Beat Bastard: An Adoptee's Portfolio

by

Robert Hyatt

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The people depicted and events related in this account are drawn from Robert Hyatt's experiences in northwest Denver over a period of thirty or forty years. In most cases, the names have been changed.

Front Cover Image: Smart Combinatorics #10 by Robert Hyatt

“Making other books jealous since 2004”

Big Table Publishing Company
For my beloved children, Henry, April, Vera, and Heather,

and my beloved granddaughter, Olivia Noel Montoya

12-24-97 ~ 2-28-16.

Her fiery spirit was an inspiration to all who knew her well.

Introduction

EVERYTHING’S A COMMODITY with limited shelf life in the U.S.A., even history. Names and details cherished by one generation are continually supplanted by a new pantheon of celebrities and modern fads which seem cheap and fleeting to the old guard, as their fancies seem worn out and played to the young bloods. Mainstream media has always preferred catchy sound bites to true recorded experience. This conveyor belt never stops moving. In Los Angeles recently, pioneering science fiction author Ray Bradbury’s house was recently bulldozed without much fanfare beyond a meme on Facebook. Many people have seen documentaries about the sixties and allowed their conception of those ten years to be confined to mainstream media’s opinion of what stood out or was worthy of consideration, reduced to catchy sound bites like “drug culture,” “women’s lib” or “self-help.” But there’s always more to know.

Beat Bastard: An Adoptee’s Portfolio is a searching account of Bob Hyatt’s childhood as a fireman’s son in Denver, his experiments with drugs and alcohol as a teen and young adult in the sixties, his first marriage and divorce, and the ultimate act of his drinking years via his commission of a thoughtless, unintentionally provocative act at the very worst place and time possible, as the living embodiment of one blindsided by that segregated and intoxicated decade. While the general public’s conceptions of the fifties and sixties may be neatly sewn up by the public relations of Happy Days and Yellow Submarine, Bob Hyatt’s rendition of his own experience in these decades seems, by comparison, viral and real. Like most others of his generation, Hyatt had his troubles with intoxicants, alcohol being the most problematic, a problem which manifested early in his life, along with an eagerness for girls and fast cars. More than just a book about the journey into chaos and redemption from the ashes, his book is also a barometric reading on a recent period of rapid societal change, with the ups and downs of Bob Hyatt’s life as the Mercury indice, to provide a written legacy of his life experience for his descendants.

Though adopted by a loving family shortly after birth and raised in Denver, Bob’s memoir is written by one unaware of his roots. He learned the identity of his biological mother in 1994, when he was 49 years old. She had remarried, given birth to children, and elected to keep her prior pregnancy a secret. Out of courtesy, her name is withheld from this manuscript. A series of
bureaucratic hurdles delayed the discovery of his biological father’s identity nearly seventeen years more. Robert Hyatt is Neal Cassady’s son, a detail lending an archetypical cast to his remembrances, and one of which he was completely unaware until a few years ago, at age 66, after a couple of marriages and the birth and rearing of four children, long after writing this memoir. Daredevil hero of Jack Kerouac’s On the Road and designated driver of Ken Kesey’s magical mystery bus, Neal Cassady has been called the father of the sixties. As Neal’s unwitting son, Bob’s first acid experience equates to his whole generation’s first trip. By the same token, Bob’s redemption of his own uncertain trajectory via Fine Arts and the resulting devotion to his family equates to validation of his generation’s faith in the transformative power of creativity and love.

Bob strove to make as objective a record as possible in this memoir, severely minimizing the instance of personal interpretation, and went to pains not to embellish or editorialize those memories, rather to keep his accounts literal and reportorial, that it took him a very long time to achieve a satisfactory tone. Beat Bastard is an informative record—both of Denver’s past and changes in the culture at large via the Beat Generation’s influence—to be valued by students of recent underground history.

After the near-fatal drunken blunder recounted near the end of this volume, Bob redeemed his uncertain trajectory via excellence as an instructor of fine arts, substance abuse counselor and human services administrator. He’s an extremely accomplished painter, influenced by French Impressionism, Northwest coast Native American (Indian) sculpture and painting, Russian Constructivism and more, capable in a gamut of styles, including American Abstract Expressionism, Art Deco, Minimalism Sculpture and Op Art. Bob has an aversion to public speaking, but will occasionally do so. It is my distinct pleasure to have made the acquaintance of one so emblazoned by the forces and facts that shaped his life. The aforementioned effect of Bob’s parentage on this ingenuous cautionary tale for creative spirits is a happy accident or meaningful coincidence, and it was only at my suggestion that Mr. Hyatt wrote about discovering the identity of his biological parents, which is presented as an Afterword to the present volume, being primarily concerned with some of the difficulties historically encountered by Denver adoptees in that effort. Readers will be pleased to learn this obstruction has recently been reversed*, hopefully eliminating unnecessary delays in future.

