

The Hillside Diary and Other Writings

by Robert Gary Neugeboren

Edited and with an introduction by Jay Neugeboren

CENTER *for* PSYCHIATRIC REHABILITATION
Sargent College of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences
Boston University

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In order to respect the privacy of people who are mentioned herein, pseudonyms are used in most instances.

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ROBERT NEUGEBORN was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1943. He attended public schools there, won a New York Regents State Scholarship and attended City College of New York. In his early years, he had leads in many dramatic productions, and starred in several musicals. He has spent a large portion of his adult years in mental hospitals, supervised residences, and halfway houses, and for the last several years has been living in the Clinton Residence in the Hell's Kitchen section of New York City. He is a member of New York City's Fountain House, where he works in various capacities, and is featured in the documentary film *Imagining Robert*.

JAY NEUGEBORN is the author of fourteen books, including two prize-winning novels, *The Stolen Jew* and *Before My Life Began*, and two award-winning books of nonfiction, *Imagining Robert* and *Transforming Madness*. His most recent book is *Open Heart: A Patient's Story of Life-Saving Medicine and Life-Giving Friendship*. He is featured in the documentary film *Imagining Robert*. Professor and Writer-in-Residence at the University of Massachusetts for thirty years, he now lives in New York City.

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Introduction



R. B. New
152 West
N.Y. N.Y.

Jay New
150
N.Y.

SPECIAL

I have told the story before.

“In October 1973,” I wrote in *Imagining Robert*, “when our parents retired and moved to Florida, they shipped about twenty cartons of Robert’s belongings to me in Massachusetts—books mostly, but also clothing, records, framed prints and drawings, his stamp collection, his 16mm Bell and Howell Model 70 movie camera, his chess set (a gift from me for his Bar Mitzvah), and personal items Robert referred to as his ‘rememorabilia.’ They asked me to store them for him against the day when, they hoped, he would be well again and would have a life and home of his own.”

First hospitalized in 1962, and hospitalized more than fifty times since then, my brother Robert has spent most of his adult life—forty years—in mental hospitals and psychiatric wards in and around New York City. The list is long: Hillside, Creedmoor, South Beach, Bronx Psychiatric Center, Mid-Hudson Psychiatric Center, Gracie Square, Bellevue, Kings County, and others. He has also been homeless, and has lived in various apartments, group homes, SROs, and supervised residences.

In 1997, when he was living on a locked ward at the South Beach Psychiatric Center, his therapist, angry at the way he had been (pseudonymously) portrayed in *Imagining Robert*, stated—after harrasing me with, among other threats, the possibility that the staff would have to use electroshock on Robert (the treatment Robert feared above all, as the therapist knew)—that on a scale of one to ten, the possibility of Robert living outside a locked ward was one.

After *Imagining Robert* appeared in 1997, however, Robert and I received hundreds of letters and calls, including some from mental health professionals like Dr. Alvin Pam, Director of Psychology at Bronx State, who offered to help. Dr. Pam suggested a transfer to his hospital. “No promises,” he said, “but if Robert is willing to

give us a chance here at Bronx State, we'd like to work with him. We think we can do better."

Robert agreed to the transfer. When he first arrived at Bronx State, however, it was the consensus of the staff, Dr. Pam later told me, that Robert might never be able to live outside the locked ward of a state hospital. Dr. Pam disagreed. Two years later Robert was discharged from Bronx State and began living at the Clinton

Residence, a group home administered by Project
For someone Renewal, and located on West 48th Street in the Hell's
diagnosed as Kitchen section of New York City. The residence, a
mad, he is, handsome, seven-story red brick building adjacent to
in matters one of the city's more beautiful neighborhood-run gar-
of human dens, is home for fifty to sixty men and women, all of
connection whom, like Robert, have experienced long-term serious
and affection, and persistent mental illness.

Nearly four years later (I am writing this in the late
summer of 2003) Robert is still living at the Clinton
Residence—the longest stretch in his adult life that he
has not been hospitalized. He has friends, he goes to
museums and restaurants, he shops in the neighbor-
hood, he visits with me and other members of our fam-
ily, he makes trips out of the city, and he gets around the
city on his own by subway, bus, and taxi. He takes classes—horti-
culture, poetry, photography—and he also works, for pay, one day
a week.

When people inquire about his life now—he is sixty years old—he often says that he is "semi-retired." But how do you spend most of your days, a cousin asked at a recent Passover Seder. "How do I spend my days?" he replied, and gave what seemed to him the obvious answer: "I smoke and I drink coffee." Then, seeing the surprise on our cousin's face, he laughed.

