Notes on Progress, May 24, 1989

I date the work on this book of stories from January 1, 1988, in Rapid City. The stories in it now seem to me timid, methodical, and moralistic, as well as stylistically dead. I know why; I have slavishly imitated other writers, gone through a thousand fine-tunings of pitch, but have failed to write from the heart. To the extent that I plan or intellectualize I seem to fail. I resolve here to write a short (150pp) book about childhood. I will write in whatever style is necessary to achieve the end of painting an evocative and beautiful portrait of that time, doing justice to the beauty as it was then and putting in also the various moral clocks that began ticking, the fight between the wonder of the senses and the greed this wonder puts in our hearts, the fight between this and the great wrong we do each other when we operate under this faculty alone. I have tended towards a ridiculous imitation-Hemingway style that makes me grateful beyond measure that I haven't tried to publish any of this shit. Simplicity is good, but each man's simplicity is all he can hope to achieve. I must begin writing flat out. In the failure of this book I see again my tendency to believe I can out-think the world, that is, figure out what it wants and deliver, without using my reserves. False. In this field you can only hope to make a dent by using all resources, heart and organization and energy. My impulse is to start typing madly but I have learned the error in that. At two pages a day, which is alot by my present standards, I could have the rough 150 pages in 75 days, a little over two months. By then hopefully some kind of plan will have revealed itself. Define a page as 30 lines, 12 lines a word. This is then 720 words a day.

I have nothing to offer the world when I am careful. There are smarter, more articulate, more organized, and more artistic people than myself. But I have my sense of beauty. My work must be the expression of that, in whatever form is needed. Fuck artifice and the imaginary voices of short-story purists, etc. Listen only to your memory. What comes will be beautiful.

When you lose heart, and you will, remember that this is a book you have always wanted to write. It does not and should not be all-inclusive. It is a starting point for what is to come. In working through it you will learn. But only if your goal is to learn, not to finish or impress or prove. If done properly this will be the springboard for future work. In the writing you may find that the book can and must extend beyond childhood. But you will only find this by writing it.