

7746 Chadwick
Prairie Village, Kansas 66208
April 17, 1968

Lawrence H. Vendel
600 Broadway Street
Fortville, Indiana 46040

Dear Mr. Vendel:

You have asked me for some biographical data. I shall set down in this letter what comes to me in the next few days or week or two. Nothing comes quickly anymore. You will find "They Broke The Sods," "Family Trees," "Born in Nebraska," and "University Years" helpful in any reconstruction of my early years. You will find "A Sand Hill Interlude," "Lumbering on The Gaspe," and "Oui, Oui, the Little Guests" useful in any consideration of my "bumming" years. "I Become A GI Joe," "Fighting The War in Texas," "The Enlisted Men Versus The System," and "Apropos of Texans and Salty Dogs" cover my war years rather thoroughly. "What Makes an Imaginative Mind" relates the story of my literary efforts.

Two personal friends who might supply information are Kenneth Forward, 2030 G Street, Lincoln, Nebraska 68502 and Wilbur Gaffney, 4300 Normal Blvd., Lincoln, Nebraska 68506. Forward was a member of the English Department at the University of Nebraska from 1920 until his retirement in recent years. He was one of my instructors in English composition when I was a freshman 1925-1926. Gaffney was a "reader" in the department at that time and still a professor at the university.

In my time I have lived four lives; I have been four different people: Clodhopper 1907-1935; Beerdrinker 1936-1953; Bureaucrat 1954-1966; Lunatic 1967-----. The cleavage in each instance was sudden, the metamorphosis sharp and complete as that of the commercial traveler in Kafka's story who awakened one morning to find himself transformed into a gigantic insect. Childhood and youth are included in the period of my first personality which was that of a clodhopper. This period also included my student years, my bumming years, my farming years. I was an imaginative introvert with an appetite for books and adventure. This clodhopper personality sloughed off like a snakeskin when I gave up slopping pigs and plowing corn in 1936 to become the assistant state director of the WPA Writers Program in Nebraska.

For the next 17 years I was a great beerdrinker and I still hope someday to write an article entitled "Recollections of a Beerdrinker." While I lived in Lincoln, my friends included many Schooner contributors: Kenneth Forward, Wilbur Gaffney, Loren Eiseley, Lowry Wimberly, J. Harris Gable, Fred Christensen, Margaret Lund, Arthur Bukin, Jim Van Liew, Martin Peterson, James Reinhardt, Orin Stepanek, Dorothy and Kenetha Thomas, Mari Sandoz, and Weldon Kees. In those years I was a gregarious and ambitious government worker who mixed with people, supervised groups of them at work, trained them, sometimes lectured them for as long as four hours. During the first two years of World War II, I was in charge of instruction in censorship intelligence to rotating classes of 30 to 40 military and civilian personnel at the U.S. Censorship Station in New Orleans. While living in New Orleans, I went on drinking bouts with Lyle Saxon, Edward Dreyer and once even with visiting Floyd Dell who spent most of three days bemoaning the fact he had "written himself out."

For the next two years of the war I was a sergeant in the infantry forces of the U.S. Army. After the war, back again in Lincoln, I worked 12 years assisting disabled veterans in patching together the pieces of their broken lives. My beerdrinking years were my happiest years. During them I smoked my pipe, drank with friends, laughed myself into convulsions at the slightest excuse, and wrote humorous pieces for the Prairie Schooner and other magazines. In their anthology Story: The Fiction of The Forties (1949), Whit and Hallie Burnett included a story of mine with stories by such others as William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, Truman Capote, J. D. Salinger, and Norman Mailer.

The urge to write had been in me from my earliest years—why, I do not know. My brothers are farmers, my sister was a housewife. No writer had ever before cropped out in the family to our knowledge. The urge was nursed along by certain teachers and friends like Wilbur Gaffney, Kenneth Forward and Lowry Wimberly. The urge still persists and always will, I suppose. My government employment always entailed considerable writing of a technical or quasi-legal nature (Lord, how I hated it!) that left me little time for creative work. For this reason I have always been a Sunday writer, never a professional.

After I dropped dead in a cafe in 1953, and was resuscitated, I found myself a changed individual for the third time. My life was gray. I was all intellect, a slave to the routine, a petty bureaucrat dedicated to my work. I was intense, often preoccupied. I withdrew into myself like a turtle. I mixed little with people, drank little beer, wrote little for publication. I kept a journal. I gave much time to my family (wife and 3 children). Music, literature, all art: these I appreciated. Like Wimberly, I had hopes of someday retiring and giving my time altogether to the writing of a great literary work. In November, 1958, my work with disabled veterans ended in Lincoln and I removed to Kansas City, Missouri, to work as a government claims authorizer. Retirement came earlier than I expected and in a shape other than welcomed.

On December 22, 1966, I had my second tussle with The Awful One and this left me almost bereft of reason. At the age of 59 I was changed into a feeble gray old man who needs a stick to get around. I experienced several episodes of utter madness. My mind leaks like a sieve. My pleasure in music, the arts, even movies is gone. To read a book has become an onerous chore; I chiefly re-read old ones. I can write only for short periods a day and at great effort. It has taken me five days to reach this point in my letter to you. Like poor mad Swift I can walk for hours and hours and do naught else but stare blankly. My moods alternate from those of elation to those of black depression. There is no humor left.

