in april of 1981 i was invited to a conference on the avant-garde that was to be held in iowa city and i was a little surprised for all i knew iowa was a state of complacent farmers who raised hogs and corn and had a university whose art and writing programs generated equally bland products at the same time most of the art world seemed to be returning to somewhat less bland but equally predictable painted products so it seemed like a strange time and place for a conference on the avant-garde it was news to me that the university of iowa housed an extensive dada archive and under the shelter of some odd department or other also harbored a group of experimental video artists and tolerated a loosely connected artist performance group so the art historians who managed the dada archive invited a number of other art historians and critics rox krauss ed fry and a few others to talk about the early 20th century avant-garde along with the three richard kostelanetz scheinber biggins and jerry rothenberg and me to give some kind of reading of the contemporary situation.

when i got to the campus a tornado was threatening thunder and lightning were storming outside while richard kostelanetz was defining the avant-garde from the stage of a crowded hall but the tornado missed us the next day was sunny little ducks were walking around the campus and richard scheinber was lamenting a decline from the traditions of the heroic avant-garde sixties and prophesying our entry into a terrible and dull new time.

because i knew there was going to be a kind of transition between the readings that i knew we were going to have here and the kind of talking i do i thought i would surprise everybody by bringing a couple of clippings from newspapers and reading from them along with my talking and i decided this improvisoratily in the manner of my talking as i came upon them fortuitously on the plane coming from san diego.

i'm something of a newspaper buff and setting off this day in an airplane heading east toward iowa city over denver with a copy of the san diego union something made me want to read this copley newspaper which like many local newspapers once you get past the first few pages is filled with stories of surprising and unlikely things to which i have an attraction as i have an attraction to a newspapers organization an attraction shared by many artists possibly because of its fractured collage-like structure and as we flew out over the rising mountains immediately to the east of san diego i was struck by the title of a one column story.

COLOR THE ISLES SOFT PINK

christos the story continued the artist who gave the world the VALLEY CURTAIN in the colorado rockies and the RUNNING FENCE in california now wants to color the islands of biscayne bay pink the controversial artist unveiled his newest project tuesday how curious this language sounds when you read it out loud.
uninhabited islands in the bay which separates miami from miami beach with silky soft pink polypropylene fabric because the islands are not entirely uninhabited if one considers all the world's inhabitants something more gets said the effect the artist said would be of a series of glowing water lilies an homage to claude monets water lily paintings like any artist christo said i will have my water lilies he said the project would be entitled

SURROUNDED ISLANDS PROJECT FOR BISCAYNE BAY GREATER MIAMI

it would cost from eight hundred thousand to one million dollars and the money would come from the sale of the drawings and collages of the project so its an ecological project of a sort except for the polypropylene the work was commissioned by the

NEW WORLD FESTIVAL OF THE ARTS and planned for june 4 to june 26 1982 in miami the festival also features new plays by arthur miller edward albee and tennessee williams there's something about reading newspapers that like throwing the i ching

now christo also said and this is what i was coming to that he had consulted with environmentalists and government agencies on this project and he had run into no objections though he had not yet secured the required permits our new department of the interior must have proved fairly easy

according to christo helicopters would drop the fabric onto the islands over a ten mile stretch of bay from downtown miami to sunny isles then a crew of four hundred would pull the pink cocoon into place all at once and his water lilies would then remain in place for two weeks before coming down it would be enchanting not imposing or menacing

but intimate and lyrical the artist promised this sounds like my old collage poetry again but i want to consider this from the point of view of questions concerning the avant-garde now i'm not proposing christo as an avant-garde artist but if this art is avant-garde its not very challenging to the chamber of commerce of greater miami because the chamber of commerce is perfectly cheerful about it and somebody is running interference for it with the rest of the people of miami probably lots of people though mainly jean claude and the work will get done i have no doubt and i have no doubt that it will be juxtaposed with other avant-garde works by arthur miller tennessee williams and edward albee

about the same time or shortly after i came upon another article that raised similar questions for me it was one of those days when i was absolutely starved for news and wherever i looked i found it and this article read

