguard, the quintet's performance hit me all at once with vibrant colors scribbled in colored pencil across my mind. The crowd could not help but praise their sound with

uncontrollable hums, tapping feet, and clapping hands that were immediately swallowed by the glow of the drum beat. The trumpet's violet wail and bass's merigold strum were like a breeze, their players prophesying and calling us to enjoy.

At the time, I wondered if Al had ever been there, if this space had sparked his impassioned poem of praise and love. Now, I've begun to realize that it doesn't matter where the poem was written, or if I'd been in the same physical space. We had been in the same mental space, overcome by a need to praise someone else's creation with a creation of our own. Finding commonality through a shared love of art was closer than we'd ever be, decades apart in a crowded jazz bar in a restless city. My quest for connection through space was less important than the feeling they carried, breathing life and experiences into archived work that represented a life that had ended.

*

During one of my fits of organization while working at the bookshop, I unearthed a box with soft cardboard covered by brittle tape and a thin coating of dust. I hoped to rehome its contents with Al's blessing, and dragged the dense, oddly-shaped box to his futon so he could sort through its contents. We opened it to find Unicorn backstock, careful binding directly contrasting with the deteriorating storage. My plans for a day of intense organization vanished at the sight of the folios and broadsides, and I eagerly dove into the distraction, watching intently as Al held up finely-printed poems on handmade paper, some grouped together in folios, or collections of broadsides, of multiple poets.

This is the first time I saw Unicorn's folio of Canadian poetry from 1969, with "What was in the Garden" by Margaret Atwood set in blue ink, surrounded by a harsh, black woodblock print of a garden and picket fence being tended to by two figures. This poem is the basis of one

of my favorite of Al's stories, of how Atwood, then still an emerging poet, was so delighted with the publication of the poem that she sent him a letter of gratitude, decorated with a woodblock print she handmade. He eventually donated it to some archival collection, admitting with a glinting smile that it was because he knew he wouldn't take good care of it, and wrote to tell her as such. He was surprised, maybe even delighted, to get a furious letter in response, having never considered that he would anger someone by giving one of their gifts away. It was the dichotomy of Al's perspective on preservation: he recognized that things were special enough to care for, but didn't always handle them with that care himself.

I was sent home with various broadsides that day, surprised at his nonchalance parting with pieces that had only grown in sentimental and monetary value over the years. In nearly every dorm room and apartment that I have lived in, I hang them on my walls with tape. When I inevitably move out at the end of the school year, I carefully fold over the corners of the delicate, handmade paper. Every time, I think about framing them, but my only act of preservation is carefully stacking the tape where it's already been, participating in my own archival contradiction.

*

In the archives, one sketch in particular invited me to linger longer than the others. From the style of it, I was sure it was Al's, although it is unsigned. I like to imagine it was a drawing of Kay reading in their apartment, though it is unaddressed. The drawn woman is all lines — her shirt is checkered and strands of hair come loose, jumbling with the pattern. The tilt of her chin shows she's looking downward, as if she's reading something so intently that she doesn't realize she is being drawn, or just doesn't care. Her hands are crossed on the paper in her lap, her feet are splayed on the ground. Behind her, a doorway leads to a fragment of the blank page set

against a dark-scribbled wall. She appears to be in a chair without legs, floating aimlessly. On a table in the foreground, a spoon with a delicately outlined handle sits in a half-full cup.

I've never been here, have never seen her, but she is familiar.

Decades later, I was drawn by the same artist after hesitantly agreeing to sit for a portrait, despite my teenage discomfort with having my picture taken. I sat against the wall of history books during a shift one summer day in 2019, squirming in a new dress and pretending to read a book in my lap. It was silent aside from the hum of a box fan and the scratch of Al's pen. I immediately longed to escape the quiet and the scrutiny of the sketchpad.

I wonder if Al sensed my discomfort, because he held onto the portrait for a while before timidly giving it to my family in a manilla envelope. Enclosed is a thick page, home to a serious, stoic girl drawn with an arthritic hand. She is bent over a book, her hair falling in wobbly strings beside her a chin that has been drawn twice, the first crossed out and resembling a star along her jawline, replaced by another chin slightly above it. Her lips are a straight line, eyes downcast. When I look at her now, I remember her insecurity. She's dressed in a gingham dress, though the pattern has not made it into the portrait. A dot near the collar of her dress is the only sign of a gold locket she bought with her grandmother, worn to simply be something shiny to fidget with. Her knees are awkwardly pressed together, and she is floating on a page devoid of bookshelves or a chair, untethered to reality.

I hid this portrait of myself for years, ashamed of how evident my discomfort and isolation on the page was. It wasn't until Al died that I hung it on my wall, finally understanding the importance of being considered worthy of being preserved through art.

