

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

The Life of John Berryman

John Haffenden



The Life of John Berryman

First published in 1982, *The Life of John Berryman* draws on extensive research in the USA and on an enormous collection of hitherto unpublished materials – journals, letters, stories and poetry – to build a biography that recounts in absorbing detail the public and private stages of John Berryman's career. It also offers an intimate portrait of a creative artist: his compulsive self-presentation and self-reproach, his moral and artistic dilemmas, his dedication and his accomplishments.

John Berryman occupies a central place among the outstanding poets of recent times. The course of his life ran between the extremes of personal degradation and artistic ecstasy. He suffered the early suicide of his father, the dominance of his mother, poverty and professional setbacks, psychiatric treatment, alcoholism, and sexual and spiritual vexation. He became an electrifying, fearful teacher and a loving, jealous friend. His mentors and close associates included Mark Van Doren, Richard Blackmur, Allen Tate, Robert Lowell and Saul Bellow. The years brought him spells of deep personal joy and artistic fulfilment, but all too heavy a hand of terrible suffering. The book will be an extremely interesting read for students of literature.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

The Life of John Berryman

John Haffenden



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

First published in 1982
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd

This edition first published in 2022 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN
and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© John Haffenden 1982

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Publisher's Note

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent.

Disclaimer

The publisher has made every effort to trace copyright holders and welcomes correspondence from those they have been unable to contact.

A Library of Congress record exists under LCCN: 81023501

ISBN: 978-1-032-19291-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-25859-9 (ebk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-19310-6 (pbk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003258599

The life of John Berryman

John Haffenden



Routledge & Kegan Paul
Boston, London, Melbourne and Henley

*First published in 1982
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd
9 Park Street, Boston, Mass. 02108, USA,
39 Store Street, London WC1E 7DD,
296 Beaconsfield Parade, Middle Park
Melbourne 3206, Australia and
Broadway House, Newtown Road,
Henley-on-Thames, Oxon RG9 1EN
Set in Linotron Bembo by
Rowland Phototypesetting Ltd, Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk
and printed in the United States of America
© John Haffenden 1982
No part of this book may be reproduced in
any form without permission from the
publisher, except for the quotation of brief
passages in criticism*

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Haffenden, John

The life of John Berryman

Bibliography p.

Includes index

1. Berryman, John, 1914–1972 – Biography.

2. Poets, American – 20th century – Biography.

I. Title.

PS3503.E744Z59 811'.54(B) 81-23501

ISBN 0-7100-9216-4 AACR2

Contents

A note on spelling and punctuation	vii
Chronology	ix
1 Introductory	I
2 Beginnings: boyhood and father's suicide	8
3 A monkey among kings, 1927–32	35
4 Scapegrace and spirited student, 1932–36	57
5 Distinction and first fiancée, 1936–39	76
6 First teaching and another loss, 1939–40	112
7 Harvard and marriage, 1940–43	129
8 Princeton and the pains of scholarship, 1943–46	148
9 Art and adultery, 1947	167
<i>Berryman's Sonnets</i>	167
Aftermath	183
10 Work and shame, 1948–51	196
11 Transitions, 1952–54	224
12 Minneapolis and second marriage, 1954–57	245
13 Breaking-points, 1958–59	268
14 Third marriage, 1960–62	286
15 Triumphs and trials, 1962–66	304
16 The sick and brilliant public man, 1966–69	340

17 Drink as disease, 1969–70	360
18 Precarious recovery, 1970–71	378
19 Last months, 1971–72	396
Appendix: A famous forebear: Robert Glenn Shaver	421
Selected bibliography	423
Acknowledgments and notes on sources	425
Index of works by Berryman	433
General index	437

A note on spelling and punctuation

From the time of his arrival in England in 1936 (shortly before his twenty-second birthday), Berryman adopted the English spelling of all words which have American variants, and retained that convention for the rest of his life – in letters and journals, and in publications. Accordingly, all quotations given from Berryman's published works, and transcriptions from his unpublished writings and letters, follow his own form. By the same token, all quotations from his writings which predate his arrival in England in 1936 follow the originals. Likewise, the punctuation is in all cases Berryman's own, apart from any unintentional slips which are my responsibility.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

Chronology

- 1914 Born, 25 October, the son of John Allyn Smith and Martha (Little) Smith, in McAlester, Oklahoma, where father works in a bank.
- 1919 Birth of Robert Jefferson, Berryman's brother.
- 1920/21 The Smith family moves to Anadarko, Oklahoma, where father works in the First State Bank and John attends West Grade school.
- 1924 John Allyn Smith resigns his post at the bank and is appointed Assistant Game and Fish Warden.
- 1925 Parents make a reconnaissance trip to Florida, while John and his brother become boarders at St Joseph's Academy in Chickasha, Oklahoma.
- 1926 The Smith family takes up residence in Tampa, Oklahoma, where John Angus McAlpin Berryman becomes their friend; John Allyn Smith commits suicide; Martha marries John Angus McAlpin Berryman, whose adoptive sons presently take his surname; the Berryman family moves to New York City, where John attends Public School 69, Jackson Heights.
- 1928 John enters South Kent School in Connecticut; bullied and unhappy, he none the less makes good academic progress.
- 1931 Attempts suicide.
- 1932 Enters Columbia College, New York, where, under the influence of his mother and of Mark Van Doren, he eventually makes the grade as a scholar.
- 1936 Graduates Phi Beta Kappa, and wins the Euretta J. Kellett scholarship to study in England; takes up residence at

- Clare College, Cambridge, where his tutor is George Rylands; attends a talk by T. S. Eliot; meets W. H. Auden.
- 1937 Befriends Brian Boydell; meets Dylan Thomas; also meets W. B. Yeats at the Athenaeum Club; meets Beatrice, who becomes his first fiancée, and takes a summer holiday with her in Germany; wins Oldham Shakespeare Scholarship.
- 1938 Returns home to New York, where Beatrice later visits him; meets Bhain Campbell, and becomes part-time poetry editor for the *Nation*.
- 1939 Meets Delmore Schwartz; is appointed Instructor in English at Wayne State University, Detroit, where he begins to suffer from a state of nervous collapse which is diagnosed as *petit mal*.
- 1940 Berryman is appointed Instructor in English (for four months) at Harvard University; publishes 'Twenty Poems' in *Five Young American Poets*; Bhain Campbell dies.
- 1941 Berryman meets Eileen Patricia Mulligan.
- 1942 Publishes *Poems*; marries Eileen.
- 1943 Ends appointment at Harvard; grubs for jobs and tackles some temporary appointments, including three weeks' teaching at the Iona School, New Rochelle, and is finally appointed Instructor in English for one year at Princeton University, where he works with Richard Blackmur; meets Erich Kahler and Christian Gauss.
- 1944 Meets Robert Lowell; lectures for three weeks at Briarcliff College, New York, and is then awarded a Foundation research fellowship by the Rockefeller Foundation; works on an edition of *King Lear*; meets Dwight Macdonald, Paul Goodman, and Edmund Wilson.
- 1945 Records his poetry for the Library of Congress; his Rockefeller Fellowship is renewed for a further year; commissioned to write a book on Stephen Crane; writes 'The Imaginary Jew', which wins first prize in *Kenyon Review*–Doubleday Doran contest.
- 1946 Becomes Associate in Creative Writing at Princeton University (1946–7), where his students include W. S. Merwin, Bruce Berlind, Sidney Monas, and William Arrowsmith.
- 1947 Meets and falls in love with 'Lise', and writes a sequence of sonnets later published (1967) as *Berryman's Sonnets*;

- meets T. S. Eliot and Ben Shahn; begins psychiatric treatment.
- 1948 Starts work on 'Homage to Mistress Bradstreet'; has other love affairs; publishes *The Dispossessed*; meets Saul Bellow and Ezra Pound; is appointed Resident Fellow in Creative Writing at Princeton University (1948-9).
- 1949 Works on an unfinished sequence of poems, *The Black Book*, and on his study of Stephen Crane; wins Guarantors Prize (*Poetry*) and Shelley Memorial Award (Poetry Society of America); is appointed Alfred Hodder Fellow at Princeton University (1950-1).
- 1950 Teaches one semester at the University of Washington, Seattle; wins Levinson Prize (*Poetry*); publishes *Stephen Crane* (critical biography); lectures for two weeks at the University of Vermont; meets Randall Jarrell.
- 1952 Spends spring semester as Elliston Professor of Poetry at the University of Cincinnati; undertakes more intensive work on 'Homage to Mistress Bradstreet'; awarded Guggenheim Fellowship (1952-3) for critical study of Shakespeare and for creative writing.
- 1953 Completes 'Homage to Mistress Bradstreet' (first published in *Partisan Review*); John and Eileen Berryman spend the summer months in Europe, where they meet Theodore Roethke and Louis MacNeice; they visit the MacNeices in London, where Eileen is hospitalised for a back injury; Berryman is separated from Eileen and spends the latter part of the year in New York City.
- 1954 Teaches one semester of creative writing at the University of Iowa (where he also begins to study Hebrew); his students include W. D. Snodgrass and Donald Justice; teaches a summer school at Harvard, where his students include Edward Hoagland; returns to teach at Iowa in the fall, but is dismissed after a drunken altercation; at Allen Tate's suggestion, moves to Minneapolis; begins a long period of dream-analysis.
- 1955 Starts teaching in Humanities at the University of Minnesota, where his chairman is Ralph Ross; at work on *The Dream Songs*.
- 1956 Translates Paul Claudel's 'Le Chemin de la croix' for Antal Dorati; divorced from Eileen; marries Elizabeth Ann Levine; publishes *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet*; awarded Rockefeller Fellowship in poetry by *Partisan Review*.
- 1957 Awarded Harriet Monroe Poetry Prize; son, Paul, is