ACTOR KEEPS HIS HEAD BUT KILLER DOESN'T

every actor wants to be a movie star says joe spinell and everybody else wants to be in the movies including the usherettes this is in a section called THE ARTS spinell is a new york born character actor who decided that one way to become a star was to write and produce your own film which he did and he put himself in the lead the film he wrote is called MANIAC and is about a psychotic killer who murders and mutilates beautiful women spinell gives a learned account of the plot structure its based on modern day killers who had problems with their mothers the style here he turns to film history through the killers eyes is taken from the peter lore movie M lore is not the auteur but thats all right we're close but unlike the lore classic according to the writer in the san diego union MANIAC has such an abundance of
blood that it is difficult to get distributed by home box
office or any of the other regular distributors  in fact
the los angeles times in a sudden access of morality has
refused to take ads for the film because the victim gets his
revenge on the maniac by tearing his head off full camera

why did spinell use so much violence? to compete
says the forty year old actor we had to come up with
something new

now is joe spinell in the avant-garde making
it new? its maybe not clear because joe spinell will tell
you “look dont tell me about violence and blood because
then i have to talk about abc and cbs for twenty-two years
theyve been bringing us the vietnamese war”

political morality
enters here this is a moral form of the avant-garde but
he takes this no further just says im making movies for
people to enjoy “if you want art go to a museum people
give me money to make a movie to make money thats why
we’re called an industry the movie industry the industry
is in trouble and television is partly to blame people are
inundated by tv and their brains are numb”

moralizing
educational and avant-garde roles are all preempted by
movie maker joe spinell there appears to be no place to go
here between lyrical intimate commercial avant-garde artist
christo and avant-garde didactic moralist commercial shocker
joe spinell

and i was thinking about this while i was flying
toward iowa and thinking about how everyone was going to be
trying to locate the avant-garde and about how almost
everyone was going to agree that it would involve either
shocking or making it new and that i was supposed to be
talking about this too and i realized i was going to be
confused because practically every role classically
attributed to the avant-garde has been preempted by something
else and i reflected that i myself have never really had
a clear image of what it was to be avant-garde though ive
been thrust into the role often enough to know what it feels
like to be avant-garde

a friend of mine had written a book
marjorie perloff had written a book dealing with american
poetry as a kind of french connection as opposed to the
english connection which is conventionally supposed for it
in the schools now i personally think there are many
roots to contemporary american poetry certainly my poetry
and the poetry i admire but i also know what writing a
book means in a book you have to organize your ideas
pretty much one thing at a time if its an important thing
and you want to really get it done and this is a book
designed to challenge what i have always thought of as the
anglophiliac model of american poetry that is so dominant in
those literary strongholds east of the mississippi or the
connecticut river north of the monongahela that are so
strongly devoted to an anglican passion that they give
the impression of some kind of outpost in a novel by huxley
or evelyn waugh where the people are sitting around on a
veranda sipping their gin slings in the shade of the local
textile factory or integrated circuit fabricating plant
dreaming of playing polo or cricket or rugby in the greener
older playing fields at eron or harrow which they may
never have seen being often second generation eastern
european jews from brooklyn or queens or lithuanians from
indiana or lutherans from wisconsin and somehow there
they are gathered on the veranda in new haven or manhattan
in memory of the british empire of which they are among
the last supports and several columns of which this book
is probably intended to take away

or maybe more precisely
this book is only bringing the news to these outposts
that the british empire has long since passed away and
that the messages from england would no longer be coming and
had not been coming for a long time and that there was a
french connection as there is a russian connection and a
spanish connection and for many a chinese connection or
japanese connection there are lots of connections in this
world but in a book you have to do one thing at a time
the world may not happen one thing at a time but in a book
you have to tell one thing at a time

and my friend was invited
to Washington to be part of a discourse with some of these English emigres and refugees among whom were numbered Harold Bloom and John Hollander and Richard Howard who are certainly distinguished members of the refugee community.

Now Marjorie was giving a talk based on the last chapter of her most recent book, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, the last chapter of which happens to deal with John Cage and with me.

And whatever differences there may be between Cage and me and these are considerable we were both obliterated by the righteous wrath of Harold Bloom who had hardly heard more than our names when he denounced the proceedings as ridiculous and us as nonpoets and stormed off the stage.

I was told about this performance of blooms and thought it was wonderful and forgot about it but it was not long afterward that I was invited out to the very same place to do a talk performance on the Folger Library's Little Shakespearean stage and it happened that when I came to do the performance I had something serious in mind because a friend of mine had died two or three days before after a sudden and unexpected hospitalization from which we had all hoped she would come out alive and I wanted to make my piece a kind of homage a meditation and speculation on the nature of her life and death.

