

Writing at the Edge of Time

Bonnie Marranca

Writing an editorial at this juncture of American life is a daunting task. Simply to rant about the degradation of culture, political corruption, spiritual bankruptcy, and the rise of far-right nationalism is to duplicate the already prolific commentary on these themes. I would rather write about the quality of human spirit that the life and death of Sam Shepard offers as a model from the last months of his life. Reprinted in this issue is the first piece he ever wrote for *PAJ*, in 1977, which was decided on as an homage after his death last summer. The December 4, 2017 *New York Times* article by Alexandra Alter, which details Shepard's struggle to finish his last book, *Spy of the First Person*, appeared just as the proofs for the new *PAJ* had arrived.

It is profoundly moving to read of his life since the diagnosis, in 2015, of the dreaded Lou Gehrig's disease. Here was a man who thought nothing of driving cross-country whenever he wished, who rode horses, a man always on the move. As physical debilitation took its toll, Shepard kept on writing even after he no longer had the use of his hands and arms, by recording the text, and when he could no longer do that on his own, dictating the book. His sisters transcribed the text. His old friend Patti Smith was there to help edit and shape the book. The publisher includes a note on this loving effort at the end of the volume. I recall that years ago Shepard helped his friend Joseph Chaikin carry on working after his stroke. There are important lessons to be learned from the enormous courage Shepard, immobilized and losing all powers of control, demonstrated in doing his work any way he could get it done.

Shepard is someone who wrote long-hand in notebooks. He used a typewriter. The *PAJ* Publications archive includes a few of his letters hand-written in pencil on yellow legal paper. He took the time to respond to queries and politely answered them. He personally conducted the business of art even in the seventies and eighties.

At the end of his life Shepard showed fortitude and more wisdom than anyone ever knows he possesses. A private man, in his movement between memory and the urgent present, he allowed a fiercely personal portrait, even though his book is not a memoir, but something like a metanarrative that involves one male character watching another through binoculars. "Why is he watching me? I can't understand that. Nothing seems to be working now. Hands, Arms. Legs. Nothing. I just lie here. Waiting for someone to find me. I just look up at the sky. I can smell him close by." Shepard remained devoted to the writer's life, which exists in the real world and yet creates a reality beyond it. He brought the same lyrical self-consciousness of his dramatic characters to an understanding of his own existential condition, looking at it from the outside and the inside. In one of the plays of his that I have most admired, *Action*, the character Jeep describes his attempts to keep himself together: "You act yourself out." The vulnerability of the male character was always there in the intimacy of the human voice. In the recent obituary of the writer William Gass, I was reminded of his belief that sentences have souls. Shepard himself was always soulful and well understood the ontology of the sentence. He honored his commitment to a certain set of values and lived out the writing life.

In these distracted, troubled times, occasions sometimes present themselves when it may be necessary to take the time to honor exemplary acts from the lives around us that bring to our understanding of the world the eschatological imperatives. In his final text, Shepard left us a record of how he did that, as a man experiencing life and as a writer chronicling it, through a dialogic process that serves as his last testament. Sometimes when grace touches one, life and death and art can seem inseparable.