- born; Berryman is awarded a tenured appointment in Humanities and English at the University of Minnesota; visits Japan; lectures for two months in India under the auspices of the United States Information Service; spends last weeks of the year with his family vacationing in Spain.
- 1958 Appointed Associate Profesor of Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Minnesota, but is aggrieved when a Special Faculty Meeting votes to disestablish the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies; publishes *His Thought Made Pockets & The Plane Buckt*.
- 1959 Divorced from Ann; awarded the Brandeis University Creative Arts Award; teaches for two weeks in June at the University of Utah.
- 1960 Teaches one semester in the Department of Speech at the University of California, Berkeley; publishes (with Ralph Ross and Allen Tate) *The Arts of Reading*, an anthology with commentary.
- 1961 Spends eight weeks teaching at the School of Letters, Indiana University; marries Kathleen (Kate) Donahue, his third and last wife.
- 1962 Teaches at Bread Load School of English, Middlebury, Vermont; meets Robert Frost; becomes visiting professor (1962–3) at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island; participates in National Poetry Festival, Washington, DC; his first daughter, Martha, is born.
- 1963 Family spends summer weeks in rural Rhode Island; Berryman receives an award from the Ingram Merrill Foundation; family resides for some weeks (1963–4) in Washington, DC.
- 1964 Publishes *77 Dream Songs* (the first volume of *The Dream Songs*); wins Russell Loines Award (National Institute of Arts and Letters); buys house at 33 Arthur Avenue S.E., Minneapolis.
- 1965 Awarded Pulitzer Prize for *77 Dream Songs*; awarded Guggenheim Fellowship for 1966–7.
- 1966 The family lives in Dublin (1966–7).
- 1967 Awarded 5,000 dollars by the Academy of American Poets; receives 10,000-dollar award from the National Endowment for the Arts; publishes *Berryman's Sonnets* and *Short Poems*.
- 1968 Publishes *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (the conclusion of *The Dream Songs*).
- 1969 *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* wins the National Book

Award and the Bollingen Prize; publishes *The Dream Songs* (complete edition); appointed Regents' Professor of Humanities at the University of Minnesota; admitted for treatment at Hazelden, an alcoholic rehabilitation centre.

- 1970 Treated for alcoholism at Abbott Hospital, Minneapolis; then at the Intensive Alcohol Treatment Center, St Mary's Hospital, Minneapolis; joins Alcoholics Anonymous; publishes *Love & Fame*.
- 1971 Works on a novel, *Recovery*, and on poems later collected in *Delusions, Etc.*; birth of Sarah Rebecca, second daughter; is awarded a Senior Fellowship by the National Endowment for the Humanities.
- 1972 Commits suicide, 7 January.

POSTHUMOUS PUBLICATIONS

- 1972 *Delusions, Etc.*
- 1973 *Recovery*, a novel
- 1976 *The Freedom of the Poet*, essays and stories
- 1977 *Henry's Fate & Other Poems, 1967–1972* (edited with an introduction by John Haffenden)



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

1

Introductory

My engagement with John Berryman began in 1970, at a time when I was reading for a research degree under the supervision of Professor Richard Ellmann at Oxford University. My topic was a study of the modern American long poem, taking into consideration texts by Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Olson. After some months of failing to discover the significant lines of my proposed comparison, I turned dizzily to Berryman's *Dream Songs* with a naive view to including them under the same rubric. I had first read the *Songs* in the late 1960s, when they left me decidedly interested but baffled. Reading them again in 1970 and 1971, I found myself perhaps a little less baffled but stimulated beyond belief and compelled to understand more. I wrote a preliminary essay on Berryman and sent it to Berryman's London publisher. When I was invited to Faber & Faber in January 1972, I missed the day's newspaper on my journey and only learned on arrival that Berryman had just committed suicide.

I had recently read Berryman's latest volume, *Love & Fame*, which excited me as an entirely accessible book, teeming with idiomatic and moral risks and raising fascinating problems of form. Berryman seemed to have taken his real life on board in a new way. One poem, 'Friendless', for example, begins

Friendless in Clare, except Brian Boydell
a Dubliner with no hair
an expressive tenor speaking voice

— lines which readily conjured up the Professor of Music I had met while an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin. Unable to control my curiosity, I contacted Professor Boydell, and from that

point on my eagerness to comprehend the life of John Berryman would not be checked. With considerable lack of tact I wrote to Mrs Kate Berryman after only a few months, and she properly met my importunate queries by politely temporising. Eventually, at Easter 1974, while teaching at the University of Exeter, I made my first visit to Minneapolis: my search for John Berryman had truly begun.

Berryman belongs to what has become known as the Middle Generation of American poets, a group that includes Delmore Schwartz, Robert Lowell, Randall Jarrell, and Theodore Roethke. It is a critical convenience to call much of their work 'Confessional', a classification to which Berryman himself responded with 'rage and contempt'. 'The word doesn't mean anything,' he protested. Such a label may produce a sweet theory, but it might turn out – just as another theory turned out for those who attempted to use flamingoes as croquet-mallets in *Alice in Wonderland* – to be limp in application. Certainly the individual writers of that generation (it may be worth recalling that W. H. Auden was only eight years older than Berryman) either knew each other personally or had affinities with one another's work, but the question of literary affiliation cannot be glossed in terms of an easy succession. In popular opinion, as my own students sometimes tell me, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, published in 1959, instigated a new fashion of opening poems nakedly to the personal life which was followed by Sylvia Plath and her imitators. Even if that facile view were partly true, we need to reckon with the fact that Berryman began writing his *Dream Songs* in 1955 (not to mention *Berryman's Sonnets* from 1947) without knowing of Lowell's *Life Studies*: so the matter of borrowing or influence immediately runs up against an awkwardly anachronistic hitch. Anyway, influence runs in many directions. In the late 1960s, after the publication of *The Dream Songs*, Lowell wrote to Berryman, 'I think I am in your debt – at least I say so in my preface. I've just completed a long poem, *Notebook of a Year*. . . . It's considerably shorter than yours, and very different.' Evidently cautious of the possibility that critics might pan him for directly imitating Berryman, Lowell wrote him again in September 1969, 'I think anyone who cared for your book would for mine. Anyway, we're accomplished beyond jealousy. Without you, I would find writing more puzzling.' Whether he derived more from Berryman as a person or from his writing is a question which must be left to critics at large to assess and interpret, but I don't think it snide to point out that a Freudian slip on Lowell's part betrayed his feeling that he had actually gained much from Berryman's literary example: that last sentence originally read, 'Without your book, I would

find writing more puzzling.' Furthermore, indebtedness is not confined to a reciprocity between one poet and another. Berryman publicly acknowledged that he took a certain charge off at least one novelist, Saul Bellow. 'In the Bradstreet poem, as I seized inspiration from *Augie March*, I sort of seized inspiration, I think, from Lowell, rather than imitated him.' When Bellow finished his novel *Herzog*, Berryman wrote him this fan-letter: 'Nobody has ever sat down & wallowed to this extent in his own life, *with* full art – I mean, novelists. I don't know of anything to compare it to, except you. . . . Go to heaven.' The fact that Berryman limited his praise to Bellow's achievement in the genre of the novel may imply that he reserved a like success to his own work in verse.

What I mean to say is that it requires another book altogether – and *many* books will come – to analyse Berryman's proper place in the literary culture of his historical epoch. The present book is the story of one life; it certainly draws on Berryman's friendships and associations, but I have not attempted to explore the entire literary milieu, only the psychology of one man. Time and study should tell us, for example, how much Lowell's work speaks to a sense of cultural and social history, and how much Berryman's is a function of moral and spiritual preoccupations.