Among the items our parents sent north to me in 1976 was a cherry wood trunk that had belonged to one of our neighbors, and that had been given to us after the neighbor's death. When, in the spring of 1991, I began work on *Imagining Robert*, I opened the trunk, and found, among other items—overdue library books, Robert's tefillin, drawings, photos, underwear, ashtrays Robert had

made at Hillside (because they were “cracked,” Robert called them “psycho-ceramics”)—a thick pale-green binder which, I assumed, contained Robert’s poems.

When I opened the binder, however, what I found was a typed manuscript of some one hundred pages and on the title page, this:

From the diary of a nineteen year old
mental patient named
robert gary neugeboren
p.o. box 38
glen oaks, n.y.

Robert kept his diary, which he shared with his therapists, for about six weeks, from April 3 to May 15, 1962. “Each time I go through Robert’s diary,” I wrote in *Imagining Robert*, “I find myself wanting to read it aloud to everyone I know—and to publish it entire, not only because it gives such a vivid, moving, and often delightful account of his daily life at Hillside, and of the way this kind of private institution cared for the mentally ill thirty years ago, but—more important—because it gives a sense of Robert in Robert’s own words: of who he was at nineteen, and of what a full and idiosyncratic life, imagination, mind, and identity he had.”

That wish, made a dozen years ago, has now come true.

While working on *Imagining Robert*, I also read through dozens of Robert’s poems, and hundreds of letters he had sent to me and to our parents. I included excerpts from all three—the diary, poems, and letters—in the book. When, in 1997, Florentine Films/Hott Productions began filming a documentary based on *Imagining Robert*, Larry Hott, the producer, had Robert recite some of his poems, and also asked him to read, on camera, from his diary and letters.

And when I approached the Boston University Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation about the possibility of publishing Robert’s diary entire, I suggested that they include with it a selection of Robert’s poems and letters. Happily, they agreed, and so, along with the complete text of *The Hillside Diary*, we have here included several dozen of Robert’s poems, and a generous selection of his letters.

The letters begin in 1958, when Robert was a junior at Erasmus Hall High School in Brooklyn and I was a senior at Columbia, and they end in 1976, the year of our father's death. Given that the letters provide, in themselves, a narrative of Robert's life during these years and, thus, a vivid and fascinating context for the diary, some readers may prefer to read the letters first, or to move back and forth between the diary and the letters.

Along with the poems and the diary, the letters provide a rich, textured portrait of an extraordinary young man and of the struggles he was going through during his early years. They also give us a detailed, often poignant sense of what life was like for people who were mental patients back then—and of how the daily and ongoing experience of being a mental patient, and being treated as one, both in and out of institutions, public and private, made itself felt in their lives.

Although I have read Robert's writings often through the years, what impressed me all over again when I read them this time was Robert's extreme generosity of spirit, and his optimism. No matter the struggles, defeats, sadness, absurdity, or pain that inform his life, Robert rarely loses his desire to care for and about others, or his sheer love of this world.

"Wee! what a wonderful day," he exclaims at the start of a diary entry early on during his first long-term (eighteen month) hospitalization. "Just took a shower painted another picture and am listening to some good music—all is right with the world." Two weeks later, this: "listening to henry miller on the phonograph and hearing another man say that man is lonely, I recognized the shadow of myself seeking and reeking from aloneness. And every so often i remember that call it what ever you may but I am in a mad house. Cheerful, no?"

When he is given a pass out of the hospital, he describes his time away in joyful understatement. "Was walking around the outside like a free man in his right mind," he writes. Several years later, however, when he is hospitalized yet again, this time in an institution for the criminally insane, though his humor is still alive, his joy is muted with bitterness. "If you show your faces or feces at the weddings," he writes to me, "...and they ask after me (you know Jay didn't you once have a brother and there was something wrong

with him there was even a book about him painting his pictures out of an institution) tell them I smoke cigars and really do love them and that with my next face lift I'll look better than never."

Robert's writings are filled with descriptions of his daily doings—what he ate, who he ate with, what he is reading, what movies he saw, etc.—and they are also filled with descriptions of what is most precious to him: his friends, and his relationships with his friends. The listings may sometimes seem perfunctory (he believes his therapist wants him to record his days in a particular way and order), yet the quotidian often opens to moments of wonder and grace, and Robert renders these moments for us in idiosyncratic prose that transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary.

