

Agnes Martin: Surrender & Solitude

going to see agnes martin in the desert came to seem to me like a pilgrimage and i don't see why not. a pilgrimage is a long, weary journey, as to a shrine. a shrine is a tomb of a saint or other sacred person. none of these words may apply to any contemporary venture, at best perhaps they have exotic unreal connotations, but agnes martin is a spiritual woman and she isn't easy to find. unless you happen to be in los angeles when she's speaking at the pasadena museum, which was just my luck last month while passing down the coast. i was mildly disappointed since i wanted her to be as hard to find as i'd been told she was and i guess the last place i expected to see her first since she disappeared from civilization was in the civilization of a museum. yet i was relieved in a way, just to see that she was alive for one thing, and to have the opportunity to see how she felt about me before i made so bold as to trek into her wilderness with only a one-way advance telegram to recommend my arrival. i was disappointed in general to hear that agnes had been emerging at all, she has in fact made six museum appearances this past year, and she told me she flew to germany recently to negotiate the sale of some prints, it seemed therefore that i'd be visiting somebody who was just very inaccessible and not a recluse from civilization, nonetheless she is basically a recluse and she always has been thus it doesn't matter now any more than before how far you go to see her unless you like to travel and see deserted places. i used to see agnes in her loft on the battery and i don't know if she's any different now than she was then and she left new york in 1967, i think if anybody's different it's me and although i thought she was very special then i doubt that i heard what she had to tell me. i was just awed to be in her presence. i knew she was one of the great women. it was a pleasure finding a great woman in new york city during the terrible time of the '60s during every terrible decade it's a pleasure finding a great woman. a great woman may be a woman more interested in herself than in anything else. one way you knew agnes martin was great was because she lived decisively alone and that this was an active irrevocable choice and because she put very little stock in people at all and another way you

knew she was great was because her paintings were. i know agnes would say the work is completely apart from the person and i have no quarrel with that myself but i see the work and the person as inseparable too. my earliest memory of agnes is of her work alone but then a little later on i saw agnes and her work together and in fact i rarely saw them apart since whenever i went to her loft almost always as i remember she showed me her paintings and sometimes her drawings too and so for me agnes was agnes the painter although i understand her detachment. her paintings are not about the world and i suppose her paintings paint themselves and in this sense she has nothing to do with it. i think it was 1964 when i stopped in at the elkon gallery and saw all these six by six foot paintings washed out whites and tans crossed by close vertical and horizontal lines muted and irregularly perfect and i called up dick bellamy and said do you know this woman agnes martin why aren't you showing her i thought at that time that if anybody good was around he was supposed to be showing them but of course he knew her work and he wasn't showing her elkon was anyway that was my introduction to the work of agnes martin. a little later on either by design or accident i was knocking on her door to review her most recent show for art news and that was how i met her. already i thought her paintings were beautiful and i wanted to meet the artist. i wasn't the least bit disappointed but socially possibly i was more awkward than she was so i wonder how we impressed each other. her hair was long then and she had lots of it and when i came in it was all loose and she was busying herself putting it back or up and sort of apologizing for being in some disarray. i know we had tea and i looked at her paintings but i don't know what else. looking at agnes's paintings with agnes was a quiet concentrated ceremonious ritual. there was a very certain distance she traversed from the point in her loft where the paintings were stashed to the spot right next to the door where she showed them. one by one without any hurry or hesitation she would carry them from one place to another, back and forth, and when she reached the showing place next to the door there would be a certain gesture of hiking the work with her foot under the canvas up into position on the nails sticking out of the wall. then she