Literary success and critical acclaim came late to Berryman. In retrospect he could announce with some wry satisfaction, 'early fame is very dangerous indeed, and my situation, which was so painful to me for many years, was really in a way beneficial.' The irony of that pronouncement is a sad one to investigate, since Berryman was a middle-aged man before he did his best work, and he lived only to the age of fifty-seven. Although what is arguably his greatest achievement, *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (which cost him untold anguish of spirit and energy in the early 1950s), earned intense praise – Edmund Wilson called it 'the most distinguished long poem by an American since *The Waste Land*' – it captured no quick public, and the poet had to labour into his last decade of life before his masterpiece, *The Dream Songs*, would be widely acknowledged as the product of someone quite other than a literary minimus. The course of his life runs the whole gamut from personal degradation to artistic ecstasy. It is, to say the least, distinguished for energy and intensity: he suffered the early suicide of his father, the dominance of his mother, poverty and professional setbacks, alcoholism and spiritual vexation. On one level, his story is that of an obsessional neurotic; but if he was cranky, he was also vibrant and entertaining, an electrifying and fearful teacher, loving and silly, occasionally unkind but far more often overwhelmingly generous toward his friends, lovers, colleagues and students.

Berryman's most severe critics have held him to be egocentric, self-indulgent and obscurantist, but Berryman's work nowhere rehearses the vanity denounced by such views. Fame, or the fact that he was not what Hemingway called a good drunk, Berryman sometimes took as his privilege for bad behaviour, but such conduct puts a scandal only on the man, not on his work. Whatever his subject, the poet imagines and composes it. While I relish the poet Douglas Dunn's belief that 'poems should come on as strong as they can', I would need persuading beyond reason to believe that Berryman belongs to what he has called 'the tradition of the crazed exposure of the American ego'. With respect to the hero of what he once termed the 'Tragical History' of *The Dream Songs*, Berryman observed, 'Henry both is and is not me, obviously. We touch at certain points. But I am an actual human being; he is nothing but a series of conceptions – my conceptions.' I see no reason to quarrel with that definition, and it is not a contradiction to say that his work draws on his life for subject-matter.

In what way, then, if at all, does the life throw light on the work? Although, as some critics believe, the imagination has no biography, biographical information can assuredly illuminate and provide an aid to analysis of the poems, even if it cannot explain them. To take one notable example: the poem *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* is centrally concerned with childbirth, motherhood, adultery and alienation. Berryman declared that several factors contributed to his feeling of being ready to write the poem in 1952–3. One was his tremendously strong sense of guilt over the fact that his wife Eileen had not had a child, for which he blamed himself far more even than for his affairs. Throughout the marriage he had felt deeply ambivalent at the prospect of fatherhood, and had compounded it after 1947 through his adulteries, heavy drinking, and staying up all too often through the night. In a late interview with the *Paris Review* he made the misleadingly simple assertion that 'we very much wanted a child', but it comes much nearer to the truth of his experience to say that he always had dreadfully divided feelings about the possibility of becoming a father, feelings which pervaded the writing of the poem (see also note to Chapter 10).

That is a pointed example, but it does underline the need for us to discriminate the truths of Berryman's life from the sometimes unreliable constructions he himself put upon it, and from the conclusions critics might otherwise draw from unstable or improper evidence. It obliges us to be generously wary of the poet's own developing sense of his identity and history, and indeed to spell out all the biographical facts, of which any number gloss the vivid work which is Berryman's legacy. My study of Berryman's major

poems, *John Berryman: A Critical Commentary* (Macmillan and New York University Press, 1980), will I hope complement this book.

In a very informative and useful work, *John Berryman: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), Joel Conarroe saliently remarks,

The details of artists' lives have a strong attraction for us; this is especially true of a writer as brilliant, as troubled, and as flamboyant as Berryman. We are compelled to ask questions, some of which are probably unanswerable, about his erratic behavior and about the sources of his art. Did he, with the death of his father, suffer an irreversible loss, one that was to be the source of the guilt and despair that dominated his adult life? Can a man mourn a loss for nearly fifty years, or is such mourning merely an excuse for heavy drinking? Was it his loss of faith, following his father's suicide, that was in fact responsible for his lifelong anxiety? Was it his mother after all, as his posthumous novel suggests, who was the dominant person in his life? Was his preoccupation with fame a product of his insecurity? Were his classes and poetry readings, at times spellbinding and at times incoherent, an essential form of reinforcement? Did his sense of personal debasement also require reinforcement, thereby contributing to his behavior? Was he, as he suggests here and there in his work, latently homosexual? Are his *Dream Songs*, as Lewis Hyde insists, to be explained away as the self-pitying indulgences of a resentful alcoholic? Would he have survived in a city with an intellectual climate different from that of Minneapolis? Is there anything anyone could have done to rescue him from himself? Was his suicide a deliberate act? Was it impulsive? Was it, like that of Hemingway, a response to physical and intellectual deterioration?

I hope that the following pages provide the evidence, if not all the answers.

I have tried to trace the process of one man's life, both the dignity and the distress. Writing such a book within a relatively short period of Berryman's death, I have encountered and attempted to come to terms with the problems of historical perspective. While sentimentality should perhaps be avoided in writing about the recently dead, affection and irritation, for example, may have a place. As I discovered at an early stage of research Berryman's life story is not available to a synthetic view: the interstices of his complex career tell us as much as the achievements and prominent

deeds, the high or the hot spots. I have been partial less to explanation than to information, in the conviction that greater knowledge might lead to deeper appreciation. In reading other lives, I have been struck, for example, at how infrequently biographers give details of the bank balances of their subjects. And yet the state of one's pocket is more than a material matter, it is a moral and spiritual condition, and I have accordingly included a number of facts about Berryman's earnings. I have often felt that determinative interpretations of a biography are postulated on the supposition that the dense pattern of a real life should yield to meanings as simple as a rhumb; they sell the reader short by trimming texture to a thesis. Biography is an art, but it owes a primary obligation to truth. To that end I have taken it as my brief to relate all the necessary facts of Berryman's life. To avoid offence to persons still living, I have omitted some facts, but I have done my best to avoid falsehood. In certain instances I have consented or chosen to employ pseudonyms in preference to specifically identifying persons. The name 'Beatrice' is used by agreement, and I have taken the convenient course of retaining the name 'Lise' (a pseudonym invented and used by Berryman in *Berryman's Sonnets*) for the woman who figured in his life during 1947 (chapter 9). Likewise, in a very few other passages where identification would serve no useful purpose, I have reduced two proper names to their initials – 'J' and 'S' – and two others (in a brief passage from Berryman's journal quoted in chapter 3) to random initials, 'Y' and 'Z'.

Although I have felt grave qualms over the radical issue of warts, there is some consolation in knowing that Berryman reckoned his life story would be written, and that he felt sanguine at the prospect. While examining his papers, I experienced a gratifying *frisson* when I read a passage from a Paris letter of December 1936 which describes an evening stroll to the aptly named Rue de la Lune, where he 'looked up and lo! it was the moon – right large & white & round in a purple sky.' Describing the phenomenon, young Berryman knowingly added in parentheses, 'Note to my biographer – leave that out, it's true but it ain't convincin'.' In later years he was occasionally heard to account for his behaviour with a remark such as, 'It's all part of my biography, that's all!' The years brought him spells of deep personal joy and artistic fulfilment, but all too heavy a hand of terrible suffering. Towards the end Berryman himself pinpointed the tragic irony of his life in these remarks to Peter Stitt:

I have . . . a feeling that endowment is a very small part of achievement. I would rate it about fifteen or twenty percent. Then you have historical luck, personal luck, health, things like

that, then you have hard work, sweat. And you have ambition. . . . I do feel strongly that among the greatest pieces of luck for high achievement is ordeal. . . . My idea is this: the artist is extremely lucky who is presented with the worst possible ordeal which will not actually kill him [‘The Art of Poetry XVI’, *Paris Review*, XIV, winter 1972].

2

Beginnings: boyhood and father's suicide

John Berryman believed that his life of trials was patterned from the age of eleven, when his father committed suicide, but his mother had first and long dominated his destiny. A troubled and powerful woman, she herself inherited a famous grandfather and parents who were divided too soon after her birth. Although her lineage was entirely a southern one, Martha was born on Sunday, 8 July 1894 in Du Quoin, Illinois, where her mother had chosen an ill-judged time to visit friends; Martha's kin sometimes teased her for being born a 'Yankee'. Except for the fact that her father, Alvin B. Little, gave her a bound edition of Shakespeare as a consolation present during an early bout of typhoid, he lacks a positive showing during her childhood: by the time she was five, he had deserted the family. As a possible consequence, Martha May, his wife, seems always to have disliked or distrusted most men, and lived a proud forsakenness for several decades.

There seems little reason to doubt that her mother was duly, if unlavishly, attentive to her upbringing, but Martha believed that she had gone unloved. Having no siblings, she apparently failed for not being a boy, and displeased her mother even further by bearing too great a resemblance to her father, which was especially a fault when she behaved badly. As years advanced she could no longer remember her father for herself, but – as she put it – 'entirely through my mother's eyes and tongue'. She felt badly deprived of her father, in fact, and longed for paternal love, doubly so when her mother blamed her for being his child. When she grew up, she consecrated her young maturity to a passionate love for her own offspring, and always burdened John Berryman with an impossibly great responsibility for her state of heart. In her sixty-fifth year, for example, she wrote him this piteous picture of her early deprivation:

I . . . loved my mother only in the family sense . . . liked her only rarely . . . knew that she cared for me only as an extension of herself, resented me for my youth and difference, hated me for the child of my father whom she despised and perhaps rightly, envied me the sons she lacked – I, who longed for her love and have love-groped my way through life for the need of it.