In Providence, once again feeling as if I were floating on a blank page, I saw myself in the sketch of Kay reading, in the way her hair fell into her face and in her pursed lips and quiet

contemplation. The same hand drew us both, situating me in a gallery charting Al's love of art and people, drawn in decades-old strokes of pen and pencil that leave a groove on the page.

*

I had heard stories of Al's life for years, but holding evidence of it at Brown is an entirely different experience — his formative years as a young writer and artist came to life in garish colors and imperfect faces and twisting lines drawn in thick oil pastels.

The archival work I'd been doing without realizing it coalesced in Providence, blending glimmering, retrospective stories an 86-year-old Al told of his younger years with a glimpse of the world as he saw it at 21: hopeful and uncritical and fresh.

When Al was alive, I often wished that he'd couple his stories with pictures and drawings like this, that I could piece together how he had become the person I knew while he was there. I wished I could have asked him questions. What would he have told me about Dick Fass and Kay Jordan and Bob Smithson? Would he have remembered the old man wearing a fedora and glasses who grinned when Al showed him his portrait, contrasted by his wife's unamused glance? Did he still remember the colors in the patterned coat of the woman he sketched sitting on a bench? Who is the person he doodled playing the guitar in a kitchen?

It's puzzling to feel your relationship with someone at once expanding and contracting in a single turn of a page. My exciting discoveries were frequently punctuated by the reminder that there was no one to ask for more details, followed by guilt that I hadn't asked sooner, when I did not know. Distance and closeness implode in this form of archival work, a swirling black hole of connection and aloneness.

While cleaning out the bookshop after Al's death, Daniel or Lauren discovered a huge, red cloth book detailing 19th and 20th century art history on the top of the shelf of art books.

“For Eliza, a great reference book,” was written in Al’s handwriting on a scrap piece of paper taped to its cover, and I took it home to flip through the chapters on Impressionism, searching for Al in its pages.

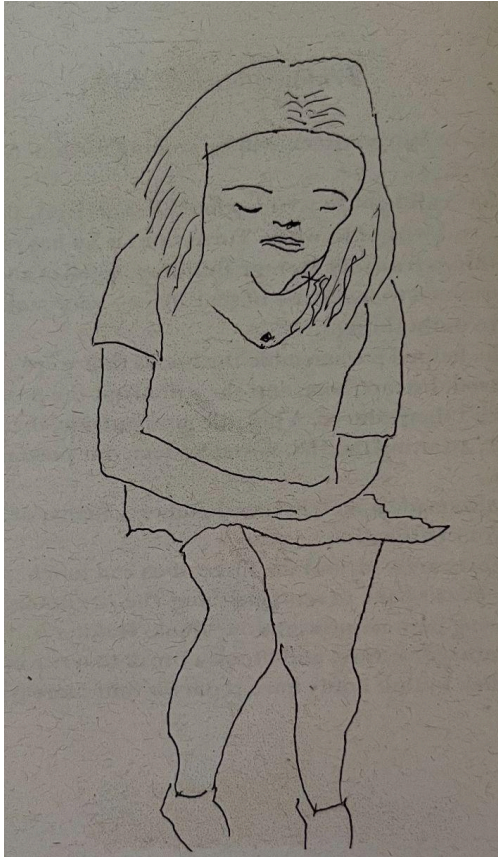
I have been, in some ways, looking for him in art ever since. I read the books he loved simply because he loved them. I make playlists that remind me of afternoons in the bookshop. I wander alone through museums so that I can linger at paintings, including the ones I think he would have liked. I am always searching for a certain feeling, one that I can tie to objects and stories that preserve his life in manila folders or on ink-stamped pages. When I open the yellow box at my parents’ house and look back through my own archive, I’m looking less to remember a moment but to remember a feeling. I’m looking for evidence of someone that I once was, for signs of who she would become.

I choose to believe that we live forever through art, whether as a creator or a receiver. That to preserve something is to let it live beyond you, giving it a life beyond yourself and connecting you to the world through objects and stories.

I choose to believe that anything is archival, and that all archives should be used and delighted in while we can.

I choose to believe that colorful melodies strummed in dark jazz bars provide an infinite heartbeat, that a living curiosity resides in soft green eyes that steal glances from a gold frame.

I choose to believe that Al and some 16-year-old version of myself are both alive in this portrait on my wall, our existences preserved and intertwined through wavy strands of hair and crossed-out lines that turn to stars.



