

MAN UNDERWATER

The democratic fiction of Richard Brautigan

By Wes Enzinna

Discussed in this essay:

Jubilee Hitchhiker: The Life and Times of Richard Brautigan, by William Hjortsberg. Counterpoint. 880 pages. \$42.50. counterpointpress.com.



Every year, countless people submit their fiction and non-fiction to magazines and book publishers and are rejected. At the places I've worked as an editor—not the most selective magazines in the country, but not the least, either—we've typically accepted about one of every thousand stories. Naturally, most of these submissions are dreck—the preferred term in the industry for unsolicited manuscripts, “slush,” comes from an early-twentieth-century colloquialism for rotten fruit—but accidents inevitably happen. Philip Roth and John Ashbery were both rescued from slush piles. One editor wrote of Samuel

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Beckett that he “wouldn't touch [Beckett's novels] with a barge-pole”; another advised Harry Crews to burn his work, explaining that “fire is a great refiner.” A publisher sent John Barth a note saying that his stories sounded “like a penny-whistle out of a wind-bag full of bad odors.”

The Brautigan Library for unpublished manuscripts is a sanctuary for the world's literary rejects. “People think the library might be a trolling spot for publishers and talent scouts,” John Barber, the librarian, told me last May when I visited him at the brick building on a leafy corner lot in Vancouver, Washington. The space beyond the arched double doors is modest: the floor is black and red checkered

tile, like an Italian restaurant's, and the main room doubles as a gallery for the Clark County Historical Museum, which, on the day of my visit, featured an exhibit of Vancouver's newspapers. The shop sells such dreary volumes as *For the Love of Farming* and *Weather of the Pacific Northwest*.

The library is situated in a corner of the museum and looks like a living room, with two stuffed chairs and an end table facing a set of bookshelves. A whitewashed sign announces that this is THE BRAUTIGAN LIBRARY: A VERY PUBLIC LIBRARY, though there's no one around except a tall man standing behind one of the chairs, who turns out to be a life-size cardboard cutout of the late author Richard Brautigan. Patrons from across the United States have paid twenty-five dollars apiece to house their unpublished novels here, books with titles like “Autobiography About a Nobody” and “Sterling Silver Cockroaches.” The shelves hold 291 of these cheap vinyl-bound volumes, which are organized into categories according to a schema called the Mayonnaise System: Adventure, Natural World, Street Life, Family, Future, Humor, Love, War and Peace, Meaning of Life, Poetry, Spirituality, Social/Political/Cultural, and All the Rest. Bylines and titles don't appear on the covers. “The only way to browse the stacks is to choose a category and pick at random,” Barber explains. “Are you in the mood for Adventure or the Meaning of Life?”

The Mayonnaise System was never intended for use. It's based on an idea in Brautigan's novel *The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966*, in which an earnest, overworked man in his thirties presides over a library whose sole purpose is to collect and store the world's unpublished manuscripts. Patrons drop by day and night (mostly night) to deposit their works. When the narrator's girlfriend, Vida, gets pregnant and the couple travels to Tijuana for an abortion, a clever metaphor is spun about unwanted children and unwanted books. “You have to be friendly,” the librarian explains to the man filling in for him. “To make the person and the book feel wanted . . . and to gather pleasantly together the unwanted, the lyrical and haunted volumes of American writing.”

"If you rummaged through the sock drawers of every person in America," Barber tells me as I pluck a manuscript called "Stalin's Chicken and Other Abominations" from the shelf, "you could fill this building with thousands of failed dreams." Though Barber looks like a stereotypical academic—wild hair and combed white mustache—he has had a restless past: a tour guide for eight years in Yellowstone, Barber spent years writing and failing to publish his own fiction before getting his Ph.D. in linguistics and becoming a professor of creative media and digital culture at Washington State University Vancouver. He's also compiled the world's most exhaustive bibliography of Brautigan's work. "This is a place Brautigan dreamed of his entire life," Barber said before leaving me alone in the library to read. "It's a place where rejection doesn't exist."