But during her girlhood she did find native grounds for believing herself to be special and socially superior. She basked in the prestige won for the family by that famous warrior General Robert Glenn Shaver (see Appendix), her valiant and kindly grandfather, whom she always regarded in terms of 'adoration'. He clearly loved the child in return, and gave her the indulgence she lacked from her mother. Mrs Little kept her in a close childhood which excluded the society of other children, and until the age of eleven Martha was taught by a tutoress and gave herself airs. All too taken with the selectness of her family background, she liked to retain a certain degree of disdainfulness throughout life, embodying in her own manner the eminence won by her grandfather.

As a single parent, Mrs Little was exposed to a good deal of small-town gossip, which added to make her jealous of privacy and exclusive in friendships. Martha always remembered the pain of ostracism and the isolation of her childhood.

I [was] the child of a broken marriage in the days when even a woman who divorced a man for just cause was regarded as declassée and her child little better than a bastard. You can have no idea what it was like at the end of the last century and the beginning of this; perhaps not everywhere, I don't know, I only know St Louis and Arkansas, and then Oklahoma. I was not quite twelve when we moved to Oklahoma, my mother and I, after seven years of pity and scorn. It is the children who peck at the stranger; my mother, an Episcopalian, oddly enough, went to my hated father's church, the Christian Church – not oddly, I suppose, the Episcopal Church was strongly opposed to divorces and divorcees then – and made friends and seemed to enjoy herself. I was never more than on the fringes, always subject to someone saying, you know she has no father, well, where is he, ohhhh . . .

Martha was twelve when her mother took her from St Louis, Missouri, to McAlester, Oklahoma, where she at last went to school with other children, but on first arrival must have struck her

classmates as precocious, snobbish, and fit for bullying, as this piece of autobiography from among her papers suggests.

Martha Little stood at bay, pressed flat against the wall of the school entry-way, hands outstretched against the rough brick, all of her sucked tight against that wall as if there only lay sanctuary. The desperate, wide gold-flecked eyes which had first flickered from one face to another in that semicircle of excited, scornful girls, clung now in a duel of gazes to the black eyes of the girl directly in front of her. This was dreadful, why, these girls were only a little older than she was, about twelve or thirteen, and they looked as if they wanted to tear her to pieces! *She* couldn't help it because her clothes weren't like theirs, perhaps if they knew that she'd *love* to be just like them – but this faint hope died as she listened to the jeers and hateful phrases pouring like toads from their mouths. It wasn't *her* fault that Katie brought her to school each morning and waited for her each evening – she'd *love* to come and go just like they did. The golden-bronze braids quivered as she thought of how she hoped she was going to be such happy friends with all of these girls; she'd never had a real friend, and – she'd have to do something right away or she'd cry and they'd laugh at her.

Because of her early tutoring she was higher in school than her peers, and at fifteen entered Christian College, a Junior College for Young Women, in Columbia, Missouri. After two years, she graduated as valedictorian in 1911. According to her own account from much later in life, she was then due to enter the University of Oklahoma (with a job in the library to meet her expenses) to major in philology, but her mother had no time for idle aspirations and found her a post as schoolteacher in nearby Sasakwa, then a town of fewer than five hundred inhabitants in a region of bleak sand-hills and scrub-oak. Much later, on 17 January 1971, in a letter to her son's third wife, Kate Berryman, she rehearsed the situation that had been thrust upon her.

I was 17 in July and started teaching the first of September, the fourth, fifth and sixth grades, only twenty-three in all, ranging in age from ten to a giant of 18 who hadn't had much time for schooling because he was needed at the farm. . . . In October I went over, on a weekend, and took my examination for the post and got the only 100 I ever had. And when I resigned in November, effective at the Christmas holiday, the Superintendent of Schools for the state wrote me that my classes

were the best in the state, in all areas, and I wept – I remember because I never cried; that was my only defence, and it wasn't kind of me because my mother would have comforted me, I think, if I had sobbed and 'taken on' but I had only my pride and my abilities, and they were mine and I would not do them down.

Because her mother had shown her neither love nor confidence, Martha had learned to harden in defiance of her, to commit her activities to personal pride and not to any family feeling. The move to McAlester allowed her professional independence and freedom of association, and it was not long before the pleasant and unassuming young bank manager, John Allyn Smith, began to court her. John Berryman rather exaggerated the situation in which his parents became acquainted when he told the *Harvard Advocate* in a 1969 interview, 'they were the only people who could read and write for hundreds of miles around.'

Born and raised in the northern state of Minnesota, John Allyn Smith was a comparative newcomer to the south. His father, Jefferson Leonard Smith, had been born in Maine on 6 September 1838 of an old-established family. During the Civil War he was severely wounded at the Battle of the Wilderness (it is possible that his leg was amputated or maimed, since he walked with a limp for the rest of his life), and consequently discharged from service. He re-enlisted after recovering from his wounds, however, and served out the remainder of the War. In 1866 he migrated to Minnesota where he took up land in the western part of the state, but – according to family tradition – was forced to withdraw because of Indian troubles. He then settled in the town of South Stillwater (about ten miles from Minneapolis), where he was for thirty years a foreman for the St Croix Lumber Company.

A tall, rugged man with enormous square shoulders, he married in Minneapolis a handsome, forceful young woman of twenty-two, Mary Kanar (variously Kenna or Kemrar in official documents), on 30 October 1869. Born in Indian Town, New Brunswick, Canada, Mary was a stern, domineering, stubborn, illogical woman of Irish Catholic ancestry from County Cork; she spoke with a brogue, and had inherited a flashing Irish wit from her parents.

In 1872, shortly before the birth of their third child, Jefferson Leonard and Mary Smith took up their residence in South Stillwater and built a fine wooden-frame family house, which they occupied until their deaths. Altogether Mary bore her husband ten children

(six girls and four boys, at regular two-yearly intervals), of whom the last born – ‘the spoiled baby of the family’, Martha later called him – was John Allyn, on 21 March 1887.

Nothing is known of John Allyn Smith's childhood education, but from September 1905 he attended a course in Commerce for some months at the Globe College of Business in St Paul, Minnesota. It is not possible to discover whether or not he gained any qualification from his studies, but he subsequently spent two years as a relief man at the different yards of the Inter-State Lumber Company, Stillwater: ‘a model young man, with no bad habits,’ wrote his boss, W. B. Thorp, in a reference. His brother, James William (the Smiths' second child, John Allyn's senior by almost sixteen years), had at some time moved south to Holdenville, Oklahoma, where he made so good as to own a bank. John Allyn and another brother went down to work with him, but Will (as he was always called) died of pneumonia in 1911, probably before John Allyn Smith took up his duties at the branch bank in Sasakwa. (The career of the other brother is lost in mystery, since he disappeared from the bank and was possibly made the scapegoat for certain speculations.)

Stuck in what Berryman himself later called the ‘little hole’ of Sasakwa, Smith earnestly courted Martha, who apparently resisted him. She later claimed that, in consequence of her strict upbringing, she had been ‘totally ignorant of sex’ and that Smith ‘raped me when I refused to marry him and said he would tell my mother if I didn't agree. I knew she would blame me, so I agreed.’ She wrote that brief, unfinished account late in life, and we cannot now know the truth of the situation, but there is a ring of authenticity in the claim that Smith might have blackmailed her into marriage with the threat of her mother's astringent and uncompassionate response. (They lived in the same boarding-house, and – in order to gain entrance to her room – he apparently rapped on her door and said there was a fire downstairs.) Her account is blunt, and perhaps the situation was more complicated, but nothing is known in mitigation except that he did marry her.

The couple were regularly married on 25 July 1912. Martha was just eighteen years of age, Smith twenty-five. It seems characteristic of Mrs Little's nature that she refused Martha a wedding-dress on the grounds that the couple would barely have time to catch their train to Minnesota, where Smith took his bride to visit his family straight after the wedding.

Apart from the forbidding prospect of meeting several of Smith's brothers and sisters, the young Martha had to encounter the stalwart parents. She found Mary Smith ‘a most commanding

woman' who instantly disliked her, most especially for her southern airs and for coming from the state of Oklahoma where one of her sons had died and another been lost. Her mother-in-law's dislike was made perfectly evident when Martha found herself, the new bride and member of the family, served last at the table. Looking critically at the girl, the domineering Mrs Smith had finally asked, 'What part would you like?' Adopting a southern convention in reply, Martha said bravely, 'Anything will be fine, thank you, Lady Smith.' Mrs Smith scornfully responded, 'I don't want to hear any of that southern nonsense – you can just call me Mrs Smith until it comes natural when you have a child to call me Gran'ma'. Smith asked his blanching bride if she would like to be excused from the table, but she stuck proudly by the board.