Zack Kopp, Denver

March, 2016

*Denver Post, April 30, 2016: “How one piece of paper is changing lives of Colorado adult adoptees” by Kevin Simpson
I LEARNED I WAS ADOPTED at age seven. The topic was brought up at school. At home that afternoon, I asked my mother about it. “We adopted you when you were two weeks old,” she replied without elaboration. Her response was undefended. No other kids said they were adopted when I asked around the next day. Over the years, my interest in being an adoptee came and went. More often than not, when it happened, I’d been drawn in by a conversation about another’s adoption. At those times, I compared circumstances, imagined ancestors and thought about biological family possibilities. I was puzzled and curious about being the only adoptee I knew of, but that quickly passed, and from my point of view, adoption was utterly irrelevant during the rest of my childhood.

My earliest memories are of the people and events at my grandmother’s house, where I lived until I was almost five years old with my mother and father, grandmother, my mother’s brother, Lou, and two small dogs. All of us shared the living room, dining room, kitchen, and bathroom of her well-maintained brick house on the northeast corner of the busy intersection of West 38th Avenue and Sheridan Boulevard in northwest Denver. My parents, the Pekinese, and I slept in a basement bedroom that was separated from a large dimly lit furnace room by a thin partition which offered visual privacy, but little else. The windowless bedroom was hardly used except at bedtime, in favor of the upstairs spaces.

Each family member had certain responsibilities and levels of importance that I knew pretty well by the time I was four years old. We kept to the traditional gender-based family roles of that time and place, in that Mother and Grandmother did the household cleaning and cooking, looking after the dogs and myself, while Dad was a fireman working twenty-four hour shifts every other day. Mom took care of my hunger and other discomforts and she was in charge of discipline. Her laugh was big and bold and wonderful. When I felt bad or when things went wrong, my grandma knew just how to soothe me. Dad was my teacher and occasional playmate. When we were together, he talked to me about my world and we got silly and played games. Uncle Lou worked as a salesman, and he was occasionally kept away from home because he gambled on the game of Bridge, often returning with gifts and a smile that made me feel I was important to him. I had little contact with other children during the first four years of my life. Since there were no children living nearby and because my family didn’t seek them out, I played alone most of the time. My mother, grandmother, and uncle often seemed interested and amused, rarely joining in my activities. Everyone watched over me.
DAYS SEEMED LONGER when Dad was at work. Mom and Grandma came up with activities to distract me. I built towers with wooden blocks, looked at the numbers and spots on playing cards, tossing them into an old fedora. I moved the marbles around on a Chinese checker board. I'd look over and over again at the pictures in my Golden Books. Tiring of these activities, I came up with other things to do. I passed time exploring and investigating every remote corner of the house. Sometimes I’d lie on the floor and imagine walking around on the ceiling. I particularly remember being drawn to a reproduction of the eighteenth-century English landscape painting in my grandmother’s bedroom. I’d see myself sitting by the brook in the pastoral scene, but I was confused. In the picture it was daytime and yet everything was so dark. The grass and trees in our yard were green, not grayed brown and black. I spent more time in the basement furnace room than anywhere else. It was my playground. I invented things to do around the gravity-fed natural gas furnace that had been converted from a coal burner years before. The furnace, with tubular duct pipes that looked like octopus arms reaching for something beyond the ceiling, was located dead center in the gray-green room. My favorite game was pretending to unlock the make-believe ignitions on my tricycle and toy cars that I parked against the wall of the furnace room. After playing like I’d started the engine, I’d ride or push one of these around the furnace on the smooth concrete floor, watching the wheels turn, and imagine it was full-size. When each trip ended, I returned the toy to its usual parking place, carefully locking it before taking another out for a spin. I liked nighttime best back then because usually everyone was home. After supper and the dishes were done, the family often came to the living room to listen to pop-tunes and dance to 1940s era big band music. The 78 RPM records were played on my uncle’s new phonograph. The burnished red mahogany cabinet made it the showpiece of the living room. My parents danced to the foxtrots and the waltzes, gliding in tempo to their favorite tunes around the small living room. When a song ended, they would ask my uncle to play another. Even Grandma, with hips made stiff from arthritis, would occasionally get out of her overstuffed chair and hobble around the room with an imagined partner. As a small boy it seemed that people showed up at just about any time. Extended family, friends of my parents, and neighbors came to call. My mother, grandmother, and uncle welcomed every visitor. They seemed happiest when they had guests in the house. My dad and the dogs weren’t as enthusiastic.