On September 16, 1984, Richard Brautigan awoke—he was then forty-nine years old, his hairline retreating and his belly advancing—and did the two things he did nearly every morning: nursed a hangover and wrote. It's likely he was writing in one of the eight notebooks of unpublished work that he kept stacked beside his bed—possibly in "An Unfortunate Woman," a manuscript that, though millions of copies of his books were then in print, his agent had recently told him was unpublishable. Later that morning, Brautigan put down his notebook and picked up a Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum. He placed it in his mouth, beneath his blond insurance-salesman's mustache, and pulled the trigger. Blood spangled "nearly every page" of the stack of stories and poems, William Hjortsberg informs us in his biography of the author, *Jubilee Hitchhiker: The Life and Times of Richard Brautigan*. The scene was a "gory pile of manuscripts."

Like most suicide narratives, Hjortsberg's book—beneath its forays into literary criticism and chest-thumping historical analysis—is a psychological whodunit, an attempt to assemble the clues of a man's life into an explanation for why he would pull the trigger on himself. The easy answer, given in numerous memoirs published since Brau-

tigan's death—among them Greg Keeler's *Waltzing with the Captain: Remembering Richard Brautigan* (2004), Keith Abbot's *Downstream from Trout Fishing in America* (2009), and Brautigan's daughter's memoir, *You Can't Catch Death* (2000)—goes like this: after an abusive and impoverished youth, Brautigan found sudden fame and wealth with his 1967 novel *Trout Fishing in America* and experimental works like *The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster* and *In Watermelon Sugar*. These books made him an icon of the West Coast counterculture in which his stories were often set, but later in life he published a slew of terribly received novels. Depressed, twice divorced, heroically alcoholic, newly impoverished, and unable to publish his work, he used that bullet as his final punctuation mark. This champion of the rejected killed himself, in other words, because his writing had failed him, because his books were no longer selling.

Jubilee Hitchhiker, the first serious biography written about Brautigan, has, fittingly, had its own mazy path to publication. When, after twenty years of research, Hjortsberg submitted his manuscript to Knopf, his editor told him it was far too long. In 2010, Hjortsberg arranged to publish the book, unexpurgated at 880 pages, with the small California-based press Counterpoint. "The size of the book itself was one of its statements," Hjortsberg, a novelist who knew Brautigan in the Seventies, recently told an interviewer. "He's worth a book as big as the ones that presidents get, or as big as Elvis got."

Richard Brautigan was born in 1935 to a waitress and raised in the drizzly environs of Tacoma. He was for most of his youth called Dick Porterfield; his mother had left his biological father, Bernard Brautigan, without even mentioning she was pregnant. After high school, Brautigan worked off and on at a cannery and lived with his mother and her new husband in a tar-paper shack on the pastoral outskirts of Eugene, Oregon. Determined to become a writer in the mold of his idols Ernest Hemingway and William Saroyan, and prevented by scoliosis from joining World War II, Brautigan spent his nights hunched over his typewriter, sending off poems

and stories to be rejected by *The Atlantic*, *The New Yorker*, and *Playboy*.

Then, one day in December 1955, at the age of twenty, Brautigan walked through the sleet-covered streets of Eugene to the local police station. "I want to go to jail," he told the officer on duty, explaining that he was hungry and depressed. When the cop told him he had to be a criminal to go to jail, Brautigan came back with a rock. "I am a criminal," he said, hurling it through the glass of the station's front door. A judge sentenced him to ten days in jail, during which time he was sent to Oregon State Hospital (*One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* was filmed there twenty years later), where he would remain for the next three months. His commitment papers quoted friends and teachers as saying that his writings "were without question some of the most weird and lewd material they had ever read," and he was treated with twelve sessions of electroshock therapy.

Brautigan left Oregon soon after his release in 1956 and moved to San Francisco; he did not return home or speak to family members for another twenty years. The twenty-two-year-old traded his denim overalls for a black leather jacket, ingratiated himself at parties with Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti (along with members of the anarchist street-theater group the Diggers), and fell under the tutelage of a locally notorious drunk, homosexual, linguist, and renegade poet named Jack Spicer. Brautigan later referred to these years as his "apprenticeship," and like many polished stylists, he worked very, very hard to make the work look easy, writing as many as twenty poems a day and publishing them in small journals, vigilantly avoiding paid work and accepting poverty as the poet's natural condition. His poems were dark and ambiguous. Take, for example, "The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster," a riff on the emergence of birth-control pills:

When you take your pill
it's like a mine disaster.
I think of all the people
lost inside of you.