Leonard Jefferson Smith, who clearly reminded her of her grandfather, she thought 'a wonderful figure of an old man . . . stooped somewhat, dried flesh holding a big bonerack together, quiet, silent, interesting.' He too, it appears, had been appalled by his wife's affront to their daughter-in-law, to the extent that Mrs Smith asked why he was not eating? 'I am just waiting till everyone finishes so I can leave,' he replied, 'and I notice that I am not the only person whose appetite you took.' Then he stood up, said 'God damn it, woman', and walked out. The next morning John Allyn and Martha went off to the Chisaco Lakes for their honeymoon. When they returned, no one showed any more rudeness, and on their departure for Oklahoma, Jefferson Smith came to the porch of his house, patted Martha on the back, hesitated, and kissed her on the cheek. She put a hand on his arm and said, 'Thank you, Father, for everything.' Though she never saw him again, she remained loyal to his taciturn and solid worth. From her mother-in-law, as from her own mother, she had received coldness in answer to her appeals for love; after years of living with blunted affection, she was more than ready to shower love on her own children, especially as it was already apparent that she had been mistaken in her husband.

What Martha managed with Smith was less love than a sensible participation. Above all else, she strove to keep up appearances. From the beginning, honour came before passion and set the pattern of their years together. She wrote to Berryman in 1959:

You couldn't know that marriage was so sacred to me that when you were nine and I fell desperately, instantly, totally, forever in love with a man who wanted a wife not a mistress I refused to break up my marriage and my home, and lost the only chance in my life for a real marriage?

It had shocked Martha to learn from Mrs Smith that John Allyn, although the baby of the family, had been neither a planned nor a welcomed child: 'in his presence, at the full dinner table, his mother said that for an unwelcome child, the third unwelcome child, he had gone very well.' For Martha, this revelation in some way accounted for Smith's self-centred behaviour: because he himself had not been loved, she reasoned, he was unable to show or feel warmth in his own relationships.

After their return to Oklahoma, Smith was employed for a while in the bank at McAlester. Martha became pregnant after one-and-a-half years of marriage, a span which had given her grave worries, as she later told Berryman:

No child was ever more wanted than you, I feared so after a year and a half of marriage that I was barren – then when you were put in my arms, it was you I loved, not the child I had wanted desperately but you, with your wrinkled forehead – my heart leaped out upon you.

What exactly she meant by 'the child I wanted' is not known, but her phrase seems to imply that she would have preferred a girl. For some months before the child was born, however, he was known as Billy, a name that stuck until John was three years old.

After eight months of pregnancy, Martha was rushed to hospital where Dr W. C. Graves delivered the eight-pound baby at eleven o'clock in the morning of Sunday, 25 October. 'No one ever had easier carriage of a child, I was never sick or in pain, just full of happiness and joy.' The child was born by Caesarian section, but the surgeon had never performed the operation before, and made a low fourteen-inch incision. Even so, all was safe, except that Martha suffered for a while almost pathological fears that her parturition had been improper, 'that I had been guilty of some sin or fault that I could not bear my sons in agony,' as she later curiously told Berryman himself, 'and by that agony have earned them, that they were gifts to which I was not entitled.' It seems, in fact, that someone (possibly her mother) suggested this guilt to her after she recovered from the anaesthetic, insinuating the cruel notion that she might not love the child enough because she had not borne him 'in travail and agony, fearful that the post-operative pain would be unavailing because it was sterile, futile, non-productive, not us but me. I was twenty, and alone; I didn't know how to think and I knew nothing.' From her account, written forty-five years later, it is quite reasonable to infer that Smith had not made himself available to give moral support and comfort, or even that he had been excluded

by her mother. Whatever the facts of that matter, it is evident that at the time of writing to her son, she was appealing to him with her expressions of pathos.

If Martha's accounts of early years are to be believed, her mother had for too long suppressed her own feelings and checked her daughter's. 'To have a loving heart and to be unloved so that your love went underground,' she lamented. The consequence was that Martha felt at her son's birth – like Thackeray's Amelia at her Georgy's – this child was her being. She allowed no sense of proportion in loving her son, since she had waited all her life for such a channel of emotion. She swaddled him with feelings so intense that he could never reciprocate her insistent love, and grew to be burdened by it. In later life, when she was separated from him by school, university, and even by marriage, her letters to him fanned feelings to an artificial heat. She enunciated her love in a manner by turns elaborate, plaintive, and pettish, and protested it with such inveterate lavishness that any possible discrepancy between the felt and the feigned did not occur to her. Berryman could allow himself to recognise this only infrequently, and then with such a measure of self-reproach that he came to feel easier avoiding the truth. Martha seemed to construe any hint that his love for her was less than all as something more nearly approaching sacrilege than as the natural process of development and reaction. Her conduct none the less gives a sorry index of her own insecurity.

John Allyn was christened for his father (the real family name, Allen, had earlier been corrupted).

Berryman himself had a notion that the family soon moved to Wagoner, where they briefly occupied a large yellow house. He kept an Airedale dog which was poisoned, possibly by a black-haired girl he dubbed a 'swart bitch'. The incident probably occurred later, however, during years in Anadarko. In December 1915, the family may have been temporarily resident in Lamar. Leonard Jefferson Smith died within a month, and Smith travelled north to his father's funeral. He brought back stories of the intense cold of the Minnesota winter, which Martha had never experienced and found hard to believe.

They were still living in McAlester when their second child, Robert Jefferson, was born on 1 September 1919. During the early stages of that pregnancy, Smith and his mother-in-law joined unholy forces to impress upon Martha what they considered her need for a 'therapeutic abortion': since her first child had been a Caesarean, it was felt for some reason that a second could kill her. Smith harboured the more selfish consideration that he did not feel able to afford another child. Quite sure of her own wishes, Martha

delayed the decision until it was too late for an abortion. Resisting the demands of both her husband and her mother, she had felt, as she later rehearsed it, 'better I die than my child not have a chance for life, how can you save your life at the cost of another's? And the child I had and the one to come were all I had; it was selfish, too, no doubt, I was dazzled by having someone else to love.' What the episode indicates is how soon and gravely Martha had lost confidence in her husband, as already in her mother. Mrs Little did not like any men who were not her blood relations and never approved of Smith. The fact that he leagued together with his mother-in-law in urging his wife to abort her second child must have alienated Martha and caused her great grief.

Late in 1920 or early in 1921, the family moved to Anadarko, a city (smaller by half than McAlester) where oil-field development boomed in the early 1920s. For four years the Smiths lived in a small white five-room frame house at 516 West Kentucky. Smith took up the post of Acting Vice-President and Loan Officer of the First State Bank on 26 January 1921. During his tenure he was to have complete charge of the bank, a small one with assets under 500,000 dollars.

The boy grew to the age of eleven in Anadarko, of which he kept few but vivid memories. As he recalled in a *Dream Song* fragment, he climbed the oil derricks whose stark frames were jutting forth in increasing numbers. He would walk out of town to fetch butter-milk when it was needed, and on one occasion earned about fifty cents, which he boastfully paraded, for picking cotton. On Saturday afternoons his mother often allowed him to take his brother downtown by the hand, to have their hair cut and to pay twenty cents to see Hoot Gibson and William S. Hart in one of the two cinemas on Main Street and Broadway. Real cowhands and Indians walked the streets.

It was from this time that, guided by his mother, he began to take an interest in books. Martha herself had always fostered her own writing ambitions; she seems in fact to have been the only one of his forebears who took any interest in literature at all. She passed on to Berryman her love for the written word, and his writings later provided a vicarious satisfaction for her frustrated ambitions. As a boy at least, however, John preferred for a while to pore over the illustrations in borrowed books, as he recalled in this verse fragment:

Deep blue picture-books
Of birds I kept months, eager to return
And shameful from return, O kept so long.

On one occasion he showed his mother a reproduction of the *Laocöon* in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, but she had an archetypal horror of snakes and severely and unjustifiably punished him for confronting her with the picture.

He attended a school called West Grade, just a block from home, and attained consistently high grades in a usual range of subjects. He was never, in the official term, 'tardy'.

His best friend was Richard Dutcher, whose older sister Dolly Massingale worked as a teller in Smith's Bank. Mrs Smith seemed nice 'but aloof' to Dolly Massingale. Martha was indeed snobbish and took care to select her children's friends (she did not like the children who lived closest to their home), but thought so highly of Mrs Dutcher that she had no hesitation in letting their boys play together. She was none the less so protective of her offspring that, at least for a time, she always walked them the six short blocks to the Dutchers' house (Richard rarely went to theirs). If Mrs Smith thought that John Allyn and Robert were good company, she was mistaken, since the boys ganged together with two others, Henry, the son of a neighbourhood grocer, and John Leroy Jones, the son of the Dutchers' black maid and washerwoman, and managed a great many pranks, including playing doctor with two girls from down the street. Once only, John Allyn and Richard crept round to the Dutchers' back porch and called Mrs Jones (who was doing the washing) an 'old, black nigger'. 'My mother, who was in the kitchen, heard us,' Richard Dutcher recalls:

I haven't the slightest idea as to what happened to John Allyn but my mother took me upstairs and gave me the damndest licking I ever got in my life. I remember Mrs Jones standing at the door crying and telling my mother that 'they're just kids, they didn't mean anything by it'. I'm sure John got that licking secondhand just by listening to my screams (mother used her quirt). I'm also sure that John's mother was told but I have no idea what she did.