Interlude: Picturing a Home

When I visit her home in my daydreams, the front door has just barely clicked shut and the floorboards still remember her footsteps. A cigarette smolders in an ashtray by a light blue couch and a window has been left cracked to let the air in. I like to imagine she's just left to go to a concert, red lipped and perfumed, but perhaps she is on a walk along the river that runs through the property, thinking of a poem. Maybe she is collecting flowers to freshen up the mason jar on the gingham-covered kitchen table and a pot is bubbling on the stove.

She could be anywhere, doing anything, but she is never there.

We've never existed in the same space, always separated by the gloss of a photograph and cavernous decades between lives ending and beginning.

*

I first met her, Teo Savory, nearly three decades after her death.

I uncovered traces of her through her possessions in the bookshop.

Al rarely talked about her, but her presence spilled from the shelves. They house her own books of poetry, bound in dark blue paper, and her novels, boasting elegant white and red hardcover book jackets. An American educated in Paris and London, she attended the Royal Conservatory of Music, and translated the works of poets like Guillevic, Jacques Prévert, and Raymond Queneau for American audiences through Unicorn Press. Her poetry and prose was scattered throughout several collections and publishers, from her first short story in the 1947 Cross Section collection to her debut novel in 1960, published by George Braziller Inc.

She is preserved in smaller objects, too. A blue and white clay jar on a shelf in Al's kitchenette bears her surname in light blue paint. She shares the name with an herb, and it feels

fitting for a woman who gardened fervently, filling entire journals in tight cursive with plans and documentation of each plant in the yard of their summer home in the Berkshires of Massachusetts.

I clean bowls of half-eaten food and coffee-ringed mugs from the table beside Al's futon, and he tells me that what is now a table was once an antique Chinese chair that had belonged to her, an only child who grew up in Hong Kong early in the 20th century, its delicate craftsmanship hidden by dust and crumbs.

She laughs in a gold-framed photograph in the poetry section, her head tilted back into a ray of sun, her hand on her chest. Al laughs beside her, lightly holding her forearm.

They were married for over three decades until Teo's death in 1989, but it was not always perfect. They were passionate, occasionally to extremes, love poems and angry notes scattered throughout their relationship like discarded bullet casings. Often, I only heard stories about her when Al did something at the bookshop that she would have considered sloppy or improper, laughing about her high standards for decorum.

When Al died, I realized how little of his life I'd known, and how little I had asked about the people and places that once filled it. I sought answers in the only places I could: books, letters, the stories of others, clinging to anything that tangibly proved he had lived, that it had been good.

I have met Teo endlessly, and she will never know I exist.

I've caught glimpses of her in envelopes addressed to unfamiliar names in neat cursive and have recognized her eccentric elegance in sepia-toned pictures taken in lavish fur coats. I'm fabricating my own idea of her voice. But my perception of her is translucent, built of paper and

ink and entirely reliant on photos and letters to fill in the gaps of my faulty, second hand knowledge.

I cannot picture what it would be like to meet her, but I like to imagine that for someone else, her touch is light and cool, and she shakes their hand with a surprising firmness. When she speaks, her voice is crisp and direct. I imagine just a few words from her mouth charm those around her, even if those words can just as easily be wielded against them. As I page through her journals and study her knowing, thin-lipped smiles in photos, I realize that she has somehow charmed me, too.

*

As Unicorn's editor, Teo was as synonymous with the press as Al. Press decisions largely fell upon the two of them, and they continued its maintenance over the course of twenty years and a cross-country move from California to North Carolina. Throughout their time at the press, young people comfortable with working for little money cycled through the staff, but Al and Teo remained constant, often at the expense of their own creativity and well-being.

As they edited and published the works of others, both lamented the inability to work on writing of their own.

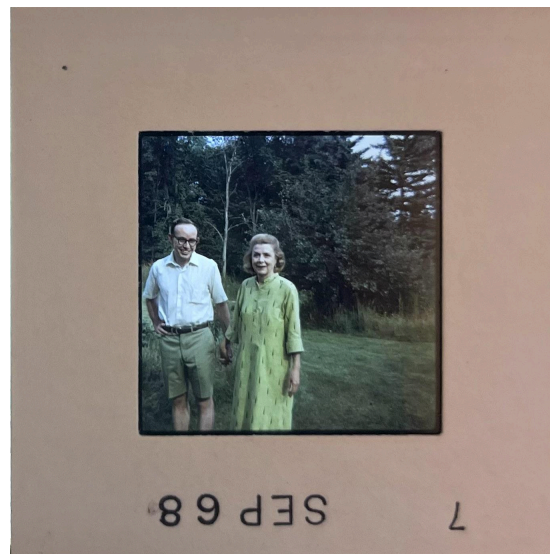
When they felt particularly hopeless or in need of a break, they would travel to the house Teo bought just outside of West Stockbridge, a rural mountain town in the Berkshires, often closing out the rest of the world in favor of gardening and writing. The white clapboard house still stands on a quiet road with a river running along the right side, and mountains stretch beyond the back door.