As an adopted only child, I was usually put on display when guests dropped in. My mother and uncle enjoyed showing me off the most, usually by having me recite a nursery rhyme, sing a song, or dance in the center of the living room. At the end of my performance, they taught me to walk around the room, stand in front of each onlooker and say, Christmas is coming, the turkey is getting fat, please put a penny in the old man’s hat. Everyone would laugh, and I’d collect the small change. To begin with, I enjoyed the attention, but I began not liking the performances. Collecting
a few coins after each little act didn’t overcome my embarrassment. I asked to stop putting on the shows, but they didn’t give up getting me to do them.

Then came the Fourth of July. At four years old, I didn’t know the significance of Independence Day, but it turned out to be the day I stood my ground. To begin the celebration on that day, family and guests came to the living room for my recitation of the Mother Goose rhyme, “Hot Cross Buns.” When I balked and refused to speak, Uncle Lou tried to coax me by saying that after I finished, we’d have a picnic. He added that there’d be fireworks later and Grandma would serve homemade strawberry shortcake.

“No,” was all I said. And I wouldn’t budge.

When my mother threatened to keep me inside during the fireworks display if I refused to recite the nursery rhyme, I blew up, screaming and jumping around the living room, stomping my feet as hard as I could. I flailed my arms and threw myself to the floor. My dad had given me a large metal key ring to play with, holding thirty or more keys fitting no known locks. It was as large as some of my metal cars and much heavier. To end my tantrum, I stood up and threw this heavy ring of metal keys as hard as I could.

It crashed into my uncle’s new phonograph cabinet. The impact left several dents and a deep scratch. The damage could easily be seen from across the room.

Everyone was silent after my outburst. I stared at the mahogany cabinet with its dark French-polish finish that had been so uniformly applied now irreparably flawed and my ring of keys lying nearby. In an instant, my mother bounded across the living room. She gripped one of my arms and began whacking me on the butt and upper legs with her free hand. She continued slapping me until I yelled, “You’re stupid!” at which time she added jerking and shaking to her tactics. By then, she had walloped me all the way to the bathroom where she pushed a bar of soap in and out of my mouth. I was sent to bed, where I cried myself to sleep. Later my mother took me from bed to the living room. Everyone was eating strawberry shortcake. She pointed-out the damage I’d caused and ordered me to apologize to my uncle for ruining his phonograph cabinet. He only nodded his head when I said that I was sorry. Then she put me back in bed. When I awoke the next morning, I went directly upstairs to my grandmother’s bedroom. She welcomed me into her bed with a big hug, where I lay contented in the comfort of her arms.

Snack — ’49
UNCLE LOU ALWAYS SEEMED HAPPY. If anything was bothering him, he didn’t show it. He went out of his way to talk to strangers, which often included some good-natured teasing or a joke. He would strike up a conversation with anyone around. One night, Uncle Lou came home just as I was going to bed. He seemed even more good-humored than usual. He asked me if I would like to have a bowl of cereal with him. Before I could answer, he walked into the kitchen, dumped brown flakes into two bowls, poured on the milk, and added several lumps of sugar.

I was about to start eating when my grandmother called me into the living room. She said that she wanted me to see Frisky, her Fox Terrier, play tug with an old sock. The dog’s name no longer applied. These days it was unusual to see it do anything but sleep on my grandmother’s lap. I watched as Frisky and my grandmother pulled on each end of the sock. Then I heard my parents’ laughter coming from the kitchen. My grandmother and I went to see the cause of the commotion. Mom kept laughing, which caused my grandmother to giggle without knowing why. Eventually my mother calmed enough to explain. She said that she and my Dad went to the kitchen to say “Hi,” to my uncle. He was busy eating the snack. When Dad told Uncle Lou that he was gobbling down a new kind of dog food, not cereal, my uncle smiled broadly and said, “Not bad,” then laughed and continued eating.

The Bridge — ‘51

ON THE 4900 BLOCK OF ELM COURT, where my family moved after we left my grandmother’s house, there were lots of kids and lots of bikes. Owning a bicycle was important in our neighborhood, not only because bicycles were the quickest way to get around, seeming to shrink distance, but also because a bike was a means of gaining peer acceptance and inclusion in a group. Kids became friends because of experiences involving bicycles, and social ties were formed between kids who had the same make or style of bike.