would sit down next to you and contemplate the work with you and wait as i imagined for you to speak your thoughts. i can't imagine what i ever said if anything. i know we discussed the titles. i think very often she wanted to know if some particular title or other was appropriate but i'm not sure. i liked them all myself. desert. islands. mountain. blue flower. hill. starlight. ocean water. leaf. untitled. i liked them all. i thought i could see what they were even though everything was a graph. i used to say to people there was this painter painting mystical geometries as though nobody else had thought of that. nature paintings ruled by the horizontal line or was it vertical. when she was young she painted the mountains as they were or as we suppose we see them or anyway the way you see them at the washington square outdoor art show. in the desert agnes told me she could see in nature there weren't any *real* verticals or real horizontals and right then she gave up nature. in the desert there weren't any paintings at all. there was a rectangular pit maybe six feet deep and 15 feet from corner to corner next to her little adobe that she said was the foundation for a studio. she abandoned new york and painting both when she left in '67 and now she is beginning to begin again. it isn't altogether clear why she left new york and why she stopped painting but if you heard the story it's the sort of story you accept and understand without any explanations. leaving new york has become as much a ritual exodus as going to new york is a ritual initiation. people said oh agnes martin left in a dodge pickup, and nobody knows where she went, or you'd hear vague reports that she ended up in the new mexican desert. i asked agnes how she ended up there, why she chose cuba, and she said she saw these mountains on this road leading northward into cuba in her minds eye in new york and that was how come. i was amazed to find the place. i sent a telegram as i said but i never made the 6 a.m. bus out of albuquerque that i declared i would, the reason being that jane was flying in from new york and arriving 11 a.m. and i didn't know that till after i sent the telegram and i didn't send another because i didn't want to make any more declarations. anyway about 3 p.m. three women of albuquerque drove us north toward cuba where i enquired in the postoffice if they knew where agnes lived. they said no but a man

down the road did. down the road the man's daughter explained carefully and i thought it sounded pretty clear. basically she said there was a gate a dry river bed and a little forest. i don't see gates dry river beds or little forests very often so i heard it all in the singular. i'm still certain she said it that way too. well there were lots of gates and dry river beds and little forests. first you had to drive some few miles out of cuba way off the main drag if you could call the road through cuba that. the gate the man's daughter mentioned was obvious enough, an impressive barbed wire gate the sort you have to get out and unhinge and swing away for the car to pass and then rehing again. then we were on a soft red clay road. then we crossed the dry river bed. then there was a little forest, midget gnarled trees of some sort. then i expected to see agnes's adobe. but what there was was another gate. i didn't think we should go through it but we did because there wasn't any other place to go in order to reach a dwelling unless you went careening off into the sage and the arroyas, those dry river beds in the form of drastic looking jagged ditches that snake around all over the place through those parts. so we went on and everything began to look like a dry river bed and a forest. i asked one of the albuquerque women what we were driving through actually. she said it was a short grass prairie with incursion of sonoran desert species running into pinon-juniper forest. that sounded good. i liked being there and all too, but the apprehension was mounting, especially when there was not only a third gate but a fork or a choice of going off or on the same road unimpeded by a gate. moreover we had passed the half eaten carcass of a cow right along the side of the road and that seemed to create an adage in my mind that when you see a dead cow you should turn back. besides i had the feeling we were within a clods throw of agnes's adobe but some part of my head said we were going to die in the desert. anyway we were all neurotically consuming a bag of nectarines and i was about to die laughing. i thought i'd never be able to travel in the desert with lucia since we were both particularly dying laughing. i said we should turn back. it was quite a few miles inching back over the soft clay bumpy road and reopening the gates and closing them behind us and wondering where the hell agnes was. back on the macadam