I am one of the select few who have traveled to the realm of the dead and returned and have also traveled to the more terrible realm of senile dementia. You have asked me for an expression of my philosophy. I hold a strong belief in man himself and none whatever in a god or a supernatural being or a scheme of things concerned with life on earth or elsewhere in the universe. I think man has pulled himself up, up, up and out of the primordial muds all by his puny self! He was assisted only by fortuitous circumstances; he has seized chances no other animal on earth ever seized. I take my hat off to him. I believe he will reach the moon.

I am a fatalist. I believe Nature is completely indifferent to the fate of man. It was chance that placed us on earth and gave us our peculiar brain and it is chance that rules our destinies. Man has had to struggle constantly against nature and the social forces of his time. If he is not equipped with the proper brain, and given the proper environment and training, he is dragged down. Even to attain a modicum of happiness during ten years out of seventy, a person's timing must be perfect. He must cross the right street at the right time.

The last delusions of man lie buried in his brain. That organ is most reluctant to yield up its secrets. When we finally pry them out we might find ourselves catapulted beyond our status as mere human beings. When that time comes organic evidence will exist for all varieties of mental illness. Physiological deterioration in the brain, or weakness in its development, or damage of the cells will be found to be the cause of many so-called "functional" disorders. We have only started learning about our brain. My doctor tells me I am suffering from cerebral cortical atrophy. He cannot tell me how or when this condition started. He cannot tell me how or when it is likely to end. He does not know these things. I can sit and silently speculate as Wimberly sat and silently speculated those last years. I am ending up the same way. Perhaps there is something to "the curse" theory, after all—?

It was his struggle against his nature that advanced man from the brute. It is this that humanized him. It is what made him invent gods and has him now reaching for the moon. His cities of stone and steel are monuments to his achievements in this war he has carried on against his own nature. Madness in man is merely a reversion back to the brute. A brute accepts its own nature; man does not. Most of the time now I accept my own nature. When I do not, I walk, walk or jot words on paper as I am doing for you now.

I am a member of the Secret Order of Earth People. I should like to be able to distinguish others of my kind. Are you one, Vendel? We need an emblem. It is so hard to go seeking one another out. Most people look like earth people but turn out to be Baptists, Masons, Americans, Methodists, Communists, Republicans, Chinese, Lutherans, and the like. Earth People aren't any of these. Earth people are of the sun, moon, stars, wind, rain, lightning, trees, grasses. They are children of Mother Earth, full of Mother Earth's earthiness. George Borrow was one. W.M. Hudson was one. Walt Whitman was one. Thoreau was one. Isak Dinesen was one. Robert Frost was one. I know of no better book than Leaves of Grass to serve as the earth people's Bible.

A man is as his brain makes him—a dolt, a wit, a lunatic; of this I am convinced. If one turns rapist, murderer, or remains a milquetoast, the fault lies in his brain. We are completely at the mercy of the soft gray matter stuffed in our craniums. I am appalled at the complexity of thinking that man's brain is now capable of. His thinking has crowded out all the gods he ever invented. He is becoming his own god and learning to tamper with his own destiny. I take my hat off to the little cuss. He needs to discard all his narrow, dogmatic, stupid, petty religions for a single unifying doctrine having Mother Earth as its source. This is no new philosophy. Walt Whitman sang of it. More than two thousand years before Whitman the Bhagavad-Gita voiced it. Earth people of all the ages have known it.

I extend best wishes for success in your English theme. I shall look forward to receiving the copy you promised me. If you have questions on specific matters, let me know.

Dated this 2nd day of May, 1968.

Sincerely,

Rudolph Ualand

BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

- 1907 Born Dec 26 on a farm near Eagle, Nebraska.
1913 Started first grade at District 87 rural school in September.
1914 Death of brother Carl by suicide in U.S. Navy.
1919 Started seventh grade at Eagle Consolidated School in September.
1925 Graduated from Eagle high school in May. Enrolled as freshman at University of Nebraska in Lincoln in September.
1926 Death of cousin Arthur Ualand by suicide in April.
1928 Dropped out of third year classes at university in April. Stole first ride on a freight train. Bussed west from Lincoln to Denver.
1929-1931 Transient worker in 40 states, Canada, Mexico. Worked as farmhand, factory hand, dishwasher, logger, cellarman, longshoreman, ranch-hand, fruit-picker, construction laborer, deliveryman.
1932-1935 Assisted father and brother in farming near Eagle, Nebraska. First published story appeared in Prairie Schooner in 1932. Participated with brother in "farmers march" upon State Capitol in 1933.
1936-1940 Assistant State Director of WPA Writers Program at Lincoln.
1938 Married Elsie Rockenbach of Eagle in August.
1939 Birth of daughter Yvonne in July.
1941 State Supervisor of WPA Writers Program in Nebraska. Death of mother from cancer at hospital in Lincoln. Cleared of charges of being a Communist by FBI investigation.
1942-1944 Training Chief at U.S. Censorship Station in New Orleans. Birth of son Eric in Jan. 1942.
1944-1946 Classification Specialist with Infantry Forces, U.S. Army at Camp Hood, Texas.
1946-1958 Training officer with Veterans Administration in Lincoln.
1947 Birth of son Craig in July.
1949 Death of father from stroke at nursing home in Lincoln.
1953 Dropped insensible in cafe in September. Hospitalized at Veterans Administration Hospital in Lincoln. Resumed work in October.
1958-1966 Claims Authorizer for Social Security Administration in Kansas City. Dropped insensible at work in Federal Building on Dec. 22, 1966. Made two futile attempts to return to work in Jan. 1967.
1967 Retired.