In the photos I've seen, the house feels larger-than-life, with four bedrooms and an added wing for borders. The couple migrated every summer like wild geese to the house's steady calm,

often inviting other writers or hosting traveling musicians performing in annual symphonies to make ends meet.

I can most clearly picture her here, standing among the roses in her garden. Her short, light hair is pinned away from her face and she's wearing a light green dress that comes up around her neck, embroidered with raindrops of a darker green. Someone is taking her picture with Al, who is dressed in a white shirt and khaki shorts, and they've paused their discussion to grin at the camera. They seem genuinely delighted to be there, in the sunshine among the roses they'd so carefully planted and tended.

I try, perhaps selfishly, to preserve them both like this in my mind: warmed by the sun, laughing, content.



*

In the pictures I've studied, the walls of the living room are painted a crisp white and the hardwood floors are unfinished. I imagine that a book sits on the table, that she was reading in

the lamplight of a darkening night, turning the pages with fingernails shadowed by crescents of dirt from her hours of gardening.

I wonder if Al's own fingertips were perpetually stained with ink, no matter how hard he scrubbed. He set up a printing press and binding tools in the Berkshire house so he could spend more time in the mountains than in the humid, clogged city of Greensboro, and often spent his days setting the type for forthcoming Unicorn chapbooks, the remnants of which sit in a corner of the room. The white stone fireplace taking up the far wall is unlit and a window is open so they can hear the buzz of frogs and crickets in the trees just out of sight.

A desk beneath a window in the other room is full of papers, books, a pair of discarded glasses, perhaps an ashtray. Teo spends her days here writing poems and short stories and novels that spill onto unlined paper as handwritten drafts that she later methodically corrects in pen.

In the other room, their kitchen table is pushed against a window overlooking the garden they have spent years planning, planting, and tending. Roses and peonies thrive in carefully-determined rows and a bed for herbs lies beneath the kitchen window. There are always fresh-cut flowers on tabletops and shelves that are bright splashes of color in mason jars and antique pitchers.

If I have built Teo out of paper, this house is built of film. The place I walk through is flimsy, its floors untextured and furniture one-dimensional. Still, I continue building, coating it in expectations and details that I run my fingers over with urgency. I watch it bow under the weight and continue to roam its halls, no matter how they shake.

*

In the 19th century, West Stockbridge blossomed into a town through its marble, iron, and limestone quarries, but by the 20th century, the industry began to fade away, bringing the town

with it. By the time Al and Teo lived there, it was a sleepy, impoverished area that inspired several books Teo wrote about a fictional town and its residents.

Throughout their lives, the home shifted in meaning. It sheltered them from the demands of the press; provided space for a sick Teo to get well; and was their home for half of the year, dragging their printing responsibilities up and down the east coast.

The couple adored their home in the Berkshires, though I can only recall hearing stories about Al bathing in the river.

He never told me what the roses smelled like in late May or if he learned which floorboards squeaked when he climbed the stairs. I wonder which of his stanzas were written in a frenzy after a particularly inspiring walk. I try to imagine if the bottom of the river was littered with pebbles that formed calluses, or soft sand that envelops your skin.

I don't know if he ever missed it, because I never thought to ask.

Over the course of Al's life, physical evidence of his past have been slowly blotted out, and when he died, what had once felt concrete became abstract. Gotham Book Mart went under new ownership, then closed for good. Where the press once stood in Santa Barbara is now home to a coffee shop. I helped pack up the bookshop, and Grove Street seems to have quickly moved on without it. I still visit nearly every time I go home, standing on the sidewalk in front of the barred windows and testing my memory, recreating the shelves of books, reaching for a space I not only knew but understood.

The stories that I used to listen to often, sometimes new, sometimes repeated, became reliant only on the details I could hesitantly stitch back together. Memory is faulty, imaginations powerful, and I am terrified of remembering wrong. I long for the tactile, for film photographs and handwritten letters and the feel of mountain air on my skin.

Despite these fears, I have fabricated a memory of a house I have never been in.

No matter how closely I examine photographs and letters, it is always inherently faulty, its skeleton wallpapered with imagined scenes, any conflict brushed over by retrospect. I can never capture the full picture, but there's a part of me that doesn't want to, that wants to cling to this idyllic home in the mountains. It glosses over its inhabitants' weariness, how they worked themselves thin and quarrelled. There is a part of me that wants this place to be safe, kept neat and orderly for the people alive in my memories.

The Berkshire house has new owners. Al and Teo, now both dead, haven't lived there in decades.