"Came back to the low and forgot to get a sandwich for bob—met him and played some ping pong and then asked if he wanted to go visit cindy—he did and we went," one passage begins. Then: "We all went into the back yard and started kicking around a dead volleyball, then we got to playing ping pong with a volleyball and i beat cindy. Then we just lay on the grass and talked silly nothings and then it got darker. We went inside and got attacked by some old ladies."

Robert's humor—sometimes broad, often understated, invariably ironic—is ever-present. When a team of doctors ask him about how and why he became ill—about his first psychotic break—he answers directly; a few moments later, he notes his reaction to what one of the doctors tells him. "Told me i had a rather traumatic life which was encouraging because i thought i was just overdramatizing."

His film and literary criticisms are shrewd and original—*"The Court Martial of Billy Mitchell,"* he writes in his diary, "could have been a radio broadcast for all the camera added to it." When he writes to me from a mental hospital about *The Greening of America*, he is unequivocal and clear-eyed. "What a turkey!" he writes. "This guy Charles A. Reich quotes Marcuse Marx and some others but the whole affaire is like a Reader's Digest reworking of

When he is
given a pass
out of the
hospital, he
describes his
time away in
joyful under-
statement.
"Was walking
around the
outside like
a free man
in his right
mind," he
writes.

a Sunday times special supplement on don't worry folks your children are justified in wearing long hair."

Most of all, though, Robert's writings are filled with small dramas that have large issue. His affection for and devotion to his friends is unwavering, and his sadness when they become lost—in madness, in drugs, in the world—is matched by his desire to help and to love. For someone diagnosed as mad, he is, in matters of human connection and affection, remarkably realistic and sane. "Then asked [Cindy] what she did today," he writes, "and she said nothing in a very depressed way and i tried to cheer her up by telling her that a watched pot never boils and that she had to start somewhere even if it were anywhere and that after a while she would begin to get involved in things but that she mustn't watch herself so closely. She said that she enjoyed nothing and i tried to disprove her—then i asked her if she would like to come to the library and she said she didn't care, but that she never spoke with anyone like she did with me, and thanked me then. She signed out and came. I showed her the Steinberg book and she laughed but then her aid came and she told the aid that she signed out but we both giggled because she is on restrictions. The aid came back and so cindy finally—third time—she got an aid to stay with her. In between i wrote this poem:

the love between us
grows like ivy
poisoned and itchy
it goes up and down my skin-shell
goosing me into pimples
and all i know
blows away before your asking heart."

Robert also seems remarkably sane about his own situation and condition—and as open and honest with others (our parents, his friends, his doctors) as he is with himself. "First called mother," he writes on the first day of Passover, "to wish her a happy pesach and she decided to give me a lecture. Said the doctors said i was very sick and that I had too many friends on the week end i told her to stop it and we both hung up." Then this: "I know i'm sick proba-

bly better than anyone it is me who feels un free and depressed and inferior and slightly paranoid nobody else, it is me who finds it hard to sit still and concentrate. it is I who haven't been able to communicate with people what the hell is she complaining about. I am perfectly honest with the doctors and my parents what do they want it takes time and more time. It took how many millions of years to produce me and my environment I can't get well overnight."

In *Imagining Robert*, with Robert's help, I tried to place the story of our relationship as brothers, and of Robert's life as a mental patient, within the context of a family history. Now, in his diary, poems, and letters—in his own words, and in a book of his own—Robert tells his story.

A Note on the Text

Robert's spelling is often idiosyncratic: "hungry" is "hungary," "relationships" is "realationships," "William Saroyan" is "William Sayroyan," "boring" is "booring," "raisin bran" is "raison-bran," and he often makes up words: "tensious" (a combination of tension and anxious), "headance" (for headache), "effeminency," "autotorium," "beef stronganoff," etc. He rarely capitalizes names or other nouns (including, most of the time, the "i" ["I"] of his narrative), and punctuation, like spelling, is inconsistent and erratic.