So in the course of things I told her story or what I knew of it and I tried to consider the nature of the fit between the life we lead and the death we get and what I wanted to think about was whether there was such a fit and if there was what kind it was and I did the best I could under the circumstances of being there then which is my image of what an artist does and is somebody who does the best he can under the circumstances without worrying about making it new or shocking because the best you can do depends upon what you have to do and where and if you have to invent something new to do the work at hand you will but not if you have a ready-made that will work and is close at hand and you want to get on with the rest of the business.

Then you'll pick up the tool that's there a tool that somebody else has made that will work and you'll lean on it and feel grateful when its good to you for somebody else's work and you'll think of him as a friend who would borrow as freely from you if he thought of it or needed to because there is a community of artists who don't recognize copyrights and patents or shouldn't except under unusual circumstances who send each other tools in the mail or exchange them in conversation in a bar.

Though I had a couple of friends from whom I got a lot of things in the mail who got very nervous about exchanging things with each other because they had Ileane Sonnabend looking over their shoulders and one of them got so distressed because he had Ileane looking over his shoulder forbidding him to collaborate with the other friend that when he wrote the text for the others installation performance he never put his name on it but this is an unusual situation and I only mention it because of that.

And I was there in Washington doing the best I could borrowing when I could and inventing when I had to and the audience was tolerant and reasonable and listened to me doing the best I could and when I was through there was a small gathering of people who came up to talk with me because when you talk to people they naturally want to talk to you because they've had some of you presented to them and a discourse has been initiated or suggested at least in my kind of poetry which is intended to open a discourse and not close it a discourse that can go on with or without me since I've contributed to it and the first question that anybody asked me as we were standing around the punch bowl was what do you think of Harold Bloom?

I said I was sorry I don't think of Harold Bloom they said but could you think of Harold Bloom? I said I could think of Harold Bloom I could think of Harold Bloom if I wanted to. You want me to? All right I'll try they said what does Harold Bloom have against you?
said its not personal they said but he seemed so angry he thinks i'm trying to kill him its an emigre condition i said you imagine people are threatening you from outside and everything outside seems terribly threatening i dont blame him for being angry if i thought somebody was trying to kill me i might be angry at them i'm not trying to kill harold bloom they said then really why was he so angry?

well i said i think he's suffering from a case of mistaken identity they said what that?
i said first he thinks hes part of a great tradition he's not second he thinks hes a critic of poetry he's not and then he thinks he knows what the world of poetry consists of but he doesn't they said what do you mean by that? and i said look years ago the first time i ever heard of harold bloom he came to my attention by accident somebody i knew an editor for an east coast publishing house who now works for the national endowment said to me you have to read this its extraordinary it was a work on william blake it was not extraordinary it was what you would expect from an academic literary critic with a taste for romanticism a more or less plausible account of blake as a complex and ironic poet that might have pleased any new critic except that blake wasnt a catholic or anglican or even a presbyterian but some kind of funny homemade secular religionist whose gospel tended to make most of the new critics laugh both because it was funny and because they had a strong taste for institutional orthodoxy but from harold bloom you dont get a sense that there's anything funny about casting allegorical epics with a set of entities that have names like orc and urthona and oothoon in places or states with names like golgonooza or ulro which blake comments on through a set of quirky drawings that make him one of the first and most peculiar concrete poets to work in english

but from harold bloom you dont get any sense at all only an explanation so i didn't think he was extraordinary at all but rather ordinary and like most academic critics rather useless until he extended himself beyond romantic poetry or appeared to and offered what he called a theory of poetry

now its not really a theory because its not at all testable and has no explanatory power it is in fact only a suggestion described as a theory about the way poets who are not yet poets come to be poets through the poetry of the poets that have preceded them which as a suggestion is not in itself extraordinary but in the way bloom works this out which is fairly extraordinary as a struggle of sons with the ghosts of their poetical fathers from whom they have learned what they want their poetry to be and whose poetical powers they want to acquire and consider their own

now what is extraordinary is not blooms seedy freudianism the oedipal struggle between fathers and sons which has continued to be fashionable in academic literary circles far longer than its nineteenth-century imagery would suggest but the object of the struggle a poetical style or perhaps a poetical content in any case a poetical product that bloom sees as a kind of commodity over which there is a copyright dispute