Though I've never laid eyes on the house or the new owners, I've wondered with a displaced sense of protectiveness how they have changed it—if they painted the living room light blue or knocked down a wall in the kitchen. I'll never fully know what had once been there to be changed.

I imagine driving down the gravel driveway one day, knocking on the door unannounced and being met with a kind stranger who lets me in without a question, lets me wander the home, running my hands on the walls still painted white, climbing up the stairs that creak on the fifth and twelfth steps. Maybe they also have Shaker furniture and a braided rug and keep a small, cluttered desk by the window.

In my imagination, they're not writers, but they like to watch birds at a feeder outside and tell me about the sparrows that nest every year in the bushes out front. They're not gardeners, but there are rose bushes that seem to come back every year without much care. They came with the house, I imagine they explain, as did a small herb garden growing beneath the dining room

window. I crush their leaves in my hands and let the fresh scent linger on my fingertips. I wade in the river, dig my feet into the soft sand and collect smooth pebbles from the riverbed.

I imagine climbing up the front porch steps at dusk, picturing a phantom figure that was there moments before, putting on earrings and red lipstick before going to the symphony, the door just clicking behind her.

She will never be there again, but perhaps I could be, finally on the other side of a photograph. I would think about finally writing a poem—one that praises the smell of fresh earth and the silk of rose petals and the way the floorboards remember our steps, no matter how separated by time they are.

On Crashing Waves

In my favorite collection of Al's poetry, *Journeyman*, published in 1970, he writes about the artwork of Albert Pinkham Ryder. Beginning in 1873, Ryder, from a seaside town in Massachusetts, painted moody, allegorical seascapes and dreamy lands, often inspired by others' creations or accompanied by his own poetry. Al's own poetry, "Ryder I" and "Ryder II," share a dreamy, moody quality. They feel stagnant and still, as if their author is holding their breath.

*

The sea does not move
The ship does not sail
The sky does not say one word
Here is death

- from "Ryder I"

*

I have been trying to pinpoint exactly when Al stopped eating. It so seamlessly became a fact of life, a task to check off my daily bookshop list — *offer Al a meal*. What began as bribes of rubens and Chick-Fil-A transitioned into protein shakes and whatever snack he wanted, just so that it wouldn't sit untouched on the side table of his futon. It began sometime in late 2020 or early 2021, far before he was hospitalized. I was a senior in high school when the pandemic slowed his socializing and noticeably altered his mood. Psalter and I were co-conspirators in plotting how to get Al to eat, checking in with each other over our own dinner if he had eaten his.

No matter when it started, doctor's office trips became part of our routine in 2021. They took his weight and commented on the rapid loss before sending him back to the bookshop with recommendations for ways to make food more appealing. It happened quickly but silently, a rapid decline that came with fatigue and headaches. Al began falling asleep before my shifts

ended around dinner time, when I would wake him up to lock the door behind me with the single key he kept.

One evening when I woke him, his skin was hot to the touch and he couldn't sit up on his own. Trying to help him get upright by holding his arm was the first time I truly understood how thin he'd become. Frustrated, helpless, and embarrassed, he snapped at me for the first time. Now, I wonder if it was a flash of his quick-tempered younger self.

Mostly, I think he was afraid.

I left him on the futon and promised to make copies of the keys so I could lock the door behind me at night from then on. I made several copies that night, and none of them would fit in the lock. I don't remember how we locked the door that night or if Al's fever was ever explained. I only remember crying in the driver's seat of my mom's car, my hands full of useless, shimmering keys.

*

Ryder's 1890 painting *Moonlit Cove* feels eerily familiar. The moon shines in a night sky dusted with a single, thinly-stretched cloud, illuminating frothy waves creeping toward the sand. Rock formations impose themselves on the middle third of the painting, creating a textured darkness that consumes the moonlight's reflection on the waves.

I have never *truly* been here, but it is a reminder of a dream I had early in 2020, months before Al grew sick. We went to the seashore together. I held his arm to steady him as we walked through shifting sand under a night sky bruised by storm clouds. We sat quietly at the water's edge, propped against a sandbank and watching as the agitated waves began to churn. In the dream, I am uneasy, as if I know something is coming that I am powerless to stop.

*

The carpet of the bookshop was once gold, with a light brown cylindrical pattern that always reminded me of layers of leaves. Over long years without proper cleaning, it developed a grayish hue, and if it had ever had much cushioning, it was long gone before I knew it. The cold concrete underfoot fought to be known by each step.

In early March of 2022, Al spent three nights in a row with his face pressed against its network of brown leaves, unable to get up after falling on his way to his futon.

After the second night, he was found by a neighbor who kicked in the door.