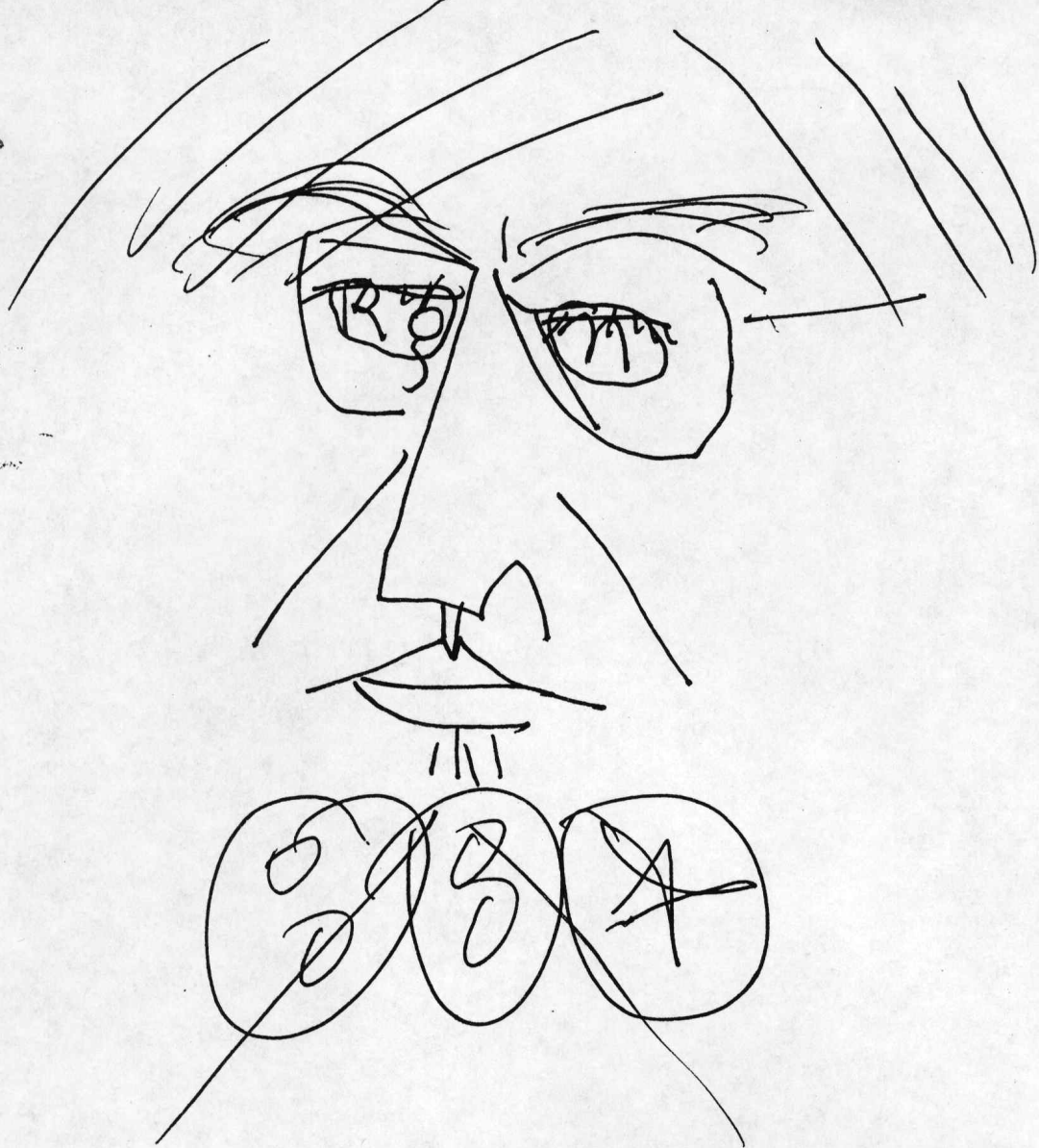
I have retained virtually all original spellings and punctuation, but here and there have broken lengthy sections into separate paragraphs, and I have made minor corrections when misspellings are mere typographical errors. In order to protect the privacy of people mentioned in the diary and letters, I have, in many instances, used pseudonyms. Otherwise, what you are about to read, beginning with "The Hillside Diary," came forth once upon a time from the mind, heart, and imagination of a young man named Robert Gary Neugeboren.

JAY NEUGEBOREN
NEW YORK CITY
AUGUST 2003

The Hillside diary



From the diary of a nineteen year old
mental patient named
robert gary neugeboren
p.o. bpx 38
glen oaks, n.y.



9 13 21 13 1e1 d 11?

What say Vengebornes?

3 april, 1962—(done on Thursday the 12)

I shall go through the day trying to remember what has happened and how i happended this wednesday in april.