we went a half a mile up to a little ranch farm to ask this man and his wife if we'd been on the right series of gates river beds and forests for agnes martin and the man said yes and his wife drew diagrams in the dirt and the man gestured out across the plain and said that's her mesa, right there, as though i should be able to see it and there was a curl of smoke out of a chimney that i was missing. it was clear anyway that we had to go through that third gate where the fork was where we'd turned back so we did it again and we came to a real little sage and juniper forest and there it was a small complex of vehicles and structures that had to be agnes. agnes the classicist. classicism she says is not about people and this work is not about the world. classicists are people that look out with their back to the world. it represents something that isn't possible in the world. it's as unsubjective as possible. the classic is cool. it is cool because it is impersonal and detached. if a person goes walking in the mountains that is not detached and impersonal she's just looking back. to a detached person the complication of the involved life is like chaos. if you don't like the chaos you're a classicist. if you like it you're a romanticist. painting is not about ideas or personal emotion. painting the desert in her head. the horizontal line. there's very few verticals in nature. and there she was as vertical as i remembered her which was only a week ago at the pasadena museum sitting on a chair in the middle of the stage surrounded by an overflow audience her hair short to the ears and still brown and wearing a sort of tangerine velveteen skirt to the floor with a white starched blouse slightly femme flared at the elbows and twisting a white handkerchief in her lap as though it was worry beads and my friend with me said she looked a dead ringer for gertrude stein. picasso said he was impressed by gertrude stein's physical personality and anyone might say the same of agnes martin. she's extremely handsome and she has the most brilliant twinkling blue eyes and her body is full and she's very solidly there yet shy and a little retreating at the same time. she giggles and jokes a lot and laughs at herself and i'd never seen her so solemn and formal. and i'd never seen her in a skirt or any sort of a "blouse." i could see she was on her best behavior, even as though it was sunday school or something. the audience too was reverent and

expectant. it was a new aspect of agnes to me, although not one i wouldn't have envisioned. as i said she was for me a spiritual woman and i was awed to be in her presence and i believed whatever she said i knew she was a right person a natural woman a presence of the universe. she made pronouncements and spoke in aphorisms and she was known to go into trances and she proclaimed the future and she had no pretensions about herself except perhaps as a painter which may possibly be the subject of her intimate and abstracted speech that she's given lately in several of these museums. it's called the underlying perfection of life and almost the first thing she says is we are blinded by pride and that living the prideful life we are frustrated and lost that we cannot overcome pride because we ourselves are pride but we can witness the defeat of pride because pride is not real and cannot last, when pride is overcome we feel a sudden joy in living, the best place to witness the defeat of pride is in our work . . . all the time we are working and in itself . . . all the time in your working your self is expressed in your work in everyone's work in the work of the world we eliminate expressions of pride. her speech is 4000 words long she told me, and she memorized the whole thing. she speaks of pride, and pride, and perfection and solitude and fear and helplessness and defeat and disappointment and surrender and discipline and the necessity of all these and the necessity of the defeat of pride. besides knowing why she left new york i wanted to know why she left new york but i had no way of asking. she was glad to see me by the way. she baked an apple pie for the occasion and then when i wasn't on the 6 a.m. bus from albuquerque she was disappointed and ate some of it. i was glad she was glad to see me and i was glad we drove past the dead cow again and found her. i left jane and the three women of albuquerque in the car a discreet distance from her adobe and walked over there and hailed her and she emerged from the door beaming in dark blue work clothes very tanned or desert weathered i thought and that makes her eyes bluer and more sparkly. she was pleased i didn't bring everybody to the door at once because she wanted to change her clothes. she put on a clean shirt and pants and i explained that the three women of albuquerque were going home in case she wondered. but first we all