In 1967, Brautigan published his best-known novel, *Trout Fishing in America*, which he'd been working on for close to six years. It's a poet's novel: in it, Brautigan turns one conceit over

and over with inventive variations. "Trout Fishing" is by turns a character, the novel, the narrator, and a "hotel half a block from Broadway and Columbus." It is also, the narrator discovers, for sale. In one chapter, he sees an ad for a "used trout stream" at a scrap shop. "We're selling it by the foot length," a salesman explains. "You can buy as little as you want or you can buy all we've got left. A man came in here this morning and bought 563 feet.... The waterfalls are upstairs in the used plumbing department."

Reviewers heralded Brautigan as an unwitting spokesman for the hippies then flooding into San Francisco, and the novel would go on to sell 2 million copies. Guy Davenport, in an essay for *The Hudson Review*, described Brautigan as one of the era's greatest young writers, "a kind of Thoreau who cannot keep a straight face," and *Newsweek* gushed that "he combines the surface finality of Hemingway, the straightforwardness of Sherwood Anderson, and the synesthetic guile of Baudelaire." Soon he was playing basketball with Jack Nicholson and partying with Andy Warhol, staying in the Chelsea Hotel alongside Patti Smith and Leonard Cohen, and being photographed for *Life* and *People*. He received enormous quantities of fan mail, little of which he answered, but most of which he filed under either "Unrequited Publishers" or "Pests." "Richard Brautigan's sperm," one woman exclaimed after she'd felated him, spitting the poet's semen into her hand and examining it, Hjortsberg tells us, as if it were "some precious treasure, bright pearls from the crown jewels of an emperor."

When Brautigan published *The Abortion* several years later, he seemed to be making a sly joke of it all. Completed in San Francisco in 1963, the novel had been rejected by a dozen publishers; now Brautigan received a \$100,000 advance from Simon & Schuster. In one chapter of the novel, the narrator describes twenty-three people who deliver their manuscripts to the library for unpublished writers. A middle-aged man dressed in leather brings in a 290-page book about bikers and bondage that is, appropriately, printed on cowhide. An old man with the dull name of Charles Green brings in an equally dull novel called "Love Always Beautiful," which

he's been trying to publish since he was seventeen and has had rejected a record-breaking 459 times. And then a tall man with a long blond mustache comes in with a manuscript entitled "Moose." His name is Richard Brautigan, and he's a failed writer like all the rest. "This was the third or fourth book [Brautigan] had brought to the library," the narrator explains.

Every time he brought in a new book he looked a little older, a little more tired. He looked quite young when he brought in his first book. I can't remember the title of it, but it seems to me the book had something to do with America.

"What's this one about?" I asked, because he looked as if he wanted me to ask him something.

"Just another book," he said.

Back at the real Brautigan Library, I had found a memoir in the Family section entitled "Strive for Mediocrity Even If It Is Beyond You: The Memoirs of Leo Witz." It tells the life story of its author, a seventy-five-year-old grandfather whose "single, fifty-eight-year love affair" with his wife, a "most wonderful lady," made, in the author's opinion, "the involvements of Tristan and Isolde or Romeo and Juliet come off as rather bland friendships," and who, if asked, "If you had your life to live over, what would you do differently?" could truthfully answer, "All I'd want is to do it all over again." It's dreadfully boring stuff, though it does have a certain resonance with the average man's experience:

Barbara and I have now been members of Green Acres Country Club, in Northbrook, Illinois, for forty years. When I was a kid I couldn't wait for school to let out. Now that I have retired, I can be out to play every day, and I don't even have to go to school. Playing consists of tennis on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday mornings, with golf filling out Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays. Barb plays golf with the girls on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and we play together on Sundays.

The book proves that Witz was, in his own words, "better than average at just about everything he tried but not all that good at anything."

By the 1970s Brautigan had become more ambitious, and in 1976 he came up with a plan to

"make one million dollars" every year by writing a new novel satirizing a different genre every year. Brautigan had always hated money. He delighted at how the Diggers made a spectacle of burning dollar bills, and he often said his favorite work of his own was a homemade project called "Please Plant This Book," a series of seed packets and poems he put together in 1968 to inspire amateur writers and distributed, for free, on the streets of San Francisco. Yet Brautigan had also developed a miser's knack for accounting and saving his receipts. Hjortsberg suggests that Brautigan's decline originated from his inability to handle the internal schism precipitated by wealth and fame. Hjortsberg tells of a late-night meal at a diner in 1973 during which Brautigan, viciously drunk, got up, left his table, and jammed his finger into every single other customer's plate of food. When he had finished, he went to the cashier and paid each person's tab. "Two dozen free breakfasts anointed by the touch of a poet," Hjortsberg writes.

