

## *Mark Halliday*

### Reality U.S.A.

I feel I should go to Norfolk Virginia and drink  
gin with sailors on leave from the *Alabama*, talking  
baseball and Polaris missiles and Steve Martin movies,  
another gin with lime juice, then Balto, Balto,  
hitch-hike in and out of Baltimore for days  
back and forth for days in a row discussing the jobs  
of whoever gives me rides, salesmen, shippers,  
small-time dispatchers of the much that can be  
dispatched. For the ACTUALITY of it!

Books dominate my head. I read in them, I read at them,  
I'm well into my thirties. What about real life?  
The woman in the light-blue skirt  
on the cigarette billboard has such big thighs!  
What is it about thighs? Smooth and weighty,  
weighty and smooth: you can tell there's really  
something *there*. And to think that  
the woman must really exist, it's a photo after all  
not a painting, she is somewhere in America —  
and to think that some guy gets to lie down  
on her and her thighs . . . She's a model,  
she probably lives in New York, New York baffles me  
I know I could never find her there — but  
listen, her sister lives in Baltimore,  
hanging out sheets to dry from the balcony  
of a light-blue house, lifting her arms —  
reality. Along with

her dimly dangerous ex-husband, her speed pills,  
his clumsy minor embezzlement of funds from  
Pabst Auto Supply, and what else?  
The boxing matches he goes to, and the stock-car races

and — maybe I should go to Indianapolis?  
 But I feel sure I'd be bored in Indianapolis  
 despite the smoky reality of Indianapolis.  
 But it's this idea of American experience how I don't  
 have it, how I ought to know the way things are really  
 and not just from Hemingway or Dreiser, John O'Hara or  
 James T. Farrell

or, say, Raymond Carver or Bruce Springsteen  
 but directly: first-hand: hands-on learning.  
 What if I were to take a Greyhound to Memphis,  
 quit shaving, learn to drink whiskey straight,  
 lift some weights (maybe I should do the weights before I go)  
 and get a tattoo on one bicep saying KISS OFF  
 and meet a guy named Eddie who chain-smokes  
 and rob a record store with Eddie! Yes,  
 we smash the glass at 3 a.m. on Davis Avenue in Memphis  
 and grab 300 albums and 200 8-track tapes  
 pile them into Eddie's red pickup and bingo, we're gone  
 in five minutes. Next day we paint the pickup yellow  
 and change the plates, no sweat. Eddie knows,  
 he knows stuff, he knows how to fence the loot  
 and he says next we hit a certain TV store,  
 he slugs my shoulder laughing, I get my piece of cash  
 but really it's not the cash I care about,  
 it's the being *involved*.

Eddie thinks that's weird,  
 he says "You're weird, man"  
 and starts to act mistrustful so I leave town.  
 Kansas City here I come.

No, skip Kansas City, I want to save Knsas City.  
 Just in case.

— In case what? What am I talking about?  
 How many lives does a person get,  
 one, right? And me,

I love my life with books! —  
 Of course it's not *just* books, I've got bills  
 and friends and milkshakes, the supermarket, laundromat  
 oh shit but still I keep feeling this thing about  
*reality* —

the world is so loaded: a green beer bottle is chucked  
half-full from a speeding Ford Mercury and that beer sloshes  
exactly like this loaded world — what?

Forget the world, just take America,  
sure there's the same hamburgers everywhere  
and gasoline fumes but among the fumes and burgers  
there's *detail*, tons of it, you can smell it.  
There are variations . . . All the stuff  
Whitman claimed he saw, there's the really *seeing* that stuff!  
There's —

I don't know — there's a waitress in an Arby's Roast Beef  
and her name is either Donna or Nadine,  
you buy the Special on the right day and you get  
a free Batman 10-ounce glass, she makes a joke about it,  
you say "What time do you get off work" (only this time  
it's really happening) and that night Donna  
or Nadine does for you what you thought they only did  
in fiction . . . That's right. Next morning  
her bottom in the light from the window looks so pearly  
it's like home, just glad to be home.

It's April, all cool and sunny,  
and across the street from Arby's there is  
a ten-year-old black boy wearing red hightops  
and we talk about the Braves (this is in Georgia, now,  
and the asphalt glistens) and the kid says  
something beautiful that I'll never forget.

Good. So then, the kid's uncle sells me some cocaine  
or teaches me how to aim a pistol  
or takes me for a ride in his helicopter —  
there must be a few black men who own helicopters?  
Up we go roaring over Georgia!

The roofs and poles and roofs  
the components,  
the components!

Ohhhh . . . Already they've worn me out.