I awoke at eight after dreaming of a circus but I don't remember who i was in the circus or what i was doing—associated it with the contest that the activities committee is sponsoring on night activities. I changed my linen (they have a thing called linen exchange where you bring last week's dreamed in and creamed in sheets in exchange for nice soft white new sheets, pillowcases and towels). Then i rushed to breakfast had oatmeal and raison-bran and sugar smacks and three juices and a cup of luke warm coffee. I still haven't learned how to drink hot coffee yet. Talked with Marty (Silver) and Roz, spoke of the sixth grade and how i used to urinate out the window at ps 181. Also told --tickle-your-ass-with a feather—particularly-nasty-weather, and may-I-fuck-your-daughter—would-you-like-a-glass-of-water. (last night we had bananasplit on cake for dessert and i asked Roz if i might have her (whip) cream, she replied yes “but don't touch my banana,” to which the girls at the next table cracked up). I then washed off the acromel (that is some sort of fleshy-coloured ointment that the doctor has prescribed for my acne—I feel guilty knowing that if i but washed, my pimples would go away—tonight for sure i will take a shower.) I was dressed in my dungerees and a tee shirt with out my hair combed. I then went to “Music Appreciation,” which was downstairs in the patients lounge. They were playing “Peer Gynt Suite” by Grieg and it was very relaxful. I stretched out on the couch and waited for sleep to overcome me. It did and about a half minute later Mrs. Krochmal (one of the morning nurses) woke me saying ‘Robert it is time to go to your work group.’ I yelled a little, protesting that i did not want to do the busy work repainting already painted furinture. (Mrs. Stevens, our usual occupational

leader, is on a one week vacation.) She said it was good for my therapy and i knew that i should go so I did. Mrs. Ely (?) was waiting and i decided to paint a little cabinet. We (there must be six of us?) cover all the painted “wood” (an ugly stain like the antique stain that momma did to all of the beautiful inlaid furniture that we got [after] Aunt Esther died) with a bright tan. It is boring work but it is supposed to be part of my therapy—it is called “milieu therapy” because of the importance of everything that is done by and for the patient in this hospital. I finished the cabinet and went on to a head-board. Mr. Payne (an aide) brought me a doctors’ appointment slip for 11:30 and i was happy that Dr. Plaut was going to see me in the morning. This was my first morning appointment since I’ve been here.

I think I am happier in the morning because i have faith that a new day has just dawned and there are going to be new things that i can learn and see and be with. I took a coffee break and went to the bathroom. Didn’t try to masturbate as i did the morning before. It seems that when i am boored the most i resort to masturbation to ease my almost anxieties. But thorazine keeps away most of my tensious (tension and anxiety) attacks. We did some painting and then started cleaning up.

I left previously and took a walk down to Creative Therapy to see sad Helen. She hadn’t painted anything yet but two people, one awful nervous man and a woman, were analyzing a sketch she did. I saw one girl’s picture—a copy of Roualt’s “Biblical Exodus” (I think it was called). It is a beautiful Roualt with a prancing horse and two figures on a landscape, with the golden sun and of course lots of black. Denny Klein, and here i associate Danni from, Winterset, and why hasn’t Ulla rewritten me—did i say something wrong in the last letter? And I left together and he made some mention of tennis (I am to teach him tennis in exchange for his teaching me chess, and of course other things—I do not feel inferior to him, just subordinate—he is reputed to have 180 I. Q.) but i answered that i had a D. A. [*Doctor’s Appointment*] at 11:30 and anyway it was too cold out.

The weather was sort of damp up till then, with puddles here and there. So i went back to the low and decided that i would get dressed for dear old Esther [*Plaut*] and myself, being at the last ses-

sion i had said some of my desire to change and become a neat young man. I chose my grey shirt, brown slacks and red tie and tennis sneakers.

I arrived at the waiting room about two minutes early (I am not too anxious about therapy sessions), hoping that i would not have to wait a half hour like i did on Monday. The Dr. opened the door and let Alan (Weinberg) out and said "Mr. Neugeboren," so i put the "Today's Health" down and went into her office, she said hello. Immediately i told her that i should have gotten mad on Monday because of the half hour wait, instead it seemed that she was mad at me. She didn't understand and said that Mrs. Krochmal must have made a mistake but that it was good that i told her so that now she knew, etc. She told me that i would have to stop seeing my friends that they were interfering with my therapy. I got sulky and resentful—the weekend was what i looked forward to and here she was taking my friends away. But she said that i made these friends when i was sick and that therefore they were mixed up and would only mess me up further. I understood what she was saying and she will allow me to see relatives so things are not too bad. I can have a friend if she agrees.