I learned of his falls after they happened, notified by email by Will Rogers, a nursing student who would stop by the bookshop to play chess and exchange stories with Al. Back home, a tight web of people formed to tuck Al into bed at night and bring him dinner. Will began introducing Al to the concept of hospice, which he believed Al would qualify for. I was in my first year of college, and received word of Al's falls in the middle of a concert at Cat's Cradle.

My understanding of the next six weeks came almost entirely from email communication from Daniel and Lauren, who eventually convinced Al to come to Charlottesville so they could care for him for a short stay. Soon after he arrived, he was hospitalized at UVA for a combination of overwhelming pain, an infection in his blood discovered by his Greensboro doctor, and the fact that he was seemingly immobile.

After a two week stay in the loud and uncomfortable hospital, Al moved to a rehabilitation facility that wasn't much better. Daniel and Lauren worked around the clock to navigate his comfort and care within the complex medical system, but they found that Al was often faced with negligent, harsh treatment. Everyone in the hospital was pleasant, Al told Will during a visit he made to UVA, but their actions were torturous.

"They dispense pain," he told Will, enunciating every word.

*

Sky without top or bottom

The sea is heavy as ground

Nothing reflects itself

The hour glass the window glass

The glass

is full of

everything

- from "Ryder II"

*

It's curious to mourn someone while they are still alive.

I often felt like I was saying goodbye to Al in hundreds of little ways throughout his year of illness leading up to his hospitalization. The habit was confusing, especially compared to his nonchalance. He knew he was sick, but didn't seem to think anything needed to be fixed. I didn't know how to convince him, or alert the people around us, that there was something wrong.

I always believed he was lonely, maybe depressed, and lost his appetite because he lost motivation from socializing during the pandemic. No matter what was wrong, I felt alone facing it, watching helplessly as my friend declined before my eyes. I was 16 and without the tools to help him in the ways he needed, but didn't know how to ask for help from the adults around me. I placated myself with little victories—when Al ate half of a reuben sandwich or told me that he'd regained his appetite, hoping that maybe this time it would stay. But there were no answers from doctors and never a change for the better, only a leveling of the scales instead of more decline.

I moved into a college dorm 45 minutes away in late 2021 to go to college, but in some ways it felt like a world away. Al, unable to move much beyond the bookshop, wrote to me daily. I emailed weekly and visited when I was home, but it wasn't the same. The drive down Highway 54 felt vast and I became preoccupied with life right in front of me, letting the people at home slip through the cracks.

Every time I visited Al, though, I grew increasingly worried about his health. In some ways, I began to sense there might be an end nearby, but could not tell when it would hit.

*

Al was eventually moved to a care facility in Greensboro, where visitation hours were arranged for his friends. I visited him only once, right before a three week trip to France and Scotland. His room was dark and seemed dingy, but it was clean and quiet and the Goans said the staff was infinitely kinder in this facility. Al was finally comfortable and able to rest, and he'd specifically said that my family was among those allowed to visit at any time.

All I can remember from my visit is that his frame was sunken in ways I didn't know were possible and that I cried embarrassing tears I could not control, promising to visit him when I returned from Europe. It was my turn to feel helpless, stunned by his appearance and weak voice, and I left with a quiet uncertainty that what I'd promised would come true.

*

Recently, on an early Saturday morning in Greensboro, I watched refracted light from a disco ball dance across the wood-paneled walls of Will's living room as he arranged fresh flowers from the farmers' market in a vase. My shoes were off, and when Will wasn't moving, we curled on opposite ends of his couch in the living room at the back of his home, a few blocks from the bookshop. His house is the beautiful kind of eclectic that I've come to anticipate from

Al's community—this particular room is full of artwork sourced from friends and secondhand sales, and books are shelved along the top of a wooden piano and the mantel of a fireplace.

While we talked, Will periodically jumped up to get books he mentioned from the tall shelves in the front room or to empty his compost, leaving me to gaze at the life-size puzzle of a human diagram that was being pieced together and hung in the hallway.

Will came into Al's life primarily when I was in college, so our paths barely crossed until now. Still, we fell into a pattern that has become familiar with Al's friends: we began by telling a few stories, and suddenly we can't seem to stop thinking of new things to say. With Will, we often laughed over how casually incredible Al was. Will rocked in delight on crossed legs as he told me about the first time he learned Al knew Thích Nhất Hạnh, the Vietnamese monk and activist, through a story where he casually dropped his name.

When we circled our conversation toward the last weeks of Al's life, our eyes welled with tears and our voices cracked. I cried because I was not there, but I think Will cried because he was.

Al died early in the morning of May 29, 2022. It was a gray Sunday in Oban, Scotland, the seaside town I'd been living in with friends for the previous two weeks, when I got the news from my dad by text.

