

Our Nada Who Art in Nada: Notes on Suicide

By Jonah Raskin

Notes on suicide are, of course, different than suicide notes, though suicide notes have provided fodder for writers about suicide. One of the funniest, saddest titles for a volume of poetry is Amiri Baraka's "Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note." Baraka seemed to be saying he'd be around for a long time, and he has been. The Beat poet, Lew Welch, didn't last as long. In 1971, in a state of despair he wrote, "I never could make anything work out right and now I'm betraying my friends." He walked into the Sierra Nevada near Gary Snyder's home and he's never been seen or heard from since, his body never recovered. Walking into the wilds is one way to kill oneself. Another is to walk to the western edge of the North American continent and plunge into another kind of wild – the sea.

To jump or not to jump is the question that thousands of depressed, suicidal individuals ask themselves on the Golden Gate Bridge. About 1500 have answered in the affirmative and have leapt to their deaths. Countless others have answered in the negative and walked off the bridge alive. A few take the leap and live to tell the tale. The survivors report that in the first nanoseconds of free fall they're sorry about their decision. That thought – and others - kept me from committing suicide during a year or so when I went around and around from depression to anxiety and back to depression again. I did not want to live and yet I did not want to die, either. Inhabiting a kind of No Man's Land between Life and Death, I was terrified that I might accidentally commit suicide by driving off the Golden Gate Bridge (highly unlikely) or by cutting my wrists while slicing vegetables (also highly unlikely).

The bridge celebrates its 75th anniversary in 2012, but none of the festivities acknowledge the 1,500 suicides, perhaps because the bridge authorities assume that to talk of suicide will only encourage more people to commit suicide. The idea of suicide is certainly potent and it can be seductive, though in my experience it takes a certain state of mind to take it out of the realm of ideas and to make it seem as big and real as the Golden Gate Bridge itself. Not long ago, afflicted with what's called suicidal ideation, I climbed into my car and drove from Sonoma County to Marin. I crossed the bridge without incident or accident, parked my car at the house of one of my brothers at Ocean Beach in San Francisco, and asked him to drive me to Langley Porter, the psychiatric hospital on Parnassus. It took hours

- from about 8 a.m. until 8 p.m. - to be admitted. During that time, I lay on a gurney in the emergency room listening to the screams of men and women injured by knives and bullets. Insisting that I was depressed didn't persuade the staff to admit me to Langley Porter. A social worker explained that the only way to be admitted was to say that I was a threat to myself and to others. I tried it and it worked.

Inside Langley Porter, I met patients who had tried to commit suicide by jumping from windows and by slashing their wrists. One woman whom I remember vividly thought that she was ugly and fat and resolved not to live another second. She walked from the mirror in her bathroom to the counter in her kitchen and slashed her wrists with a bread knife. The scars were still visible. She was neither ugly nor fat, but rather thin, beautiful, young, and vivacious.

During a two-week period inside Langley Porter and then as an outpatient, I emerged from the cycle of depression and anxiety and from the pit of suicidal ideation. While I was locked inside, my book about Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl* was published. On the pay phone in the hall, I listened to a friend read a review by Vivian Gornick for *The Nation* that helped to lift my spirits. Ginsberg had been a patient at Langley Porter soon after he arrived in San Francisco in the 1950s. He was suffering, he told his psychiatrist, from writer's block and from a sense of guilt as a closeted homosexual. In the 1940s, he had often thought of suicide and recorded his suicidal thoughts in his journals. Moreover, several of his New York friends committed suicide. There are allusions to them in *Howl*, which is, in part, a catalogue of the suicidal. Here are a few of them: "who created great suicidal dramas on the apartment cliff-banks of the Hudson"; "who plunged themselves under meat trucks looking for an egg"; "who cut their wrists three times successively unsuccessfully"; and "who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge this actually happened and walked away unknown and forgotten." Of course, *Howl* helped to make that last person – Tuli Kupferberg (1923-2010) – famous. In fact, Kupferberg jumped from the Manhattan not the Brooklyn Bridge in 1944; a tugboat rescued him and took him to Gouverneur Hospital. Later, he joined the Fugs, the popular 1960s band, and wrote *1001 Ways to Beat the Draft* (1967) and *1001 Ways to Make Love* (1969). For Kupferberg, life began after his famous leap. I met him in 1990 and found him to be funny and serene. Nothing phased him after his attempt at suicide.

Of course, poets and fiction writers have explored the subject of suicide for centuries. A. Alvarez wrote about it in *The Savage God* (1972). A close friend of Sylvia Path, Alvarez grappled with her suicide in particular and looked at suicide from a cultural and historical perspective. His book is among the best, though no one, as far as I know, has written the definitive study about suicide in literature or about authors who have committed suicide. Not surprisingly, the subject is controversial. Family members, friends and admirers are often loath to believe that someone they've known and loved has committed suicide.

That was the case with Abbie Hoffman who took an overdose of Phenobarbital, washed down with Glenlivet, then locked the door to his apartment, crawled into bed and went to sleep, never to wake again. David Dellinger, one of Hoffman's co-defendants at the 1969-1970 Chicago Conspiracy Trial, tried to convince me while I was researching a biography of Hoffman that he was assassinated by the CIA, though he had no evidence to support his claim. Hoffman had attempted suicide once before, though he kept it a secret. He was also unwilling to go public with his manic depression, feeling that if Americans were to know about his mental condition they'd dismiss him as crazy and a crank and not regard him a serious activist. Ginsberg knew Hoffman was depressed and suicidal. He called his number and left a message on his answering machine: "Whatever you choose is right." Perhaps he ought to have urged Hoffman to call a suicide hotline.