When another close friend, F. J. Callahan, died, John was early initiated to the reality of mourning for an older boy he had worshipped. Awed and terrified, he secretly managed to touch his friend's dead hand.

. . . the dead friend's hand at ten he toucht, as cork
yieldless, odd-textured, with nobody looking
[unpublished Dream Song fragment].

He suffered nightmares from remembering that touch, and would run screaming to his mother in the living room. For some time afterwards he would cross the street from the undertaker's parlour.

Since her husband was a Catholic, Martha had been converted to the Catholic Church on her marriage, and John was brought up devoutly, serving the six o'clock Mass every morning throughout the year, from the age of eight until the family left Anadarko. Torturing himself if he was late, he assisted a Belgian priest named Father Boniface, whom Berryman later claimed had influenced him as a child only less than his father. 'He was a squat man, good, stern, friendly,' Berryman recalled, and resembled physically the later 'interim' Pope, John XXIII. 'I believed in God & my Guardian Angel to the hilt.' Such was the boy's absolute and ingenuous religiosity that, his mother remembered, he got out of bed one evening and asked her – 'from the depths of what childish sin it would have been indecent to probe into' – whether he would go to hell if he died? Mother and son said an Act of Perfect Contrition together, and when she had explained the prayer to him he smiled serenely as she tucked him back into bed. The grave sin that had troubled him is probably the one recorded in this Dream Song fragment.

Once after midnight he did sneak downstairs
and drank a drink of water!
and took Communion anyway – while roll
himward the grand fires yet. He gave hisself airs;
thought him a great matter.

With increasing financial security, the family together with a maid took a holiday cottage at the popular summer resort of Medicine Park high in the Wichita Mountains. The region is composed of small, rugged mountains, streams, plentiful leafy trees, and oddly-shaped lakes. Berryman remembered sliding down a chute into a pool, going duck-hunting, and fishing with his father from a sixty-foot-high dam. One incident at Medicine Park remained to shock Berryman's memory; while wrestling with Robert to pass one another on a wall, John shoved and gave his brother a bloody fall. The image of Robert Jefferson covered with blood stuck in his mind as a ghastly totem for at least thirty years.

In September 1923 Smith was appointed a Notary Public in Caddo County, Oklahoma. He also joined the Oklahoma National Guard, which operated from Fort Sill, and by 8 July 1924 became Captain of Battery 'E', 160th Field Artillery. Berryman keenly remembered one rainy day when his father took him on a visit to

Fort Sill: he was exhilarated by visions of men with field-glasses, gun manoeuvres, his father in puttees moving away to give orders, and the firing of field guns.

At work, however, Smith ran into difficulties which obliged him to resign his post on 10 March 1924: the record is written in his own hand. There were two reasons for his leaving: one, his own, the jealousy of a rival, who seems to have discredited him to the woman who had a controlling interest in the bank; the other, his wife's, was his truancy from work, as she explained in a letter which she wrote but did not send to Berryman in 1970.

Allyn is the only person I ever knew who was totally self-centered: he was kind in general; amiable, pleasant, courteous; no close friends; he never, as far as I knew, ever inconvenienced himself for any one – example: while very important matters were pending at the bank in Anadarko and Allyn should have been there to handle them, he went off on a fishing trip to Colorado, despite the bank's owner insisting that he stay and despite all the arguments I put up . . . he came back to find that he was no longer at the bank, and that is why we went to Florida.

If her account is to be trusted, her husband's position was quite unsupportable, but it must be mentioned in his favour that, over a year later, on 9 September 1925, Ben Mills, President of the Oklahoma National Bank, gave Smith an unqualifiedly clean reference for his fifteen years in the banking business within the state: 'He is honest, sober and industrious and strictly reliable and a gentleman in every sense of the word.' Richard Dutcher recalls that his own father, despite losing his farms through a bankruptcy which may have been Smith's responsibility, relied unreservedly both before and afterwards on Smith's financial advice.

In private life, perhaps because he felt emotionally dispossessed by his wife's strong, exclusive love for the children, Smith had become fickle. According to Martha, he had at least one affair with a friend of hers; when he made a trip to Chicago in order to float a bond issue for the Anadarko gas company, the woman had apparently gone with him. Smith had been otherwise unexceptionable as a member of society; he played baseball at Sasakwa, swam, and enjoyed the occasional hunting and fishing trip. In Anadarko he played a good hand at bridge when they visited with a local doctor and his wife (Berryman considered later in life that the doctor had in fact shown too much interest in his mother). Not even Martha disputed the fact that he was a pleasant and courteous man, though

he made no close friends and perhaps did not want any. What is evident is that he was too self-contained and unassertive a personality to please his vivacious and striving wife. While she developed social and intellectual interests, and joined the local Philomathic Study Club, Smith had no interest in reading books and did not share her energy for climbing in society and disdaining ordinary folk. A shrewd, witty, wily woman, her snobbish and managerial nature had underscored the incompatibility of their backgrounds and expectations of life. It seems likely that if he was negligent at work, the veering path of his emotions contributed strongly to distract him; rather than tackle his headstrong wife, he had begun to secede from what was increasingly their vacuous and painful relationship.

Smith did not despair of himself, nor become idle and diffident, after resigning from the bank. Within eleven days he was appointed assistant game and fish warden of Oklahoma. By the middle of the next year, however, he felt stale and restless for a new departure. Years before, his mother-in-law had bought some land in Florida, at that time worthless, for a very low price, and had given half the property to Smith and Martha for a wedding present. He went to McAlester and talked matters over with his mother-in-law, an otherwise ambiguous partner, and they decided together to try their fortunes in Florida. Their resolve went much against Martha who did not want the children to be uprooted, especially as Robert was just about to enter school. When Smith and his mother-in-law determined that only the three adults should make a reconnaissance trip, Martha insisted that she would stay behind with the boys, but her objections were overruled because they needed her to drive the car.

Martha chose the boys a boarding-school called St Joseph's Academy in Chickasha, the centre for a prosperous farm and ranch region, and arranged for them to spend weekends with Mrs Dutcher in Anadarko. The parents began their trip in September 1925.

John was approaching his eleventh birthday as the term began; Robert was just six. The school routine consisted of rising at 6.15, Holy Communion in Chapel at 6.30, breakfast and a brief playtime followed by Mass at 8.15, and an otherwise usual school day ended with bed at 8 p.m. Both boys badly missed their mother, but John wrote her many letters and tried to conceal his misery. 'I love you too much to talk about,' he told her bravely. As the term progressed, he said he was 'getting along fine' at the school, which meticulously awarded grades for every aspect of the daily routine: he achieved As (95-100) in application, catechism, arithmetic,

hygiene, geography, composition, spelling, and homework, a B (90–5) for politeness, Cs (80–90) for deportment, order, neatness, reading, penmanship, and grammar, and slipped to D (70–80) only in history. Although the routine went relatively unrelieved, there were small pleasures such as buying corn candy in town and drinking chocolate at recess. Because he was not allowed to take books from the school library, John complained that he had been unable to read anything since arriving at the school, and asked his mother to send in magazines, especially *Adventure* and *Cosmopolitan* and *Hearst International*, when she had finished with them.

Although John made a number of friends, both he and his brother were bullied by the other boys. Later in life Berryman reflected on that time and feared that he had not been as valiant in defending Robert as he should have been. 'I protected Bob, or I think I did – how horrible for Bob if I didn't – how we longed for mother to come.' 'The worst bully,' he remembered,

was a bow-legged boy. He had organized, I think, half the boys in the dormitory. Hair fell over his forehead. He was taller – tho' short, & hump-shouldered – than I was, and he respected me because I once made him shout with pain; I forget how; he & one Lieutenant were torturing Bob when I came on them. However . . . he beat me senseless one day to show me where I stood.

The priests inflicted other stiff punishments.

My impression of myself then is Peter Rabbit – Burgess was my sole author. I was docile, I think. But my image is of the school room deserted in the afternoon except by one or two other malefactors and me, always me, writing 'I must not throw chalk in geography' or '*I must bring my missal to Sacred Studies*' 500 or 1000 or 1500 times. I got very good. To use two pencils held in the right hand is an obvious device. Until, tho' you get good, the effort slows you down worse than one. I could use four.