this is quite extraordinary and very funny especially since as far as bloom is concerned there are very few of these poetical products and they appear to have been disputed for centuries since each father had a father with whom he must in turn have disputed the rights so poor john ashbery must have wallace stevens for a father who you may not believe this will have whitman for his father who will have emerson as his as emily dickinson will also and pound may have Browning who will have shelley who will have wordsworth who will have milton who will have spenser who will found the line the abraham of post-enlightenment poetry

but what is this product and what use could it possibly be in any time if it remained
the same over all that time three drastically different centuries

but for bloom time and culture count for nearly
nothing cabalists and calvinists english lords brooklyn
journalists hartford insurance executives and new york art
critics as poets confront nothing but death and the crises
of the personal ego so the whole line of blooms contending
“strong poets” turns out to be only the textbook version of
english romanticism suitably trivialized and egoritized by
bloom and called the tradition

now i have very little
interest in what anybody would call a tradition and no
interest in anything you could call a canon but i can see
the service bloom has rendered graduate students of english
literature he has reduced for them the great number of
poets to a handful of “strong” ones who turn out to be
the most familiar ones of the textbooks and set his
students to work finding their poet fathers for which
task he has equipped them with a mongrel array of greek and
hebrew technical terms useful i suppose mainly to console
them for their lack of ability to read in any other language
than english

while for the rest of the general educated
public if they read him he has created the consolatory
sense of the increasing belatedness and progressively more
attenuated virtues of each successive generation of poets
from blake and wordsworth to the present encouraging this
reader or nonreader to take comfort from his ignorance of the
dozens of contemporary poets working in his language that
it would most probably not have been worth his trouble to
make their acquaintance at all

and that’s what i told this man
in washington or something to that effect and what i
realized as i said it then and realize as i say it now
there is something of an idea of the avant-garde in
harold bloom however inverted and even he seems more at
home with it than i am a notion of first comers whose
achievements were new and blocked the way to further
achievements along the same path an idea of patented
inventions each one acting as a roadblock and the

tradition as a series of bitterly fought retreats till the last
“strong” poet finds himself like kafka’s rodent or a beckett
character backed into the last corner of the room its a
funny view of a tradition having it back you into a corner
and comically a little like clement greenberg’s version
of modernist painting in which the brilliant achievement
of one artist closes an avenue to the next but actually
rather more like the architecture of florence where genius
has choked up the traffic and wont let you renovate the
streets

but at least the tradition of art history is
based on a serious cultural ideology on the preeminence
and power of the nineteenth-century industrial state that
traced the marvel of its own spiritual development in a
history that began with an ingenious geography

for as michel

de certeau has pointed out in his great book on “the writing
of history” all history begins with geography first you
mark out the place where it all happened and this
demarcation of the historical place creates along its
boundaries the nonhistorical place where nothing has
happened in any developmental way and there is no history
only anthropology because there are only the customs and
traditions and rituals that maintain the primitive
traditional self because history is the allegorical
epic of the development of the civilized citizen self

so art history has been worked out as a
fantastical progress from the fertile crescent to egypt
in a few skips across the mediterranean to greece
over the adriatic to italy across the alps to
culminate in paris or perhaps london or berlin from ur
to the eiffel tower or if you choose literature from
nimrod to arnold bennett or thomas mann which in the
interests of a purely illusory sanity is foreshortened in
the schools and taught as the tradition of painting from
giotto to picasso which is no less manic than less
intelligible because it reduces hegel’s outrageous but
understandable pilgrimage from slavery to the freedom of the
german state to an intellectual rubble or pile of bric-a-brac
which is a junk heap not a tradition and to which the
only adequate response may be nietzches comment that german
culture and education for this read european
institutionalized culture is no culture at all only
a deeply entrenched barbarism but of course in the united
states institutionalized culture is not a deeply entrenched
barbarism it is only a sickly barbarism barely clinging
to the saddle

so when it speaks or groans which is
perhaps more appropriate for harold bloom of its tradition
it is not speaking from any particular institutional
authority just a provincial place in new haven
which is
why i do not normally think of harold bloom and his tradition
except as an entertainment and as somebody asks me in the
present because all that unites us in this country is
the present and the difficulty of recognizing it and
occupying it which is why its so easy to slip into
prophesy and the emptiness of the future that is so easy
to occupy because of its emptiness that we fill up so
quickly with a cargo of memories and attendant dreams