I didn’t have a two-wheeler of my own.

When we first moved to the Elm Court house I tried riding my tricycle with the kids on bikes, but soon quit taggling along, for obvious reasons.

One hot August afternoon, an older girl who lived on our block let me ride her bicycle. The “twenty-six incher” was much too large. I couldn’t reach the pedals while sitting on the seat. But, I could ride the bike in a standing position because it didn’t have the straight cross-member bar between the front fork and seat that was built-in to boy’s bicycle frames. I rode around the block, but soon became tired because I couldn’t sit down. In a while I found I could temporarily recover by alternating pedaling and coasting.

About a half mile from home, I saw a group of kids taking turns riding bicycles across a footbridge that crossed over an irrigation ditch which delivered water to truck farms located north of our neighborhood, testing their abilities at various speeds. I wanted to try it. When the boys who had been crossing the bridge stopped to look at a low tire on one of their bikes, I started across. I failed to keep the bike traveling in a straight line and since there were no safety rails to prevent it, I rode off the side of the bridge into the water below. I struggled to get the bicycle off of me and to
get my head above water. Once I did, I heard giggling. And when the boys saw that I had a girl’s bike, the giggling turned to laughter.

“Look at the sissy! He can’t ride,” jeered one boy.

“He’s really a girl! You can tell by his bike,” snarked another.

I struggled to get the heavy two-wheeler out of the irrigation ditch. First I tried to push the bike out of the slippery trap from a kneeling position in the water. Then I attempted to pull the bike out of the waist-deep water from a place on the bank above the water line. Finally, from a standing position in the water, I pushed the bike upwards against the steep muddy sides. But I just couldn’t get it out of the ditch. As I stood helplessly in the water holding onto the handlebars, an older kid jumped into the ditch. He grabbed the bike and pulled it up the muddy bank to the dry ground above. The laughter and name calling stopped at once. When I climbed out of the ditch and stood on the bank, I looked into my helper’s face for the first time. It was Bradley, the older brother of a friend from school. Bradley smiled, then walked away in the direction of his house. I wiped the mud off of my hands and rode the dirty, dripping bike toward home.

The Firecracker — ’54

“ROB!” DAD CALLED ME from his bedroom. His tone was austere. When he used this inflection, he meant, “Come here, now.” During the few steps it took to move from the living room to his bedroom I had enough time to feel anxious. When I entered, I saw my parents peering through the window into the backyard. They’d opened the window on the chilly Saturday morning so they might better hear the goings on outdoors. Mom invited me to climb onto the dressing table bench under the window where I’d have a better view. This was good. I knew it would be a time for sharing, not punishment. I looked outside and saw Cliff moving back and forth on the backyard swing.

Cliff was my age, nine, and he lived across the street. He was “touched,” according to my parents, and went to a special school. I noticed that Cliff was swinging at the top of the arc and he pumped his legs to maintain maximum height. He had a comic book in his hands and he unabashedly serenaded the neighborhood from his high-flying perch. The tranquil April morning was charged with Cliff’s country and western twang. Why, oh why, did I ever leave Wyoming?!! he sang loudly, repeating it over and over, emphasizing certain notes in a style not unlike Swiss yodeling. As he sang, he soared near the gravitational limits of his swinging seat. Between repetitions of his song’s single line refrain, Cliff mimicked rapid firing machine guns, blasting cannons, and exploding bombs, sound effects from his WWII comic book. We watched Cliff for several minutes without comment.

“Why don’t you go outside? You and Cliff can play for a while,” Dad suggested in a soft tone of voice.
I went outside and hopped onto the empty swing next to Cliff, thrusting my legs out and back to gain a desired height. Cliff continued his rendition of song and verse until he had turned the last page in his comic book, then he allowed his swing to coast to a stop, looking around the backyard and at me as if waking from a trance. Then he got off of his swing. “Come over to my house. I got some new comic books.”

“Okay,” I replied, as the two of us made toward the gate Cliff had left open when he’d entered the yard.

At Cliff’s, we sat on a brown leather couch embossed with images of cowboys on horses swinging lariats at steers. The couch was located in a room Cliff’s Dad had converted from a single-car attached garage. The leather was tough and the innersprings unleashed enough energy to propel the jumper much higher than other couches. It became a favorite spot. If we weren’t sitting on that couch, we were jumping up and down on it.

Cliff and I looked at the new comic books, then we bounced on the couch. “Cliff, let’s check the alley,” I suggested.

“Yeah,” Cliff agreed with his typical enthusiasm.