had the apple pie and a french fish soup bouillabaisse with salmon okra and tomatoes. i was very nervous. or very high and nervously attuned to her emanations and expectations. later jane and me agreed we were afraid of her. i couldn't remember being afraid of her before so i decided i'd changed a lot. i must've been more presumptuous about myself before. or not so aware of the extraordinary presence i was in. or we were both crazy and i thought she was my peer. i don't know. i *was* in awe, but less conscious perhaps. there was the most incredible evening in '66 i think it was when i brought five or six people over to her loft and we sat around in a vague circle in a sort of a trance as though it was a seance although nobody mentioned it and there was at one point this great overhead crash i don't know what it was it wasn't thunder and lightning it might've been a skylight on the roof or even her skylight but whatever it was she didn't bat a lash she went right on talking and asking us all what sort of a wall or body of water we imagined in our minds eyes and when we saw the wall or the body of water would we cross it or could we and if so how would we do it she went right on with this exercise testing us i imagined for correct answers anyway as though nothing had happened which is her basic approach to life. nothing happens. no verticals. everything the same. a quiet existence. not much time for other people's problems. lots of time to herself. solitude and loneliness and contentment with one self. the union of opposites without trying to do so. the friend who went with me to the pasadena talk wrote and told me the whole thing seemed much stronger now than it did at the time but what she absolutely remembers about it is that everything she said she also negated completely, and she doesn't know how she did it. she does contradict herself all the time with the most bewildering confidence. she'll say all conventional people spend 90 per cent of their time wondering is it right or wrong. what you do is right, that's it. then she'll be cato the censor and tell you how absolutely wrong you are. she'll tell me one moment that associative thinking is the basis of all our distraction and the next that i'm exceptionally lucid when i'm at the typewriter. she'll tell me i'm very prudish and priggish (and she *knows* i'm a snob), and later on she'll say i shouldn't use four letter words. she'll say she

wanted to ask me something although she wasn't into winning anything and then suddenly there's an argument and it seems as though somebody has to win something if we're to proceed to the next. i think she's delighted to see people but her fear of being disappointed by people is intense. she says she talks all the time when people come in order not to know more than she wants to know, she said you mean you realized how mean we all are? she said about people who come to see her believe you me, i run em off if i don't like them, if they're inconsiderate. she said it with a little chuckle. and told about a couple who came and lived off her for two days and the woman ate a peach from their car right in front of her and didn't offer her one. she doesn't know really why people come to see her. i wasn't sure myself, being such a pilgrimage and all. i just know she's important to me. and i was very curious to see how she was living in the desert. and i still wondered why she left new york even though i knew. i didn't know how to ask but she offered a number of hints gratuitously. she said i don't blame people for not being able to see the paintings, goodness knows, i have no idea why i did them myself. she said i had 10 one-man shows and i was discovered in every one of them. finally when i left town i was discovered again — discovered to be missing. she said she didn't know if she had left the world behind or the world had left her. she said she left new york because of remorse. she said that out at the edge of the canyon after we walked out through the sage to see the sunset. i didn't say anything at all. i guess it isn't necessary to clarify everything or anything. the canyon and the sunset were what seemed to matter and that didn't matter either. a glow was on us though and agnes extended what i thought must be the rarest compliment for her. she said everybody who comes is very conventional except me. it was after that that we were walking back to her adobe and she said she wanted to ask me something although she wasn't into winning anything. it was certainly a difficult moment. i knew it would be some sort of political question which would mean she would stop liking me having just said out at the canyon that everybody who comes is very conventional except me. i have no idea what she meant by the question all i can say is it concerned domination and i think whether i hadn't

experienced domination or being dominating. i thought possibly she was alluding to women as role players. i had no intention of mentioning the despairing word feminism, agnes was born in 1912 and it doesn't take much ingenuity to see that she's better off in the desert throwing mud at her adobe and polishing her green truck than i am going around meeting hundreds of strange women who might have nothing more in common than electricians and philosophers but who in the name of feminism take issue with your four syllable words so that we can all be the same that is to say feminists, thus i believe i was appropriately evasive and the only remark i remember is agnes saying her sister says she believes in men women children and dogs and we left it at that although that wasn't the end of it. the thing is in any case one remains modest and gives honor to the sage who stands outside the affairs of the world. out around her adobe she pointed out the loco weed. which drives horses crazy she said. she explained how you make adobe mud bricks by filling up four rectangular sections of these open wooden frames with the mud stuff and then leaving them out to dry or bake in the sun. she talked about animals having thoughts and how she doesn't keep domestic ones any more, she doesn't want them around any more than people. what she keeps exactly is five vehicles in perfect working order and a beebie gun and a regular .22. not counting the small adobe in which she cooks and eats and possibly reads and undoubtedly muses, an open tall shedlike garage where she was parking her new shiny blue vw sports model, an outhouse, a tiny cave log room guest dwelling and a compost affair and she still sleeps in the dodge pickup or the pickup detached from the truck in which she lived for a couple of years riding all round the u.s. and canada till she found the proper mesa. when we drove away i said it didn't seem as if we were driving off a mesa, she said that's because we drove off the back end. anyway she keeps all her machines in good shape. before we woke up she polished her green truck, a '48 chevie, she said. the jeep we didn't see because she keeps it in town in case the roads've been more washed out than usual. i didn't see how we made it in in her white dodge truck returning from taos there must've been some rain and the dodge had zilch traction so i kept ditching off to the side to