When Mrs Dutcher reported to Martha that the boys were unhappy and might like it better to stay with her and attend school in Anadarko, Martha defied both her husband and her mother and immediately took the train back to fetch her sons from Chickasha. Waiting with paper bags in an office near the headmistress's, the boys felt 'unspeakable relief'.

In Florida they sold half the property originally purchased by Mrs Little and bought a restaurant in Tampa, where they employed two cooks and divided the other labours. Mrs Little supervised the kitchen, Smith did the buying and kept the books; Martha made chocolate sodas and other drinks behind the counter, acted as cashier, kept an eye on the waitresses and periodically waited on the tables herself. Profits accumulated, and when Smith was offered a good price for the parcel of remaining land, he sold it against his mother-in-law's wishes. According to the Tampa City Directory for both 1925 and 1926, moreover, Smith seems also to have worked from home, 725 South Boulevard, as president of Bay Realty and Insurance Company, but the venture has otherwise gone unrecorded. The boys were put to school.

On the failure of the Florida boom, suicide became common, as Berryman wrote later in a verse fragment.

In Tampa, where my friends died, '26

. . . .

And they were my parents' friends, none of them mine,
But every day somebody shot himself.

Smith sold the restaurant for cash, but at only a third of the price they had paid for it. School was out for the summer, and the family took an apartment, early in June 1926, in the Kipling Arms, a building owned and occupied by a man in his late forties named John Angus Berryman (who originally hailed from Georgia) and his wife Ethel. The house was situated right on the beach on Clearwater Isle, across the bay from the city of Tampa itself. Enjoying the summer holidays, young John played golf in the hall of the Kipling Arms and went swimming in the Gulf, as he recalled in a fragmentary poem of much later date.

We went to bed with colds, but more the burn
One broiling morning I remember now.
The blisters rose & broke, & more were born
Beneath them. One day in a hopeless row

I put a spear from twenty feet so near
My brother's eye my heart stopped.

'Those lovely beach parties,' he recalled. 'I had no idea what was wrong, of course, but a child picks up atmosphere.' He was unaware that the adults in his life were acting out a bizarre drama.

In a letter of Thanksgiving 1970, Martha Berryman set the scene for her son. 'The first signs of the death of the boom came in summer, early summer, and everything went like snow in the sun: there was a miasma, a weight beyond enduring, the city reeked of failure.' It is typical of the extent to which Berryman accepted his mother as gossamer that he took her account almost without emendation as the text for this stanza from a late poem 'Tampa Stomp' (*Delusions, Etc.*):

The first signs of the death of the boom came in the summer,
early, and everything went like snow in the sun.
Out of their office windows. There was miasma,
a weight beyond enduring, the city reeked of failure.

John Angus Berryman and his wife became the only friends the Smiths made in the locality, as Martha recalled:

John Angus lunched at our place every day . . . he got out of the real estate business in time to keep part of his profits; his wife wanted to go back to New York and he did not, there may have been other reasons, I don't know, but he gave her the car, half his take, and his blessing, she divorced him, and left.

Her account seems to suggest that this sequence of events – the growing friendship with John Angus and Ethel, the divorce and settlement – all happened within the span of their acquaintance, but (perhaps for her son's benefit) she is clearly conflating the time-scheme, and omits to mention the fact that part of these events must have happened after Smith's death. Smith himself became bitterly unhappy when his career and resources crumbled, sullen in his conduct, and had an affair with a Cuban woman, but it is possible that his own waywardness may have been incited by the obvious fact that Martha and Berryman were much taken with each other. It is ironic that in the beginning Mrs Little (and for a while Smith and Martha herself) believed that John Angus, who was sixteen years older than Martha, proposed to pay court to herself as the dowager of the family. 'As it turned out,' the future Martha Berryman wryly observed, 'it was just southern courtesy, and she never forgave him.'

Registering an inevitable sense of disengagement, Smith's state of mind rapidly deteriorated. He had felt 'out of context without us', Martha told her son, 'and rendered monstrous by the fiendish strain and depression of the boom-break in Florida.' Smith asked her for a divorce in order to marry the Cuban woman with whom

he seemed besotted. After consulting with the doctors who had been brought in to advise on his mental health, she 'agreed to sue him for divorce and the custody of the children and half of our joint funds.' That Berryman shared his mother's point of view is indicated by the way in which this stanza from 'Tampa Stomp' slights his father's relationship.

The Lord fled that forlorn peninsula
of fine sunlight and millions of fishes & moccasins
& Spanish moss & the Cuban bit my father
bedded & would abandon Mother for.

Martha apparently tried to dissuade her husband from divorce because of the Catholicism they all shared (even, she supposed, the Cuban woman), since the Church would not recognise a second marriage, and because of the effect it could have on the children: all to no avail. 'He said he couldn't think of anything else he wanted to do. Then I told him that he could, of course, see his sons whenever he wanted to, but in their home; and he said that would be all right, and that of course the furniture etc. stored in Anadarko I could have.' (When she eventually inquired after those goods, she discovered that Smith had not been paying the rent of six dollars a month, and that all their possessions had been sold.)

If Martha's tales are to be trusted, a swimming incident took place in which Smith may have tried to kill himself and Robert Jefferson. In a letter of October 1954 she gave an absolute and uncircumstantial account of the incident: 'it was Bob that he took out in the Gulf at Clearwater, meaning to drown Bob and himself. . . . Allyn told me what he had meant to do but couldn't.' On the other hand, in letters from 1970 (which she never actually sent to Berryman), she wrote two accounts which qualify the incident to an extent that redresses the blame attached to Smith. Written on 23 November 1970, the first letter seems to suggest, in fact, that Smith had no execrable intentions.

When I came out to say lunch was ready, I asked where Bob was and you said your father had taken him down the beach. I went down the beach, which was shallow there, past some people sitting around, and then saw Allyn swimming out, and called to him asking where Bob was . . . and then I saw that Bob was out there by him and I screamed and several people came, John Angus among them but by that time Allyn had turned around and was holding Bob up – then they reached us. . . . It was your grandmother, my mother, who, later, told

you that your father had tried to drown your brother: she told me this, long afterward, when berating me for not telling you the truth, as she put it – she never liked Allyn, or any man, for that matter, except her blood kin.

Allyn was in a very disturbed state of mind (I had taken him to every good psychiatrist in Tampa) but I have never believed that he would, when it came to it, have drowned or allowed to drown, Bob or anyone including himself.

In her last account, she does actually state that Smith had taken Robert into the water, but avoids giving her own opinion of his intentions.

Allyn was pretty far out and I couldn't see Bob at all. I was terrified and screamed but he didn't seem to hear, so John Angus tore off his shoes and swam out to where Allyn was, and I screamed and screamed, and evidently Allyn heard me, and turned round – he had had Bob in front of him held by a cord around under his arms. When they got back to the beach Mother went into hysterics and accused Allyn of meaning to drown Bob when he got far enough out, and had hysterics – very bad for Allyn. I asked Allyn, later, why he didn't take you, too, and he said he didn't know, he just thought he'd take Bob and swim out into the Bay.

My mother hated all men except her blood kin, and she may well have told you that your father tried to drown your brother.

It is certainly possible that advancing years had dulled her memory and that she sincerely believed each of her accounts as she wrote it, and yet the last two accounts were written within days of one another and contain manifest contradictions which must be intentional. Her specific motive seems to be twofold: to mitigate her son's opinion of his father (which her letters of earlier years had incited to scorn) and to cast her own mother as the villain (rather than herself, as her son did from time to time) for so heartlessly and perhaps groundlessly calumniating Smith. In any event, if the incident took place at all, it was a terribly irresponsible adventure or the act of a deranged mind, but the contradictions in Martha's accounts must cast doubt on the forensic value of her evidence.

Certain of Berryman's *Dream Songs*, working with the little and often partial knowledge he had gleaned from his mother, work to compose his ambivalent feelings towards his father's actions, but at least one – number 145 – urges a mitigating pathos. (The persona 'Henry' stands more or less for Berryman himself.)

Also I love him: me he's done no wrong
 for going on forty years – forgiveness time –
 I touch now his despair,
 he felt as bad as Whitman on his tower
 but he did not swim out with me or my brother
 as he threatened –

a powerful swimmer, to take one of us along
 as company in the defeat sublime,
 freezing my helpless mother:
 he only, very early in the morning,
 rose with his gun and went outdoors by my window
 and did what was needed.

I cannot read that wretched mind, so strong
 & so undone. I've always tried. I – I'm
 trying to forgive
 whose frantic passage, when he could not live
 an instant longer, in the summer dawn
 left Henry to live on.

The period leading up to Smith's suicide brought threatening behaviour and long, dour conferences between Smith, John Angus, and Martha. On one occasion, she alleged, Smith tried to choke her. She considered that he was a remote being, that 'nothing was deeply important to him', and that he felt lost. The bulk of what she says depicts a man deeply alienated, at a point of existential crisis, and irremediably selfish. Her versions variously allow pity or scorn for a man who cannot change his inveterately self-centred nature. As far as Berryman was concerned, his mother had likely contributed in some part to the sense of rejection Smith experienced. In notes dating from 1954, Berryman recorded (as his mother must some time have told him) that his father felt 'small' after returning from the swimming venture with Robert Jefferson (especially when she specified that she no longer felt 'love' but only 'affection' for him), and that he consequently felt furious and unreal.