Most of the younger boys in our neighborhood could be found ambling through alleys looking for intriguing items that had been thrown away by neighbors. Cliff checked the trash bins on one side of the alley while I looked on the other. We hadn’t progressed a half block in our search before we saw Biggs striding toward us. “What are you doing in my alley?” Biggs demanded. He was three years older than Cliff and me.

“Nothing,” Cliff said timidly.

Biggs took a Boy Scout knife out of his pocket and opened the largest blade. “I’ll teach you to come into my alley,” he declared, brandishing the knife at us.

Cliff and I immediately ran away. We dashed part way down the alley and then into an unfenced yard. Biggs scurried after us, laughing and wielding his knife in various stabbing motions. “I’ll get you!” he threatened. Cliff and I gained some distance on Biggs, probably because his giggling slowed him down. There were two Poplar trees in the unfenced yard. Cliff climbed one of the trees and I climbed the other. By the time Biggs caught up to us, we were high enough to be out of reach. “Come down or I’ll come up after you,” he warned.

Cliff and I didn’t say anything as we climbed higher and further away. Biggs threw his pocketknife up into the tree at Cliff three or four times, but the branches were too close together. Unfortunately the tree I’d climbed wasn’t as tall, and the limbs were wider spaced. I climbed to the highest branch I could, but it wasn’t high enough. Biggs threw the knife upwards into the tree, over and over. I tried to position myself so that the tree trunk was between Biggs and me. Biggs ran from one side of the tree to the other making it impossible to shield myself by keeping the trunk between us. I watched helplessly as the whirling knife came toward me, then dropped back to the grass below. The only sounds disturbing the tranquil morning air were Biggs’s cackling laughter and the sound of the knife striking tree limbs from time to time. The knife hit my leg and my back, but without enough force to break the skin.

“Hey, you kids! Get out of my yard!” hollered a woman from inside her house. The screeching adult voice was music to my ears. Biggs ran away immediately. We climbed down from the trees as soon as he left the yard.
Cliff had been crying and didn’t seem to know what to do next. “I’m going home, Cliff,” I said. “You go home too.”

Cliff nodded in agreement and ran home.

For the next two years, I went out of my way to avoid Biggs. I saw him now and again, but successfully dodged him until one Sunday in mid-July. A kid named Joey lived next door to me. His older brother bought him countless packages of firecrackers from Mexico. That sweltering afternoon, a group of neighborhood boys were setting off firecrackers in the alley behind Joey’s house. It was great fun detonating them inside of tin cans, bottles, and anthills.

Then Biggs showed up.

He stood in the background for a while, observing the excitement and chaos.

Eventually he singled out Cliff, attempting to bully him out of his share of firecrackers and making him cry. As I watched, I had an idea. I quietly walked up from behind Biggs and I slipped a 5/8ths incher in his back pocket, so that only the fuse was exposed. After making sure he hadn't noticed, I lit the fuse. Of course Biggs immediately reacted to the explosion by frantically clutching at his back pocket. None of the other boys noticed the detonation amid the mayhem caused from their own simultaneously exploding firecrackers. In addition, the blast inside of Biggs’s pants pocket was somewhat muffled, having been sandwiched between his flesh and blue jeans.

Biggs confronted the group. “Who did that?” he bawled.

None of the other boys knew what Biggs was talking about, which they expressed by shrugging their shoulders and looking around with confused facial expressions. On the other hand, I was altogether aware of the circumstances and noticeably amused. Biggs started toward me, rubbing his butt as he moved. As soon as Biggs got close to me, I clobbered him on the upper arm with my fist (in our neighborhood, it was unusual for anyone to punch someone in the face before the age of ten or so). *

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“Robert Hyatt is the unwitting, gentlemen heir to a beat kingdom. His brave and personal journey leads him to his biological father, the legendary Neal Cassady. Hyatt is a man with grace and stunning insight and through his eyes another incredible tale of beat lore unfurls.”

~ HEATHER DALTON, Director, Neal Cassady: The Denver Years

“Mr. Hyatt displays a level of objective precision, the likes of which is seldom seen in this fast-paced, multi-tasked-out century, in delivery of this legacy for those following his lead.”

~ ZACK KOPP, Author, Millennium Sickness, Where’s Kopp?
We are so proud of our dear big brother Bob, and I cannot tell you how happy the Cassadys are that Bob’s struggle to find his birth family was successful! We regret that he had to wait so long, and we owe a huge debt of gratitude (and many hugs) to the wonderful employee who opened her heart to him and gave him the information he’d spent a lifetime seeking. We love having Bob in our family.

~ CATHY CASSADY SYLVIA


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