Then she tried to wring out of me why and what happened just before i got hospitalized. I quickly tried to communicate how depressed and apathetic and like a child i was. Some of my fears. She didn't seem to get what she wanted and i guess it takes a while before either of us understand exactly what was going on.

I ate lunch—stuffed turkey, sweet potato and ?—saw Dr. Plaut on line but what was there for the two of us to say? O yes during the session i wanted to know why everyone was so interested in me and said that she must enjoy seeing people get better and then stuck in that I saw Tommy Stewart last night and he was going to school and looked happy and maybe someday i could be like that. She asked me what i wanted and i said to have a girl and be happy to understand the world around me and to love those who love me.

She said they weren't unreasonable demands and that maybe i could achieve most if not all of these goals.

She asked me
what i wanted
and i said to
have a girl
and be happy
to understand
the world
around me and
to love those
who love me.

Ate lunch with a somewhat pretty lady from low 2 and discussed the fact that she was getting out soon—asked her if she felt better and she said somewhat. Played volleyball after lunch and left after two good games. Wandered in the library and tried to read the N. Y. Times but was not interested. Bob (Gold) was there and I asked him to give *[me]* some art lessons. He did and it was great. He showed me how in a good painting things, masses rest on other masses and that the space of air left around the object was very important. Started reading a pamphlet on Jackson Pollack, wow! I want to action paint—came back to the ward and saw Bob (Miller) in a dopey mood, asked him if he wanted to play ping pong. We did

Going back
i saw a sight.
A doctor,
youngish, was
wearing a
beret swimming
a briefcase
and singing
“Hava Negila”
just like I
would do. So
maybe i am
not so sick
after all.

but i was scared that he would pass out but none of the aides seemed concerned about his greenness. We later went to hear some music—Brahms i think—and he read the Pollack book and i talked to Allan Weinberg and somehow managed to tell him of my operation [*orchietomy*].

Then i was told to make my bed and i did. I finished reading the Pollack pamphlet and went to dinner with Morris. Dinner was grilled cheese and bacon and ice cream. I had three ice-creams and one of them tasted funny. We were giggling—Marty, Tim James, and Cindy (Abrams), when Cindy started washing her face with two grilled cheese sandwiches—then she took mustard and slapped it on her face all the while hysterical with laughter. She wiped it off. I asked Tim if he was going to go to current events class and he said no. I left the dining room in a cheerful mood and met the twins—Betty and barbara, with Sam (Ware) and Roz. They were going outside the gate for a walk into town. I decided i would sneak out with them just for the fun.

I saw a beautiful blackbird with white tailfeathers. I also saw a large type bird that they said was a quail or dove it was beautiful. We ran past the gate but i decided that i wanted to get better and disciplined so i said i was going back and i did. Going back i saw a sight. A doctor, youngish, was wearing a beret swimming a briefcase and singing “Hava Negila” just like I would do. So maybe i am not so sick after all.

I went to current events but after five minutes i said to myself what was i doing here with all these nebishes? I should be outside enjoying nature. So I left and took a walk—remembered that Smith was going to open the library. They have nice chairs with armrests in the library, also a nice phonograph. I put on a piano concerto by Beethoven. And i took out a big art book entitled “The Lasker Collection”. It was beautiful—Dufys and Matisses and Picassos... then i quickly looked through a book on Gaugin and saw some of his watercolours for the first time. The man is a semi-genius. I came out of the library reeling with colors, maroons and oranges. I would do another painting. A still life with the fruits (not fruit) that i had back in my room. Two oranges a banana and apple. I worked only with a pallette knife, improvising a dark shining blue background—the only definite shape is the banana—maybe I’ll outline them in black. Played some ping pong and then to the evening activity which was dancers and a singer.

I came in and walked right to the front row and there tried to look under the dancers’ wide skirts but saw nothing. I saw Bob and Helen sitting on the opposite side and planned to stay with them, my friends. What makes a friend why did i pick them to be friendly with? Who knows. Then Sarah, who is in the choral club with me started singing with a magnificent dramatic soprano voice and the evening activity was over.

I came back and tried to do some reading from—space-time and architecture but my eyes became blurry. Listened to Brahms, went to the toilet and started typing this. Talked with William and found it hard falling asleep. Dreamt of a trial or a composition about a trial. woke at 8:15.