so just a moment ago richard schechner was
trying to tell us about the present state of the avant-garde
and gave us a cautionary account of how everything in
theater and performance now was a decline from the
revolutionary great old days how even the best of the new
artists are merely indulging in degraded versions of the
great techniques of the revolutionary predecessors instead
of carrying on and developing the tradition while even
the best of the old are no longer capable of going on in
their avant-garde way but are at best repeating
themselves and then he cautioned us that the loss of this
tradition of the sixties would cost us dearly as the new
fascism of the reagan government was almost upon us and we
would once again need revolutionary artists to lead a new
resistance

and i marveled to hear this nostalgic account
of the great past and cautionary account of the terrible
future accompanying so trivial a grip on the present in

the mouth of an avowed member of what for the lack of a
better term we could call the sixties avant-garde but
maybe thats the problem with the notion of the avant-garde
that it turns itself from a discourse into a tradition
whose members worry about its decline in a threatening
future and maybe thats why i'm such a poor avant-gardist
because i'm mainly concerned with the present which
if i can find it might let me know what to do and as for
the future it will find us all by itself whether we look
backwards or forwards it will be there at the top of the
stairs meanwhile i want to occupy the present

and what is it at this moment in the united states
a rocketing inflation that no particular politician can
make anything other than a rash claim to understand a
rising unemployment that anyone can understand and
underestimate as they understand because as the number
of people who lose their employment increases so the number
of people who are no longer eligible for unemployment
compensation who become demoralized and no longer appear at
the unemployment offices looking for employment or the help
they can no longer receive increases as well and these
people disappear from the numbers of the unemployed as they
case to be counted among the job hunting poor who as they
are no longer counted dont count and become some kind of
indefinitely numerous ghosts who no longer live in our
affluent or struggling economy but trouble it mysteriously
nonetheless

and if for a long time i didn't know what it
meant to be haunted i begin to know it now in the present
even as i read the newspapers or walk down the street looking
for it and i pick up my hometown paper the san diego
union and read about the grant hotel

now the grant hotel used to be the only tall
building in san diego it wasn't very tall it was about
ten stories tall but for a long time it was the tallest
building in sleepy san diego there are a lot of taller
ones now but for a certain kind of businessman clientele
t its had a kind of nostalgia and chic and was considered good
for christmas and new years parties and the like though in
the last couple of years it had gotten quite a bit rundown
and a new ownership had just taken it over and was planning
to spruce it up
and whether in line with this or not the other day they were testing the hydraulic lift for the outside fire escape the mechanism failed and the falling fire escape killed an eighty-five year old man named angel aquinero and his seventy-five year old friend sam marino who happened to be walking by and narrowly missed two twenty-two year olds who scampered out of the way
and while i find the whole story interesting i find it curious that the name of one of the fast twenty-two year olds was jack kemp the same name as the distinguished supply side legislator who had been a fleet footed quarterback behind one of the worst offensive lines for the buffalo bills where he had distinguished himself also for getting the hell out of the way in a hurry and i imagine if the policies he has advocated result in a collapse he will once again be distinguished for getting the hell out of the way in a hurry or a lot quicker than any elderly retired cook
and i asked myself as i was reading the paper how come this fire escape being tested right in the middle of the day on broadway fell on two street smart old men just like that didn't they have any ropes or some sort of barrier and signs warning people away no says the newspaper article there were no ropes or barriers or signs because there's no ordinance requiring them for testing the hydraulic lift of a fire escape
well i suppose not perhaps they'd never had trouble before but then had much experience testing it had they ever tested it before did they test it regularly once a year maybe or just suddenly now because they were renovating and a city agency had just noticed them and required the test but there was nothing about this in the paper either still the paper mentioned two men in street clothes shouting people away
now i have an image of angel aquinero eighty-five years old his hearing
not so terribly good any more concentrating on talking to his friend and listening to him while walking by and when they shout at him he has things on his mind more important than anything two punk kids could be calling out waving rudely at him and sam marino and he's got a life to live angel it's his street and the people of the street recognize this by calling him the mayor the mayor of broadway and i would think that the mayor of broadway deserves more consideration when he's walking down his own street than to be yelled at and have a fire escape fall on his head but the hotel feels justified because it was operating within ordinances that didn't recognize the dignity due the mayor
and as i continued leafing through the newspaper looking for the present i came on some letters relating to the problems of the tradition in the columns of dear abby two letters while i was sitting in the plane thinking about the problems of the avant-garde that from two utterly distinct perspectives raised the problems posed by the present to the tradition one letter could have been
written by harold bloom

