

34 Hamilton Rd.

Arlington, MA 02174

July 16, 1975

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Dear Mrs. Elsdon,

I'm sorry that I haven't written sooner to you about Bert. Certainly it has been on my mind - so much so that when I looked at your letter I was amazed that it was dated only in February of this year. It seems as though I have felt guilty about not answering for longer than that.

Perhaps one of the reasons I haven't written sooner was that I knew it would be difficult to pin down the elusive charm and integrity of the guy. God only knows, I loved the man. I considered him one of my dearest friends, and yet when I looked back upon the years I knew him - what? How can I define him simply? It's impossible because Bert was an incredibly complex person - and also, as you know, a very private person. Quite frankly, I don't think I ever got beneath the surface of what he wanted to show me. And perhaps this was

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as much my fault as his because we all have a tendency to camouflage our selves out of some sort of misguided tendency toward self-protection.

At any rate, chronologically we met in the summer or fall of 1947. I was living in a beach house owned by my brother on the other side of the road of the Crites' house. We exchanged greetings in a rather undone fashion and didn't really, as I remember, strike up more than a desultory conversation until one Thursday in the late fall - when I received the Sunday New York Times - I was reading it on the front porch. Bert, noticing the fact, asked if he could see the financial section of the paper. As I had - and to this day don't - any interest in that particular section of the paper slightly acquiesced. Not too much was communicated at that time, but naturally I was intrigued. What the hell is a hermit on the dunes interested in the financial section. I guess from that we began talking to each other,

Certainly our acquaintance or closeness didn't occur from that but it did break the reserve that normally - or abnormal - people have about their privacy.

We ultimately became quite close - I think - but as I've said, there was always a distance. Bert, as I've always suspected, ~~he~~ had been badly hurt in some sort of personal relationship. As a result

I feel he was never going to allow himself to open his life so that he could be wounded in that way again. He never really opened up with me.

But perhaps this was my fault; Certainly he was a far more erudite person than I was philosophically. And when he got in to the Mystics I couldn't even follow him. I never knew, even, when he was being serious about "the Spirits," and yet he probably was or he wouldn't

have mentioned them. I think that he very much wanted to be liked - at the same time keeping that affection at arms length - while he talked about "the Spirits" and at the same time sort of poking fun at himself so you couldn't quite know whether he was serious or not.

I suspect he was. As you must know, he was a firm believer in astrology - and possibly with much justification. Certainly he anticipated that

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my first wife and I had a star crossed marriage.
It ended, as he had anticipated in a divorce.

I'm afraid that you are getting a very superficial evaluation of Bert from me, and for this I'm sorry.

We left Oahu in April or May of 1948.
From that time on, the only occasions I saw Bert
was when I came out to California to visit with my
mother & father who lived in Santa Maria. But
at no time when I was there did I fail to make
my pilgrimage to his shack in the desert. 1952,
1954, 1959, 1964 at my father's death, 1968, 1972 when
my mother died. He always drew me back. I could
never have been in the west coast without stopping
in to sit for an hour or two. I always had to leave
before we had finished really talking, because I had to
get back, but perhaps I was afraid the conversation
would run out, that it would become dull - for
him? I don't know. All I do know is that
he was a dear friend - dear, dear, and that I
cherished our relationship.

We corresponded fitfully, but always with 3
(on my part at any rate) guilt at not having
written more often. I remember once Bert
sent me a \$60 bill which, of course, over whelmed
me. As I remember he said "The spirits moved
me to send you this." I later responded by
sending him a portable radio ~~to~~ that had been
hanging around the place with no one using
it very much. He then in subsequent
communications accused me of being a
bit "chesty" - I think that was the term
that he used, but naturally it was an
affectionate way of expressing thanks.

Bert gave me a tremendous amount of
nourishment. In my own way, I hope I gave
him something back.

