Tim Miller’s interest in what was beginning to be known as performance art launched his move to New York in 1978 at the age of nineteen. Although in many ways continuing to think of himself primarily as a dancer, he began improvising performances at PS 122, and by mid-1980 he was presenting full-length solo works. This previously unpublished essay from the autumn of 1981 recounts elements of Tim Miller’s first year of performances. It was intended as a free-form illustrated lecture, with photos by Kirk Winslow. Tim’s lawnmower dance was incorporated in Postwar (1982), along with the Miller family history and the theme of the atom bomb. The motif of body spray-painting would reappear in Live Boys and Buddy Systems. The essay’s final paragraph enunciates a major theme, the fear of sudden annihilation from above, which is found in various political, theological, and sociological forms throughout Miller’s works.

Today I wrote a nice song called the Hamburger Song. I can’t sing it now but it’s a very good song, about keeping going even after the big bombs fall and you’ve got no more teeth and we have to cling to the simple things. I love hamburgers. I had one tonight at the Polish
restaurant on Second Avenue. It had the nicest piece of individually wrapped Kraft American cheese on it, nice square and safe.

This is a picture of me from a performance work at the Kitchen in NYC. My name is spraypainted with black Rustoleum on my chest. If you paint your name on your chest then you can point to it to help you remember and understand who you are in the world and the way things work. And if you understand your name then maybe you can understand other words too and the big ideas of our time. Behind me in the picture are more words painted on the wall. These words talk about going to the beach and about my mom driving in our Rambler station wagon to the hospital to have me. I was born in Pasadena but then I grew up in East Whittier and slept under a picture of Dick Nixon. And came to NYC when I was nineteen. I love New York. This is my home now. I just had my twenty-third birthday. So I’ve been here almost four years now. It’s cold out tonight in NYC. Cream of Wheat weather. Gotta find a new boyfriend before it gets too cold. But maybe not this year. . . .

I’m very busy these days. I wanna be famous and have enough money to buy black cowboy boots and lots of different kinds of cheese. I’m very busy these days. Making a big piece called “Post-war.” That’s where the hamburger song comes in. I’m making this piece now and everything starts when I run in a circle as fast as I can think and then my heart beats and beats and I breathe and breathe and when I perform I run run run and run and almost step on people’s shoes in the audience and they feel the wind as I run by.

1945. 1946. 1947. 1948. 1949. 1950. 1951. 1952. 1953. 1954. 1955. 1956. 1957. 1958. That’s me. 9/22/58. All those years go by and so many babies got born, all my friends born in those years, and if we hadn’t dropped the big bomb on Japan my Dad would have had to invade and he might have gotten killed and I never would have been born. My mom always used tell me this whenever we talked about the atom bomb, like at Thanksgiving or Xmas or whenever the subject came up. . . .
I’m very interested in history. I like dates and the way they connect to my dates. . . . It must be cold. Gotta find a new boyfriend before it gets too cold.

My Mom got into the Rambler station wagon and my Dad drove her to St. Luke’s Hospital to have the last baby. On Monday. I love Mondays. That’s the day I was born. So I took off my shirt and then painted my name on my chest in black Rustoleum and lean and throw my head over as far as I can go and oh oh oh one nice moment there on one leg arms back back somewhere behind my head. You could buy a whole house for fourteen thousand dollars. They even came with one tree in the front yard.

I have dreams about lawnmowers. Mowing the front and back yard. Mowing the neighbor’s yard. Mowing across this big nation. Mowing a state at a time. Mowing a nice easy square state like Kansas. Mowing a hard state like Maryland. Mowing a tiny state like Rhode Island only takes an afternoon. Mowing Alaska can take a lot longer. Then when I’m done mowing all the states I start mowing indoors. Mowing the bedroom. Mowing the kitchen. Mowing the den. Mowing the performance space. Mowing the theater. Mowing the rock club. Mowing the opera house. . . . I’ve been performing a lawnmower dance for a year or so. A friend of mine named Barry who thinks he’s the child of J.F.K. and Marilyn Monroe mows the space and I dance and dance and the mower almost cuts my feet and the space gets smaller and I dance faster & faster. . . .

One of the verses of my hamburger song talks about paying the rent and going and eating a hamburger. Another verse talks about being sick of sex and having a hamburger instead. Another verse talks all about if the bombs fall on your head then it’s too late to go and eat a hamburger. . . . In 1964 I asked my Dad while we were waiting for a left-turn signal when we would be able to get a color TV. He said maybe in 1965. We never got a color TV. Not until I had left home.

This is me on the dinner table. This performance was about dinner-time. The audience sat all around me on this long thin table.
Some people I cooked hamburgers for. But there weren’t enough to go around. This came after the lawnmower dance and before the lifelike recreation of the Hindenburg disaster. People liked being that close to me. . . .

It isn’t unreasonable to just want a little order in your life. But sometimes that’s too much to ask for and you just have to sweep everything into a pile and forget about things making sense or fitting together. Maybe this is where faith or something comes in. Or maybe you just get your brains blown out by a big gun. . . . You’ve got to be very careful. You’ve got to be very careful where you step. Or else something awful is gonna happen. I have this dream where I’m walking thru the desert kind of like the *Twilight Zone*. The air is very heavy. I get the feeling that if I make the wrong step the whole world is gonna blow up. So I’m trying to be very careful to not fuck up and ruin everything. Cause if you take the wrong step, that’s it. You’re out. There was this big white bowl shape in this dream. It reached up to the sky and all the power and danger of the dream was in it. I had this dream for about fifteen years. Then it stopped. I only realized recently that the big white bowl was probably Hoover Dam. I think my Mom held me over the edge too far and all I saw was a big white bowl and my five year old heart went faster faster than now.

Things are a mess. That’s OK. I had this dream where I was responsible for the whole world and it was like on *Twilight Zone* and if I made the wrong move things were gonna blow up and break up and fall on top of everybody so I was very careful because I didn’t want the dam to break. I just wanted to get from one side to the other. . . .