a standstill and somehow retreating backtracking and then racing forward as though to hit your mark meaning staying on the road as in archery if there's a wind you shoot or aim way off target in order to hit it or even boomerang yourself. after the first night there she gave us a vacation and we went to taos. i was relieved in a way since the telepathy is pretty heavy and i had had a nightmare and the scrutiny is relentless and while she completely disarms you she then flatly contradicts you and as i've indicated i was fearful of exposing what could only be a profound political disagreement between us. i read a hilton kramer review she had there of her retrospective in philadelphia and couldn't help saying the reason she doesn't have the reputation hilton kramer says she should have is because she's a woman. but agnes knows exactly who or what she is or isn't she shot back i'm not a woman and i don't care about reputations. i said well i wouldn't come to see you if you weren't a woman. she concluded the argument saying i'm not a woman, i'm a doorknob, leading a quiet existence. in taos jane thought of buying her an enamel doorknob we saw there but we brought back some cheese and syrup instead. also jane bought some eggs milk and apples and agnes said that was exactly what she needed so as concerned the food we were in perfect agreement. another safe thing was finding out more about agnes, i never asked her much before, i never seriously wondered why she was so different and a natural woman of the universe, or even why i felt close to her while knowing she had her life a lot more together. i never knew she was scottish for instance, but i didn't know how scottish i am until recently either. i think the first thing i asked her over the apple pie and french soup bouillabaisse was where did she come from. then i asked her if she likes the bagpipes and she replied oh yes. a half a mile away. she doesn't come from scotland herself actually. she was born and grew up in saskatchewan, somehow i always thought it was vancouver. i thought vancouver was a wild uncharted territory, but i happen to be in vancouver right now and i can see how agnes couldn't possibly have come from vancouver, i never inquired what saskatchewan is but it sounds northern and wild and right for where agnes would have to come from. she's a mountaineering camping pioneering frontier type of

woman whose unnatural habitats for reasons of turning out to be a painter were vertical claustrophobic cities like new york. she's climbed big mountains alone for years so i can only imagine how she felt going three hours upstate new york with me and thalia poons one summer for a little two day cook and sleep-out next to a crick river and 20 yards in from the macadam but she never mentioned what an elementary tourist trip it was. the crick was deep enough to submerge and swim a few strokes around where we camped and she seemed happy tearing off her clothes yelling at last at one with nature and doing so. it was there that she divined my future and said i would go insane again which i did. another fairly safe thing to talk about is insanity since i suppose we would both agree that nobody knows anything about it except the insane. i think it was at the very end of the summer that i did go out again and agnes and thalia were the ones who rescued me up in brewster where i abandoned my car and called them and waited for them to drive up in somebody's vw bug and didn't take the whole bottle of thorazine that agnes suggested i should but rather about 400 mcs or mgs or whatever they are. possibly agnes asked me what was wrong with me and i said i was afraid to die. yet in her wall and body of water game in which she asks people what sort of a wall you imagine or body of water and when you imagine it if you could cross it or go over it and if so how you would do it i was the one apparently who had the correct answer, at least to the wall question, and that was that the wall was transparent so naturally i could walk through it and whatever was on the other side was the same as on this, so it doesn't seem reasonable that i was afraid to die unless the game we played occurred later on and i was by that time dead or dead on the one hand and alive on the other so it didn't matter. on her mesa in the desert agnes told us the women in her family live a long time although her mother died young, at 75. she told us all about how she died, how it took two years and how happy she was when it happened, i mean how happy her mother was, and agnes's final pronouncement on death was that you go out either in terror or in ecstasy and clearly her mother was ecstatic. she said her mother was one of the little people. agnes isn't very tall herself but partly because of being full and solid of body she appears a medium