The previous year, fed up with San Francisco and in search of a new muse, Brautigan had taken a fishing trip to the mountain town of Pine Creek, Montana, where he met a group of macho writers and artists, including the novelists Thomas McGuane and Jim Harrison and the singer Jimmy Buffett. The crew lived in farmhouses in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, where they partied and fished and fired guns. Brautigan, burned out from months of book tours and sick of his hippie reputation in San Francisco, soon bought land and joined them. "Montana has re-established my proximity to heroic nature," he said.

If there's a love story in Brautigan's life, it's a brief one, and it began around this time—on a visit to Japan Brautigan took after moving to Montana—when a married Japanese fan cold-called the author in his hotel room and he asked her on a date. Hjortsberg describes this woman, Akiko Yoshimura, as a "daughter in a box," the Japanese term for an obedient woman, and it's not hard to see Brautigan's attraction to submissive types. He had a bondage fetish, and, in an April 1985 *Rolling Stone* profile, Lawrence Wright reported that women in San Francisco bars would warn one another of his predilection for tying lov-

ers up. It was perhaps no surprise when Brautigan and Yoshimura, after a monthlong romance, got engaged—but when the couple returned to Montana, their life together quickly fell apart.

At this time, in 1976, William Hjortsberg was a thirty-five-year-old novelist, and, in addition to being part of the Montana crowd, he was also Brautigan's nearest neighbor. "Had I even guessed... that someday I'd be his biographer," Hjortsberg writes forty years later, "I'd have been a proper little Boswell, jotting down every overheard witticism." He's being falsely modest; *Jubilee Hitchhiker* is a book of Boswellian completeness. Nearly every dinner, drinking bout, fight, and one-night stand—and there were a lot of all four—is recounted in minute detail. In the scenes where Hjortsberg reconstructs events from interviews and journals, he uses the third person, going so far as to refer to himself as "Gatz," his nickname; but when he recalls his personal experiences with Brautigan—drinking in Palo Alto or fishing in Montana—he uses the first person. The result is a book that is rigorous yet warm, one that smudges the distinction between biography and memoir. But it's Hjortsberg's ability to work like a novelist—to shape his mountain of material, the enormous chaos of Brautigan's life, into a narrative—that makes *Jubilee Hitchhiker* most remarkable. Here, for example, is what Hjortsberg sees on a July morning at the Brautigan ranch, when he stumbles unannounced into Brautigan and Yoshimura's kitchen:

Brautigan knelt on the linoleum floor. He was shirtless and barefoot, wearing only a faded pair of blue jeans. Shockingly pink and bristling with curling blond hairs, he appeared almost larval, an enormous golden caterpillar. His potbelly pillowed over the waistband of his jeans. He clutched a serrated bread knife in both hands, pressing the tip against his navel, staring pleadingly up at Akiko. His wife seemed to tower above him in spite of her slight stature. She wore [a] kimono, the obi belted tightly about a narrow waist. Her hair sprang in a wild Medusa-like disarray around a pale oval face contorted with rage. "You no commit seppuku," she shrieked. "You got no guts!"

The couple divorced two years later.

Compounding Brautigan's troubles

was the fact that his "million-dollar" novels, of which he wrote four before abandoning the project in 1977, garnered vicious criticism. "This is a terrible book," wrote Roger Sale in *The Hudson Review* of *The Hawkline Monster*, Brautigan's 1974 mash-up of gothic and Western genres that devolves into orgiastic sex and whimsical violence. "[It is] deeply unfunny, in no need of having been written."

But for Brautigan, perhaps, it did need to be written. Brautigan had always resented his association with the California counterculture, and by 1976 he talked about the need for the "dewhimsicalizing of his literary reputation," saying he would not "write *Son of Trout Fishing in America* or *Grandson of Trout Fishing in America*." Biographers and critics—Hjortsberg among them—have emphasized Brautigan's financial ambitions with these novels, but they've tended to ignore that he wrote them in dialogue with the metafictional critical arguments of the day, most notably John Barth's battle cry against literary realism, his fight against the "used up-ness" of traditional forms. Brautigan wanted to make money, but he also wanted to be taken seriously as an experimentalist.