I spent most of the day swollen-eyed and tucked between large branches of a tree on a hillside, watching the ocean's waves and listening to the songs of birds. In the evening, I walked with friends in the forest behind our flat, relishing in how my legs burned as we climbed steep hills and listening to them talk. I laid in a field of dewey bluebells, unfazed by how my sweater and jeans grew damp as I watched the sunset and searched for something in its pink clouds. I consider it all a tribute—the dew, the pink sky, the waves.

*

True to his wishes, Al had a green burial a few days after his death. Will says it was beautiful. I was still an ocean away, on a train to Edinburg, but he was one of the four volunteers who carried Al's cardboard coffin to the gravesite. Will contributed shovelfuls of dirt to cover his coffin while I wandered through an old bookstore across the world, thinking of the friend who'd made his bookstore feel like home.

When we talk on Will's couch with the disco lights glimmering around us, my tears are ones of regret — short and ugly, barely leaving my eyes before drying. His are full and sweet, and they seem like melancholic gratitude, rooted in deep love.

When I was in Scotland, my loss didn't quite feel real. In Greensboro, the place that he was supposed to be and suddenly was not, the lack was carnivorous.

His memorial service was held in the large back room of the bookshop's first location, now owned by one of his friends. A circle of folding chairs surrounded a small table that was crowded by plants brought from people's houses, binding tools, and chess pieces. During the service, I read "Message" by Thích Nhất Hạnh and my father said a prayer for Al. People from every stage of Al's life stood and shared their stories about him—some were familiar faces, but most were new, and I listened as people from all walks of life told the crowd how my friend had impacted their lives.

The ache that had once been expansive and isolating began to ease as I listened, comforted by the reminder that his life and work had such a broad reach. The distance I'd felt from my dorm room for the past year began to retract, the stories became a bridge. I was surrounded by people that had witnessed his brilliance and experienced his magnetic friendship.

There were people that missed him as much as I did, who felt the ache as much, likely more, than me.

The stories continued to flow as we ate some of Al's favorite foods—bagels and orange juice and reubens, and I felt not only the loss, but gratitude that I'd known Al, that I was able to miss him.

I now understand what people mean when they say grief comes in waves.

*

After his death, I spent nearly three years without hearing Al's voice.

I could see it in the words he wrote, could access it in memories and amused conversations with his friends, but I hadn't truly heard it since he died, and even then, it was unsteady and frail in our last conversation. I'd felt the importance of having physical evidence of his early life, but hadn't considered that I was missing reminders of his later life outside of my own memories and the stories of others.

While working on another essay, I recalled an interview with Al for a class assignment that is stored in my voice memos. I pressed play and was met with my own freshman year voice, hesitant in an interview setting, asking questions of Al, who answers with calm, lengthy stories. Often, he laughs, accompanied by the resolute *slap* of his hand hitting the table in glee.

The waves crash against my shore.

His voice dislodged something within me, unfurled a version of myself that was Al's friend, not researcher. I wasn't learning something new, but recalling something familiar. Something I lost.

When he recites Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!", he chokes up, and I cry along with the recording. I think of Ryder's fascination with sailboats, of my dreams of water, of hands letting go, of voices filling with emotion and eyes watering.

*

The dream ends quickly.

Al and I sat on the shore, watching the waves grow taller and taller. My unease mounted with their height, but I stayed anchored by my friend, who was unfazed and at peace. He knew something that I was not yet willing to accept. I didn't want to let go of his hand, and I wouldn't for another year, clutching it through doctors appointments and lunch bribes and evenings of tucking blankets around a thin frame on a futon until I finally loosened my grip during a final, awkward hug in a hospital bed.

In the dream, my hand returned to my side. I continued to watch the waves grow rougher and eventually reach out to cover Al with frothy foam. I remained dry, quietly watching.

When the waves receded, I looked beside me and found only sand.

*

Self-portrait

not even the artist moves

Only the lines in the window pane

Where this devil Ryder

Lived with everything

Today we live in sunlight

have nothing

- from "Ryder I"



On Binding, Again

In December, I bound a book for the first time in years.

It was a gift for my friend, and the base of its cover was made of a scrabble board I measured and cut with kitchen scissors. I covered it with a light green cloth that I dug out of a bin of fabric scraps at a local reuse store, and the glue, which I ordered because it was what Al always used, seeped through the thin fabric. Inside, the end pages are made of white wallpaper patterned with creeping vines, yellow flowers, and green butterflies.

I grew flustered covering this book, angry at myself and the materials that didn't fit quite right. The floor of my bedroom was littered with paper and fabric scraps and paintbrushes covered in glue. My fingers were sticky and felt too large as I fumbled with waxed twine and watched a YouTube video about Japanese stab binding, something I had learned before but couldn't quite remember. The paper I chose was too thick, and the sheer amount of it I wanted to include was too much, but I forced a needle through it anyway, a process that took over an hour and much of my body weight.