height. she says at 60 your body begins to fall apart, whether she is or not it doesn't seem to cramp her style, when we emerged that first morning from the log cave guest dwelling she was standing on a ladder hurling handfuls of mud at the wall of her adobe. by little people i believe she was alluding to the fairies of old celtic scotland. the rest of what i found out about who she is or where she comes from was that an ancestor was the scottish poet who was the author of flanders fields and her father was an essayist and there weren't any painters in the family. she thinks everything happens according to destiny and i objected on grounds of social oppression which was one more instance of my political tactlessness. i was saying that my mother painted lobster pots and boats in the harbor at sunset and that her potential for being an artist or an artist's artist or an artist to herself and nothing else was undeveloped for social reasons but i was saying altogether too much. someone has to be absolutely quiet when the other holds forth agnes remarked. and she talks all the time when people come in order not to know more than she wants to know. but i was thinking some of the time how to get agnes's attention. jane had the idea that sometimes she must feel awfully heavy to herself and then i thought she hasn't had enough people respond to her humor and jane said yeah they're probably too busy at her feet. were we supposed to ask her the meaning of life questions. do people go in order to ask her the meaning of life questions. i guess they would. but she doesn't have any answers, for nobody can tell anybody something they don't already know. she says what she knows for what she knows is what she is and what that is is perfect for her and she is still on the path herself. she says one thing she has a good grip on is remorse. and that suffering is necessary for freedom from suffering. and that the wriggle of a worm is as important as the assassination of a president. and that our work is very important but that we are not important. and that what you want to do is your work and what you want to want to do is your work. and that people ask her whats going to happen in art, where is art going and she says gosh, i hope it's going to go in all directions. and that a sense of disappointment and defeat are an essential state of mind for creative work. a working through disappointment to further disappointment

to defeat. what does it mean to be defeated. it means we cannot move . . . but still we go on, without hope, without desire, and without dreams, then it is not i, then it is not us, then it is not conditioned response . . . without hope there is hope, we go on because there is no way to stop, going on without hope and desire is discipline, going on without scheming or planning is discipline and without striving or caring is discipline . . . defeated you rise to your feet like dry bones, these bones will rise again . . . undefeated you will only say what has already been said . . . defeated having no place to go you will await and perhaps be overtaken . . . defeated, exhausted, and helpless you will perhaps go a little bit further. helplessness is very hard to bear, helplessness is blindness, in helplessness we feel as though some terrible mistake has been made, we feel cast into outer darkness as though some fatal error has been made . . . feelings of loss and catastrophe cover everything and we tremble with fear and dread but when fear and dread have passed as all passions do we realize that helplessness is the most important state of mind . . . lack of independence and helplessness is our most serious weakness as artists and that's the way agnes goes on in her 4000 word speech that i heard at the pasadena museum and a few of those things she said to me and i think her critical attitude her relentless scrutiny her voices of perfection her examination of your words and deeds is all in the spirit of improving your character for otherwise why would you go such a distance to see a woman who is herself on the path of perfection which is to say to becoming most totally who she is. she said sitting in the adobe or someplace if only i could get non resistance. she understands remorse but she needs non resistance, that's clear isn't it. yet while walking seems to cover time and space in reality we are always just where we started. i went for a little walk along the rocky edge of the canyon behind her adobe and was amazed to see a tremendously long procession of small black ants in an orderly line up and down this rock facing down into the canyon some going up and some going down with a few stray dissenters or were they the lost ones. i picked up a sandstone to take back to the world. i returned to eat supper. i didn't do much else there. i did take a shot out her door with her beebee gun at a can she placed for my