Perseverance in the face of critical scorn, however, soon became a key element of Brautigan's career and legacy, an important part of what aligned him with West Coast literature; he saw himself as the underdog, panned by what he called the "eastern critical mafia." In the 1970s, as his novels increasingly were rejected, the writer and his characters merged into one snubbed identity—a figure like the archetypal Constance, who, in Brautigan's 1975 play on porno paperbacks, *Willard and His Bowling Trophies*, was once a promising novelist but by her late twenties has been forgotten. Critics called *Trophies* "vile," and Michael Rogers, in the *New York Times*, suggested that "perhaps Richard Brautigan should make a retreat from the novel form." Not long after, Brautigan gave up on his genre project.

Barber himself knew Brautigan at the end of his life. "He was probably the most unusual teacher I've ever had," he told me in the library, explaining how, in 1982, he'd taken a creative-writing course with Brautigan at Montana State Uni-

versity. Brautigan, by then, had a lot of lessons to offer by way of negative example. Unwilling to acclimate himself to an impoverished lifestyle, he had taken out a suicide loan, the kind he knew he'd never be able to pay back, from the First Security Bank of Livingston, and used the money for extravagant alcohol binges and stays at five-star hotels. He was so desperate for affection that, when a fawning study of his oeuvre was published by the French critic Marc Chénétier, he had a woman he'd once dated read him the book as a bedtime story.

At school, Brautigan was a mess, and he made jokes about checking out of the "Big Hotel." He'd broken his leg and could be seen tottering across campus on a cane, overweight and bloated. To soothe a herpes outbreak, he swaddled his genitals in toilet paper, which faculty reported seeing falling out of the cuffs of his jeans. "Whatever magic Montana once possessed had vanished," Hjortsberg writes. With his borrowed money, Brautigan left to travel Europe. When he read to a crowd of punks in Amsterdam and they demanded an encore, he demurred, saying that he didn't have any more. He visited friends in Munich and told them that "a computer at the Keio Plaza Hotel in Tokyo now handled all his future literary business." When he met a Spanish woman who was in Amsterdam to have an abortion, the two began a romance so bleak and blackly humorous it could have come straight from one of his own stories. He returned to the island of Majorca with her, where, one night, he got so drunk that he passed out in an alley with a stray dog. "American millionaire writer found drunk in the gutter sleeping with a dog," reported the local paper.

With about \$10,000 left, Brautigan flew to Bolinas, California, where he owned a home. He began carrying a gun everywhere. He published a final novel, *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away*, a lyrical story about a welfare kid in rural 1940s Washington who fishes in his sneakers, collects beer bottles in a baby buggy, and hangs out with a corpulent couple who bring their living-room set to a pond, casting their lines from the sofa. "I didn't know that afternoon that the ground was waiting to become another grave," says the narrator in the opening line

of the novel; by its end, he has accidentally killed his friend with a rifle. He hides in the grass, watching the couple fish, gradually disappearing into the landscape himself:

I had become so quiet and so small in the grass by the pond that I was barely noticeable, hardly there. I think they had forgotten all about me. I sat there watching their living room shining out of the dark beside the pond. It looked like a fairy tale functioning happily in the post-World War II gothic of America before television crippled the imagination of America and turned people indoors and away from living out their own fantasies with dignity.

The novel is a small masterpiece of autobiographical fiction. But in relation to its era—it was written in 1982, as contemporaries like Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon were tracking late capitalism's information overload and deconstructing postwar narratives of American power—the themes of *So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away* seem quaint. If, in the 1960s, Brautigan offered a kaleidoscopic vision of America—its dropouts, its environmental degradation, its swelling aspirations—now he offered simply a parable of a lost world and a lost writer. Reviews of the novel were tepid or downright frigid, and Brautigan wrote to his agent: “Book sales are not paying the rent. It's sort of sad to publish a book that ... looks like a piece of shit and is doomed from the beginning.”