The most alarming aspect of Smith's last days was that he could be seen walking up and down the beach with a gun in his hand. Occasionally, Martha said, someone would take it away from him. When she consulted doctors, they apparently advised that

it might be the thing that made him feel strong and powerful
 and all agreed that it should not be taken from him, it was an
 assertion of self and was an affirmation of strength and even
 responsibility that he, alone of the men around, had a gun.

Although she took the precaution of burying five of the bullets way down the beach where he might not find them, she gives no account in letters to her son of the sixth bullet – the one with which Smith shot himself.

As far as she was concerned, she felt convinced – a belief which she energetically and consistently professed – that Smith had killed himself by chance. She often inspected the magazine and never discovered a bullet, and believed that Smith did not know the gun was loaded when he pulled the trigger. She searched the house and car daily for hiding places, 'so the only possible solution is that Allyn did put that sixth bullet in and forgot it, and when clicked often enough would bring that sixth bullet into the firing chamber.'

There are three immediate and apparent reasons for Smith's suicide. The first might have been that the divorce proceedings were apparently to be finalised on the very day of his death – Saturday 26 June – or, more likely, the following Monday. The second, as Martha told me personally in her eightieth year, was that Smith had given the Cuban woman 'every nickel he had'. Third, moreover, that very woman (Martha told Berryman) 'with whom he was either totally in love or who was an image of everything different (and hence safe from all the failure and despair) and hence safety to him, had gone back to Cuba without any warning, farewell, and explanation.'

On the night of Friday, 25 June, as Martha related to her son, she had offered to withdraw the suit 'and continue to share a household with him', both for the sake of the children and in hopes of his recovery if they moved to another environment. Smith declined. (A further contradiction figures in her accounts of this matter, however, since in one of her uncompleted draft letters of 1970, she tells how Smith 'didn't really want the divorce, he didn't know what he wanted, maybe nothing, maybe back home he'd feel different, he didn't know. So I didn't withdraw the suit for divorce which was filed only so that he could marry this woman, thinking he might change his mind again.' The later account differs so radically, in fact, as to suggest the possibility that one of Smith's immediate motives for suicide might have been that she had rejected his confused overture of reconciliation.) Smith talked for a long while to John Angus in Martha's presence until she fell asleep, she said. When they left the room at about 1 a.m., she woke up but stayed dressed and dozed on the couch.

I looked into Allyn's room once, and he was asleep. Very early, around dawn, I woke again and looked into his room, and he was not there. I had not undressed, so I went down

immediately, and there he lay, with the gun fallen from his right hand. I ran upstairs and knocked on John Angus's door and I can still see his eyes rheumed together – when I told him, he said to wait, shut the door, pulled on trousers over his night-shirt, and went down with me – when he touched the gun, the muzzle was warm, probably the shot woke me from dozing. I stayed with him, after bringing a sheet to put over him, while John Angus called the police; the Chief came, at once. I could not believe that he would kill himself, he had seemed quite cheerful about making a new life for himself with no obligations, with freedom to do what he liked, etc. But there were only his prints on the gun and it was the gun used (the police tested that, as well as everything else), and when they (the police) learned from all the people staying there how he would walk the beach and pull out the gun and say he was going to shoot himself

That account, written on 23 November 1970, breaks off, and although addressed to her son, the letter was never sent.

Smith died early in the morning of 26 June. The coroner's investigation was held the same day and concluded that he had died through a self-inflicted wound from a .32 calibre special automatic. The newspaper report of the hearing includes these remarks:

According to testimony given at the trial by Mrs. Smith, her husband has for several weeks been suffering from insomnia, which she believes caused despondency and was the reason for his committing suicide. She stated that she awoke about 6:15 o'clock Saturday morning and found her husband gone, but thought she saw him sitting in their car which was parked near the apartment. She went down and upon finding that she was apparently mistaken, returned for the keys to the car, intending to drive around the island to look for him.

On the dresser, Mrs. Smith reported, she found a note from her husband, weighted down by pocket articles. The note read:

'Dear Peggy: Again I am not able to sleep – three nights now and the terrible headaches.'

There was no signature.

Mrs. Smith descended again and at the rear of the apartment building found the lifeless body of her husband lying in a spreadeagle fashion. There were blood stains on his shirt, though investigation has revealed no trace of powder burns. A .32 calibre automatic pistol, which Mrs. Smith testified her husband gave her about four years ago, was found lying near his head.

The jury was unable to find any substantiation for what the newspaper calls 'several points' in the case which might have interfered with the theory of suicide. If the newspaper report is competent, it is curious that no mention was made of a pending divorce, and that the coroner did not pursue the question of powder burns, which are unavoidable in such a case. But any theory must remain conjectural. The death certificate, signed by Dr W. H. Groves, reveals no other circumstantial particulars except that, shot through the left chest, Smith died instantly.

They hied the body (probably because of the heat) back to Holdenville, Oklahoma, to bury Smith alongside his brother Will. Martha took the children for a duty visit to Smith's family in Minnesota. She recalled that 'the sister just older than Allyn did kill herself which is probably why his family accepted his death as suicide immediately.' Martha herself never thought it suicide, but always maintained her belief that Smith had accidentally shot himself. Her mother, who was 'a very strong woman with views', she said, and perhaps one of her sisters-in-law, filled her elder son 'full of lies and insinuations'.

In an unfinished draft story called 'Little Me', Berryman wrote, 'I take it therefore that my desolation and rage over his death persisted, although for years I thought it purely grief.' He believed he had gone through an agony of grief after his father's death, but it seems probable that his mother and other kin grievously agitated and confused his natural feelings. Berryman could never actually recall his immediate sensations about his father's death, only the ride to Tampa and the darkened funeral-home room. He could remember curiously little even of the man himself, except for his dark hair cut short, the fact that he smoked Camels, and the mistaken notion that he resembled King George VI.

Later in life Berryman believed that he had been stunned by his loss, and took it as the *point d'appui* of his psychological problems. Convinced that his father's self-serving action had broken his own peace of mind, he swung between compassion and loathing for the man. From time to time he sought to resolve his tormenting ambivalence by asking about the circumstances surrounding his father's suicide, but he never looked beyond his mother, who was partial and severely prejudiced his judgment of the situation, to documentary or other sources of evidence. In the 1940s he was to write a biography of Stephen Crane, and from that work and from further research on Shakespeare he learned biographical procedures and lines of inquiry. What may reasonably be inferred from his deliberate restriction of research about his father is that he wanted to

comprehend the situation from his mother's point of view, and to avoid any contradictions and ambiguities which might accrue from alternative evidence. Since his mother showed a reluctance to witness to a worth she had rejected, however, it confused and goaded Berryman's sense of guilt and responsibility to learn, when he asked her if his father had preferred him to Robert Jefferson, first that 'Your father did not show any marked partiality, I know, as that would have registered,' and then, 'I believe now, seeing then as clearly as I can, that Allyn preferred you.' In the same letter she added, 'You will, I know, rejoice to learn that my devotions in the present and future are daily offered for Allyn.' Berryman could meet his duty to his mother only by disallowing the claims of affection owed to his father, her antagonist.

Late in 1954, when Berryman first went to Minneapolis, he undertook a period of rigorous self-analysis, and included among his notes the wishful, if strictly untrue, observation that 'I came here to Minnesota to tear him to pieces, to get square, to even the score with him! *expose* him,' and hectically construed a dream of 7 September that year with the comment, 'So dream is my bloody father looking down at me, whom he's just fucked by killing himself, making me into shit: and taunting me before he flushes me away.'

He set about to pattern his life on a bias, and later shaped his poetry in the same spirit. '*So few memories!!*' he lamented in 1970, while conceding that he retained 'enough *feelings* to dominate' the *Dream Songs*. His work served to focus and confirm the partial truth to which the balance of his mind clung, and to perpetuate self-deception. In hospital in 1970, he took notes on what he saw as a 'new problem' (though it was no such thing).

Did I myself feel any *guilt* perhaps – long-repressed if so & this is mere speculation (*defense here*) about *Daddy's death*? (I certainly pickt up enough of Mother's self-blame to accuse her once, drunk & raging, of having actually *murdered* him & staged a suicide.) . . . Can't seem to remember his *ever* getting angry at me . . . BLANK, probably *odd*. . . .

Such a vacant relationship compared to the (horrible) *richness* of mine with Mother! ODD . . .

How do I actually now see him? limited, weak, unfaithful, not a success, not a soldier (fake soldier) & do I feel guilt about this rather *contemptuous* view? Were we, in fact, close Father-son as I tell myself; (Mother said he was rather *cold*.)