aim after a quick lesson in how to hold the thing i hit the can and quit while i was ahead. also i thought there was a sudden rainbow just to commemorate our visit and i said i'll bet you rarely have a rainbow here and agnes replied yes we do, all the time, it's forever raining when the sun is shining. but the last perfect double rainbow i saw was a couple of years ago in mendocino so i was in and out of her adobe oeing and ahing catching it out in the open or through one window or another watching its aspects and fading disappearing act. about 6 p.m. the wind was blowing in the canyon. by nightfall we were in bed, there isn't any electricity, and i had another nightmare. there was of course just a little bedtime story, of multiple rapes in cuba, a most dangerous part of the country apparently. but agnes had a nightmare too, she was quite indignant about it, she said she knew those nightmares weren't hers, and that's why she can't be around people, because she takes on their . . . she picks up their . . . and jane told her i needed to live among people and agnes said then i must have more pain. i could of course consider exchanging the pain for the nightmares in the desert. yet i could say like her that pain is necessary for freedom from pain. anyway if we are always just where we started there isn't anyplace to go and we might's well be where we are. i was reading recently about merlin who retreated from the world into his forest hermitage. it was said that at the sight of a crowd of people his madness breaks out anew. it was said also that his laugh was especially well known, the result of his more profound knowledge of invisible connections. agnes has this laugh or this cosmic giggle, but i wish to say she isn't any magician. she disavows magic adamantly. she hates magic and fetishes and superstition and the i ching, she says superstition is a belief in power, that there've been whole ages where art was only fetishes and that superstition is the enemy of art. she is also as a classicist as a cool artist a woman who looks out with her back to the world a painter who paints not about ideas or personal emotion but who paints the desert in her head as a classicist she is also eloquently opposed to romance and romanticism. she said she never met anybody who wasn't searching for love. she thinks this is a great mistake. she described a time of her own enslavement in this respect and how she became definitively

done with it. the voices of perfection. of being alone with your self. of everything being the same. of not having any verticals. of lots of time to herself. of not much time for other peoples problems. of solitude and loneliness and contentment with one self. the union of opposites without trying to do so. a zen sort of person who never studied zen. a woman perhaps who's endured many insults, and who forgives everybody — and nobody. a woman who doesn't believe in influence unless it's you yourself following your own track. a woman it seems to me absolutely fearless of saying what she thinks. after all she doesn't depend on people. the work is what counts and the work is so fine and the people like the work so much that they pay her to live without any people. once she took a freighter around the world and someplace in india they took her off the boat and confined her in a hatch because she'd gone into a trance. no doubt the people on the boat were altogether too much. the boat in the desert is a beebee gun a .22 and five vehicles in perfect working order and i'm not without a little remorse that i went to see her myself. do we have to give honor in person to our sages standing outside the affairs of the world. or bother them with ideas of themselves that they don't have themselves and be bothered ourselves by ideas of ourselves they may have that we don't or bother at all. i don't know. in albuquerque after she drove us out and we were having lunch in la placita i asked her if she didn't think she was leading an exemplary life and once again she knocked the whole thing, oh my no, i'm a murderer, i'm a this and a that, i'm working out the hairy ape in myself, i'm just beginning, and so on, and i remembered how she leaned forward intensely in the adobe and said somewhat incredulously and you realized how mean we all are and i nodded yes, so how could i exempt her from her own conclusions about life. the work is the thing. the grid is still because the whole can be grasped by the eye and mind at once. the value she places on the known rather than the seen suggests innate ideas which she sometimes calls a memory of perfection. agnes martin: a study in the memories of perfection. "the ocean is deathless/ the islands rise and die/ quietly come, quietly go/ a silent swaying breath/ i wish the

idea of time would drain/ out of my cells and leave me/ quiet even
on this shore."

—September 20, 1973