After reading about forty manuscripts at the Brautigan Library, I discovered that not all the authors were as chipper as Mr. Witz about being considered “mediocre.” Jack Saunders, for example, prefaces his book “Jism Noir”—a clunky, unbelievable detective novel—with this note, signed in pen:

["Jism Noir" is] about a writer's struggle to be grateful for what he has and live in the moment he is in, even though he can't sell what he writes and he keeps losing jobs for writing several books a year. He's been at it 20 years now, publishing what he can himself, and giving it away. He considers himself in the mainstream of American writing, in the tradition of Thoreau and Whitman.... And Richard Brautigan except more so.... His work is anti-commercial. Who's going to bring out a book called "Jism Noir"? Then don't!

“Failed writers might be the most bitter people in the world,” Barber told me over lunch, “because there are few places left for democratic voices to be heard in America.” The Brautigan Library—which Barber took over in 2010 from Todd Lockwood, who had founded his own version in Vermont in 1990 but who had let the collection of manuscripts molder in a basement after the project ran out of money—was meant to provide just such a place: one where “you didn't have to be talented to be part of a literary community.” “We don't judge,” reads a solicitation letter to would-be contributors to the library. “We let the author decide if his or her work is worthy of being ‘in the public.’” But in recent years the library has had to turn authors away—there's room for no more than the 291 manuscripts currently held there. Next year, however, it plans to switch to digital submissions and start accepting manuscripts again, all of which it will make available online.

This is an auspicious moment for the library to go digital. In 2008, for the first time in history, the number of books self-published surpassed the number of books published commercially; even such high-profile writers as J. K. Rowling and Deepak Chopra are passing up the insights of editors and publishers in order to sell their books on their personal websites, directly to readers. It's the kind of democratic revolution Brautigan envisioned, one that has led to a renegotiation of which voices are heard in the public sphere. It is, of course, also a dubious victory. On my last day at the library, Barber and I got to talking about Brautigan's great story “1/3, 1/3, 1/3,” about a mill watchman who wants to write a novel. He bands together with his girlfriend, who will edit the story, and the narrator, a local teenager, who will type it up; a model of self-publishing, they plan to “divide the royalties three ways.” The irony of the tale—not lost on me after days at the Brautigan Library—is that the watchman turns out to be semi-illiterate. (A characteristic line: “Maybell shifard wen she saw him standing ther in his blac macinaw smild at her and Carl felt his blod run hot lik scalding coffee and fiting mad.”)

But Brautigan's work maintains a striking sympathy for even untalented

writers like the watchman; he sees his tragicomic trio “all sitting there in that rainy trailer, pounding at the gates of American literature,” their literary fates entangled. This is one of the paradoxes of Brautigan's life and work: even at his most popular, he never stopped identifying with the rejected. His antiheroes are sexual failures, rebuffed and murdered novelists, abortionists, and hermetic librarians, and though many today would agree with Thomas McGuane's angry 1973 assessment of Brautigan as an anachronism of the Sixties—“nothing but a pet rock! A fucking hula hoop!”—his library shows that he has left a quiet legacy as an advocate for the mediocre or failed, as a symbol of the vagaries of success and the capriciousness of commercial publishing, and as a cult hero for a certain kind of writer—a writer like Leo Witz or Jack Saunders.

Brautigan himself suffered one final rejection: in a poignant coda to his story, his body wasn't discovered until six weeks after his death. Hjortsberg explains how maggots were “writhing in his decaying flesh,” and says that there were “many, many flies, a nightmare population of blowflies, houseflies, blue-tails, and greenbottles swarming everywhere in the melancholy twilight of the shaded main room.” When friends began to call and get Brautigan's answering machine, “the batteries ... began wearing down and the recorded message grew distorted, the words slurred, like a man underwater.” Hjortsberg completes this disturbing picture with a description of Brautigan's “death shadow,” which the poet Michael McClure saw when, weeks after the police discovered Brautigan's body and hauled it away, he drove to Brautigan's house to see the scene of his friend's suicide.

[McClure] climbed up onto the second-floor deck and had a look in through the window. [He] clearly saw the death shadow of Richard Brautigan's body etched into the floorboards where his corpse had lain undiscovered for many long weeks. Brautigan's body fat had liquefied, what coroners call a “lipid breakdown,” and had seeped into the wood, leaving behind a phantom image.... The new owners [would later try] scrubbing it free, but no solvents or detergent would do the trick.... Like a photographic ghost, Richard Brautigan's impression might have remained forever to haunt the old shingled house. ■