Jack London, another American radical, died in 1916, and one might think that after all this time his death would no longer provoke heated debate and discussion. It does. The debate started in earnest in 1938 when Irving Stone argued in *Sailor on Horseback* that London – the bestselling author, socialist, farmer, Darwinian, Nietzschean, and more - took his own life with an overdose of drugs. Fans of London still haven't forgiven Stone and anyone who raises the topic anew is likely to have his head lopped off. No one who loved life could have sought his own death, London fans have insisted.

They have rejected analogies between London and his hero, Martin Eden, in the novel of the same name, who commits suicide by slipping through the porthole of his cabin aboard an ocean liner and sinking beneath the waves. They have also dismissed as irrelevant London's own accounts of his attempts at suicide while a teenager. On one occasion, he drank enough alcohol to become intoxicated, then jumped into San Francisco Bay hoping to drown himself, or so he insists in his memoir about his own bouts with alcoholism, *John*

Barleycorn. The cold water had the effect of waking him. He was rescued and lived to tell the tale.

By the time that London wrote *Martin Eden* (1908), Tolstoy had already written about Anna Karenina's suicide, and Flaubert had written about Madame Bovary's suicide. In the nineteenth century, fictional women characters seemed more likely to take their own lives than male characters. London changed the gender of the suicidal hero – or anti-hero, as the case may be. He also made suicide seem like a beautiful act - a kind of aesthetic performance with the whole universe as the audience. In the last paragraph of *Martin Eden*, London seems to be drawing on memories of his own attempted suicide in San Francisco Bay. He also seems to be at one with Martin Eden, inside his head during his own last moment on earth.

Martin Eden does not jump to his death. He eases himself out of a porthole aboard the *Mariposa*, and, when his feet touch the sea he lets go of life itself and descends into "a milky froth of water." Rapidly, he sinks like "a white statue, into the sea." No one has written about suicide as vividly and as intensely as London. "Colors and radiances surrounded him and bathed him and pervaded him," he wrote of Eden. "There was a long rumble of sound and it seemed to him that he was falling down a vast and interminable stairway. And somewhere at the bottom he fell into darkness." Perhaps London was merely imagining what it might be like to commit suicide at sea. He was certainly an imaginative writer, as *The Call of the Wild* suggests. London could put himself inside a dog and write from a dog's point of view. But the final sentences in *Martin Eden* have the feel of authenticity and actuality behind them.

London empathizes and identifies with his character. Having thought about suicide and having tried to end his life, he was in a position to write about it convincingly. Much the same is true for Sylvia Plath, the poet and novelist, who attempted suicide several times before she successfully took her own life in 1963 at the age of 30, soon after the publication of her brilliant novel, *The Bell Jar*. Esther Greenwood, the narrator and main character, believes that death will be liberating and tries to kill herself. In 1953, Plath herself took an overdose of her mother's sleeping pills, crawled under the house where she was living and remained there for days. She later wrote that she "blissfully succumbed to the whirling blackness that I honestly believed was eternal oblivion." In *Martin Eden*, London describes much the same kind of sensations – blissfulness and eternal oblivion.

Young women poets aren't the only suicidal writers. Tough

guys and hard-boiled hunters such as Ernest Hemingway also kill themselves. Of all the celebrities who have taken their own lives, Hemingway's touched me to my innermost heart. I was 19 in 1961 when Papa put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger. I was in Paris, too, and reading his short stories, including one of his best, "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" in which an eighty-year old man tries to hang himself. The story ends with a kind of nihilistic suicide note, "Our nada who art in nada, nada be they name they kingdom nada they will be nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada as we nada our nadas and nada us into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada."

During my own days of intense depression, I felt a sense of all-pervasive nothingness every waking moment. I was in so much pain that I did not feel I could go on living. Friends told me that I was fortunate to be going through "the dark night of the soul," but I did not see it that way. I still don't. I remember telling a psychiatrist that it seemed as though someone was inside my head pounding away with a sledgehammer. The pain was excruciating. Plus, I was only sleeping about three hours a night. Seeking help at Langley Porter felt like an act of desperation. I did not know what else to do, where I might turn, or to whom, for help. I still remember how I felt in those dark days, especially when I drive across the Golden Gate Bridge. Curiously, I'm only reminded of my depression and my suicidal ideation when I'm driving South and not North, which always feels like a journey into freedom.

John Bateson's new book, *The Final Leap; Suicide on the Golden Gate Bridge* is a wonderful addition to the literature of suicide. One of the most valuable aspects is the list of the 1500 individuals who have taken the leap. Most of them were white and male, many of them were in their forties, most of them were never married. I'm white and male and have been married and divorced several times. I was 62 when I experienced my depression and suicidal ideation. The statistics that Bateson provides in *The Final Leap* are sobering. So is the vast body of literature about suicide, from Flaubert and Tolstoy to Plath, London, Hemingway, Hoffman, Ginsberg and beyond. Of the men who have leapt from the bridge, I'm only familiar with the life of one of them, as far as I know. Weldon Keyes was a poet, playwright, and the author of *Modern American Poetry* who moved from New York to San Francisco and became friends with Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Desperate to become famous and never as well known as he wanted to be, he tried once to jump from the Golden Gate Bridge and couldn't. Then, during the second week of

July 1955, he returned to the bridge to try again. Keyes drove across the span and parked his car on the Marin side. What he did next is still a mystery. His car was found on July 19. There was not a trace of Weldon Keyes. Like his fellow poet, Lew Welch, he has never been seen or heard from again.

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