"dear abby" it went "i am planning to marry this summer my parents are divorced and my mother is remarried i have my heart set on having a traditional church wedding who should give me away? my father or my stepfather? both consider me their daughter and i love them both equally my mother says the one who pays for the wedding should have the right to give me away probably my stepfather this is giving me an ulcer i've even considered eloping so i wouldn't have to make a choice but i really do want a church wedding
i have a twenty-one year old brother who could walk me down the aisle but he says he'd rather be an usher
please tell me what to do i don't want to hurt any feelings on my wedding day"

but there is a second letter from a totally different point of view and if the first one is harold

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bloom the second is a little more like me this letter is from a second wife who writes to console a writer of a previous day who had complained of the problems of being a second wife

"dont despair i am also a number two the man i married was previously married to a delightful woman named sue for years my mother-in-law called me sue my name is joan she even gave me gifts on sue's birthday she loved sue and she loves me too now im divorced and my ex is presently going with a lady named jean i understand that my former mother-in-law is now calling jean joan"

so you can see why for me joan the tradition will resolve itself in the present and all you have to do is find it but if you dont it will find you often quite rapidly and without warning but in any case my feeling is that it will come as it came to me one day recently

not long ago i moved my mother to san diego from brooklyn where she had lived for many years now its a long distance from brooklyn to san diego and the life thats lived here is as different as the climate and i would never have moved her but her life was falling apart or at least she felt that it was she was getting older she was seventy-eight or seventy-nine and the neighborhood that she'd been living in for the last twenty years ocean parkway had been running down and was now inhabited by strangers who she felt were menacing and strange and she was finding it progressively more difficult to manage her daily affairs putting her checks in the bank and taking care of the gas bill and the telephone and the rent so i moved her to an apartment in pacific beach near the bay and i cant really manage her affairs very well but even i can manage them better than she can
and i arranged to move her things from brooklyn and flew out to get her and i installed her in this sunny little apartment on la play in a small complex of apartments

managed by a very helpful and authoritarian ex-military man who looked out for her and took her shopping when he could and called me when he couldn't and all seemed to be going fairly well till she began to have problems with the telephone company and san diego gas and electric with whom she quarreled over the bills even when i arranged to pay them and with the bank that she was convinced was defrauding her of her interest so that she went there every day to make sure it was recorded and fought with the tellers when they wouldnt satisfy her and it got so that the tellers would go to great lengths not to have to deal with her because from their point of view she would fly into inexplicable rages over matters they didnt understand and the sight of a little white haired lady in a small brimmed orange cloche hat coming through the doors of their bank would strike terror into their hearts and the more attentive of them catching sight of her coming through the doors clutching her ancient purse to her chest and holding a bundle of bankbooks in her hand would beat it quickly to the john or the coffee machine for a much needed break

and the manager would eventually call me and i would have to drive down with her to straighten things out while they listened sympathetically and i tried to explain to her what they had quite correctly done which only made her angrier because they appeared to be talking to me instead of to her "and its my money" she said

but all this was manageable until she started to quarrel with her apartment manager or until she started to suspect him as she suspected everyone else of stealing from her her money her bankbooks her toothbrush her needles and toothbrush and finally her ice cube trays

at this point i moved her out into an apartment hotel a resident hotel for elderly men and women where they got their meals cooked and served to them their rooms cleaned and beds made and lived with other men and women whose capabilities were not much greater than their own which she might have enjoyed except that she was losing her grip on the present so that it didnt mean much to
her and she complained of it for reasons that seemed odd when she explained them to me
they were prejudiced against her because she was Jewish because she was from Scranton and she wanted to go back to where her people were in New York and it was useless for me to explain to her that nearly thirty percent of the people that lived in her hotel were Jewish that i'd heard them speaking yiddish and i'd heard her speaking with them and that her good friend with whom i'd seen her sitting much of the time was Italian but she spoke yiddish too better than my mother who was really a native speaker of English with a Pennsylvania accent who had never really learned to speak a fluent yiddish at all

but what good would it do all she wanted to do was go home to the Scranton of seventy years ago or the New York of thirty or forty or fifty years ago so i reminded her that all of her remaining relatives were living in Miami now and maybe she would like to visit them but that worried her because her sister Bessie would be nearly ninety now and Sarah must be over eighty-five and Sylvia well Sylvia