Now to answer your mino-graphic
questionnaire — I've told you how we met. As
far as I know, he was born in Friesland(?) an
island off Holland. He was never close to his
family and as far as I could discover, there
was a bitterness in his relationship with them.
Never married, but he certainly was interested in
women and was frequently talking about women
coming to the dunes to visit him. But they were

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all so odd, that he soon shucked loose. Bert settled
into the dunes because he felt most secure there, I believe.
As I recall he arrived in the northern coast of California
and then worked his way down, until he arrived in
Oceanside. He may have spent some time in Los
Angeles. I remember his telling me that he had
taken a course in war stock market analysis (and
had very quickly come to the conclusion that brokers
were for the birds.) Basic philosophy - he was a
pragmatist and accepted the philosophy that
suit led him - sort of platonic but strongly overlaid
with mysticism and that overlaid with skep-
ticism. Being intelligent, he was a skeptic about
politics, judging the man by his actions. I know
he detested RMH with a passion - a feeling I heartily
concurred in. Bert valued most in life his
privacy, his independence. Visitors? - I know
he enjoyed seeing me and he always urged me to
stay longer, but I always wondered whether he was
telling me the truth. When we were living in the
dunes ^(The Shacks), he would visit us, and we had him for
dinner - as I remember - but it was always
under his control. Bert valued, in my belief, his
independence most. Reading his favorite pastime. I
remember coming up on him once - about in 1964.

and I never crossed through the cottonwood
grove without waving him by a loud "Hallo
Bert!" and discovering him on his outdoor
mattress, reading a biography of Beethoven while
if you can believe it, B's 5th Symphony was blaring
on the portable radio. Basically philosophy and
the evaluation of life was what he was most
concerned with. Favorite music - I think I've
already answered. Foods - ? He was a peasant.
He could eat anything out of a can. I remembered
being astounded that he didn't enjoy Pismo clams!
I practically lived off them when I was living there.
People that he looked up to - ? No one that I
know. He would tell me about the Dunes people,
but always with tongue in cheek. Chester Arthur, some of the
other odd characters who had inhabited the beach. In
retrospect, I think he was a little paranoid about
some of the other people in the Oceano community,
but then he was probably right! I'm
sure he was lonely, but he preferred that to the
frustration and anguish of a social existence.
Perhaps his sensitivity was such that he could not take
the superficial crap that goes on in society, the innuendoes,
and because of his basic insecurity it became too
devastating and disturbing. "Only the dunes soothes the
spirit."

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He had great respect for creative people - philosophers, musicians (composers), satirists (Hopper on the coast as well as Buchwald), simple people with integrity. To my knowledge he never expressed regret at his life style - but then why should he? And I never felt that I should pose such a question. All life is a compromise, and I think he had discovered the best suited him. Bert was not interested in material things, as his life style indicated, but he was interested in the truth for some strange reason. perhaps. I've already mentioned about his interest in the war bet. I know nothing about his health history except an amusing aspect - anal - where he had contracted some sort of bug or worm that gave him a ferocious itchy ass. He never changed while I knew him - always garrulous, gossipy but with understanding, tolerance, and humor. Don't know about his "stowaway" episode. He gardened for subsistence. Livelihood - taking care of a couple of yards which burgeoned under his loving care. In the dunes he grew what he could eat. To my knowledge he never killed any animal even though rabbits & birds were in abundance around his shack. I'm not sure that there was ever any communication with

the birds & bees. As I remember, they went their way and he went his. I know nothing about the next T.P.

Nothing about friends that you are probably already aware of.

I have already tried to describe the elusive Bert, for what it's worth.

Your last P is much more difficult to answer.

I'm sure he affected my life, but I don't think
that I can honestly pinpoint why. His uniqueness,
independency, life-style — all of these have, I'm
sure, had an effect on me. That's a terribly
complicated question that I can't honestly diagnose.
I guess the simplest way of putting it — though
unadorned — is that my life has been
enriched tremendously by knowing Bert
Schievink.

I do have ~~to~~ some Kodachrome slides that I took in 1959 of him. My ex-wife has them but should they be of any value, let me know, & I'll get them for you.

And all the best in your project.

(over)

Sincerely
Winton R. Johnson

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P.S. I found your questionnaire most helpful in bringing things back to mind about Bert. One other thing I remember - he would disappear for days at a time. When queried about it, "Vinston, the spirits were not right," or something to that effect. I don't know whether it was really physical or mental, but I believe the latter.