The whole time, I thought of him.

I thought of the books he bound with precision and delicacy in Santa Barbara, every choice of color and font and material intentional, every copy made with quick, young, trained hands.

I thought of the ones he bound with love and dedication in Greensboro, never rushed but often eager to share, copies made with clear technique but imperfect execution.

I imagined him reading aloud to Psalter as she bound deadstock Unicorn books. I remembered the late nights in the bookshop spent covering a literary magazine I'd helped create with torn thrift store jeans. I thought of the blurry letterpress I've only ever seen in Polaroids, of

cereal boxes used as davis boards, of the cabinet of bookmaking supplies, of the folding bone and brush I picked up for my sister in an empty bookshop when I said my goodbyes.

I wonder what he'd think of me now.

It's often in the back of my mind—what he'd think of this project, of who I have become since he last saw me, of my quest to know him better and be more like him. I wonder if he'd be proud, even as I struggle to stitch together something that was so ingrained in his life and work. I imagine him laughing at me, mostly, slapping his knee and guffawing at how frustrated I get pushing the needle through a stack of pages.

Truthfully, I'm scared of getting it wrong. The book, maybe, but also his life.

Also my own.

Binding has never felt like mine. It's always belonged to him, a remnant of a life before I was around that I admired from afar. In my room, watching a book come together as I made it, it felt like I was in the archives again, at once closely connected and deeply separated.

I am still learning to hold this closeness and distance at once.

Despite the frustrations, at each stage of the process I was in awe of what the book was turning into, enamored with how the end pages looked against the cloth and the feel of the pages as they flipped in my hands. I couldn't ignore its flaws, but delighted in watching something *become* until it was a final product in my hands, wrapped in paper and placed beneath a Christmas tree.

I watched nervously as my friend unwrapped the book at a group gift exchange, my heartbeat quickening and my mind spinning. I worried that she would notice the uneven cut on the pages or the corner where the fabric doesn't quite stretch, that she would hate it and politely admire it still.

Instead, she held it with a sense of wonder, and it was passed around a circle of writers I respect, of friends I trust. They admired this thing I created, flipping gingerly through its pages before passing it to the next person. Watching it was like letting out a deep sigh. Later, I hugged my friend in the kitchen as we put dishes in the dishwasher and my fears were replaced with warmth.

In his poem “Journeyman I,” AI writes about how writing closes gaps, makes the people and places that seem far away feel closer. He is reaching out for his readers through the page, begging them to take his hand. He longs for connection through the words he writes, and ends the poem with a final plea:

What I can't bear alone please hold with me
and I with you
Will tease each other into a harmony
of thought and poetry

Even two years after his death, when I read his work, I feel him reaching out, offering to share what we can't bear on our own. As I've worked on this project, I haven't been bearing it alone. I have written paragraphs and pages and thousands of words that others bear—my friends, my family, the people that, through AI, have become both.

When I reach this stanza, I think of my friends who cradled my handmade book and have cradled this work for the past nine months, writing careful notes on half-baked drafts and engaging excitedly with every step of my process. I am reminded of Daniel and Lauren's delight in photos of AI passed around on my phone. I can hear my sister laughing in the passenger seat

of my car, sipping from a carton of orange juice in front of the locked cemetery gates where Al is buried. I see the scribbled notes my father made on one of my first essays about Al, feel the warmth of my mom's hug when I got home from Providence. This stanza tastes like lemon ginger tea and cookies wordlessly left next to my computer at the bookshop.

I'm not sure if any creative work will ever feel complete, especially this one.

There will always be something that could be better, a flaw in the process that I wish I could iron out. I often live in fear that I'll get something wrong and won't be able to change it if I let it go. Al lived outside of this fear, sharing creativity that was malleable and sometimes flawed, but that always captured what he cared about. Creativity was a means of connection, a way to reach out and speak up.

Al's life is a collage of creation, preserving each moment with a poem or sketch or novel or story. He lived to create and for that reason, what he made was good. The evidence surrounds me: on the wall above my desk is the drawing he did of me in 2019, proudly floating on a blank page of sketch paper. His books are on my shelves, and the one I delight in most has his writing in pencil on each page, adding notes and correcting grammar. A broadside is taped above my headboard, as is a photo of him in New York and the label for the lemon ginger tea he'd set on the desk beside me as I worked.

There is life coursing through all of it. It is his, it is mine, it is every person he encountered and documented through his art. Through their pages, we hold what we can't bear alone, and when we do, we become infinite.

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