but i had an idea i would call her brother Irving who was younger than she was he was taking care of Sylvia and living in Florida not far from her other sisters she could visit with him and get a chance to see Sarah and Bessie before they died and Sylvia too and the idea of being with her family again her sisters and brother appealed to her because it was her only idea of home so i said that i would call Irving because i thought she could manage a plane trip if i put her on the plane at one end and her brother picked her up at the other

and i was about to do this when i got a phone call picked up the receiver and heard a horse voice that sounded like a member of the mafia or an Italian bookie that i recognized as my uncle Irving saying 'hello David'

now i hadn't heard that voice for years but this gentle heavy man spoke with the voice of a heavy there may be something about a persons life that brings one into the world as a heavy maybe running a candy store surrounded by bookies and detectives he had come to sound like one of them developing over the years that kind of cracked and breathy pharyngeal growl that i immediately recognized as my uncle

"hello Irving" i said with a confidence that surprised me but not him though i had not spoken to him for nearly twenty years

and he said "listen Sonny I know you're taking care of your momma" i said "well she's all right she's not bad" i said "she's in a hotel and she's not too happy because she's not surrounded with family but she's comfortable"

he said "look i know your momma is a difficult person she's never been very happy and i know you're doing your best for her but she's had a very hard life and i think it would do her good to come down here and visit with her family" i said that's a wonderful idea how should we arrange it? and he says "look she takes the plane to Fort Lauderdale i come in and pick her up right away and she'll live the life of reilly"

"the life of reilly" i hadn't heard that expression in years since i was a kid and William Bendix played it on the radio in the nineteen forties and my uncle Irving was promising my mother a return in the nineteen eights

he said "yeah she'll lead the life of reilly its beautiful here we'll take her all around she'll see the seashore she'll see all the children and grandchildren the beautiful houses they live in she'll live like a queen"

i said "it sounds good but why don't you call her and talk to her too ill do her good to hear your voice and give her confidence she may be a little nervous about such a long trip"

"sure Sonny i understand but maybe you should give her my number too in case i can't reach her right away"
ive got kind of irregular hours  im working as a night watchman  and sometimes i'm not in

sure i said  ok irving  but i knew she'd never be able to make the call though i coached her on how to do it from the pay phone in the hall  by dialing the operator and billing the call to me because i knew that she'd lose her confidence or forget altogether  but i said sure and a week went by two weeks  three weeks  no irving and i couldn't figure out why irving hadn't called in all that time.

so i asked my mother did you try to call irving and this was a very difficult if not entirely pointless thing to do because having a conversation with my mother about some specific act or event that either did or did not occur in the recent past was difficult because of the way she loses hold of the present about as soon as it goes past  and pointless because what she says is so unreliable as she tries to cover up her losses but i tried to find out whether irving had called her  or more improbably whether she had called him  and she tried to remember  or more precisely to answer  so we both tried and became exhausted with our effort.

she felt spent with the immense effort of struggling with an uncooperative long distance operator who refused to put her through  with a signal that didn't lead to a familiar voice at the other side  and ended in tears.

for weeks she had been trying to get irving she had called again and again  she was exhausted with all of the trying she was describing  and still there was no irving and now she was close to tears because something might be wrong.

and while i didn't really believe this i decided to call  so i dialed him in the morning and nobody answered  i tried again in the afternoon and that night and the next morning  and i remember thinking it was strange because i knew that his wife fanny stayed home much of the time looking after my aunt sylvia who had become something of an invalid and spent all of her days on the couch looking at whatever was on television  so i thought it was strange and kept on trying  and one day several weeks later i dialed the number and somebody picks up the phone and its a women's voice and i say "hello can i speak with irving?"  and the women's voice becomes hard and cold and says "is this some kind of joke?"  and i say "no no fanny is that you?"  she says "david? is that you?"  i said yes and she said "irving died"  "what happened?"  i said.

she said "remember he called you?"

"yes" "well that night he went to work at his watchman's job  he went out to get a cup of coffee during his break and a car came around the corner and hit him and he got killed!"

now i hadn't counted on the presence of fort lauderdale or miami  or my uncle who had appeared on the telephone and then disappeared  nothing within the horizon of my discourse could have prepared me for that moment with my aunt fanny who had just lost the husband she'd lived with for over forty years and was now on the telephone.

and it seems to me that if you can't respond to that you're not in the avant-garde.