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Epopœia and
the Decay of Satire

John Thomas

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John Thomas

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There are some writers whose work is difficult to comment upon without overstating their concerns or ideas. John Thomas is one of these writers.

Regardless of whether one is familiar with his writing or comes to it for the first time, there is a quality which is apparent in each reading—what, for lack of a more accurate word, one might call self-consciousness. (Here one intends a kind of writing with its critical origins in experience, writing which is reflective rather than evocative; e.g. from the poem "Pine Knob Mondo"—"*Who seeks/Nirvana? All senses/are forms of touch, says Democritus.*")

Thomas' work defies comment, though not because it is involuted or esoteric. With the exception of references which should not be inaccessible to the serious reader, the work is for the most part self-sufficient—i.e. Thomas means exactly what he says. For Thomas, the false poet, as he is fond of quoting Valéry, "profits by the lucky fluke."

Here is a poet for whom the poem is not a state of mind, some shamanistic formula or incantation. Whether it is renegade rabbi, illuminated junkie or zen evangelist, the pose of the poetical medicine man is one which, unlike many of his generation in North Beach and Venice West, does not hold much attraction for Thomas.

Certainly, of those Cold War bohemians labelled "the beats," Thomas is among the few who realized that all the talk about primitivism and the poetics of spontaneous celebration was, in fact, an exotic accommodation to the cultural supremacy of Madison Avenue and Hollywood. Ginsberg's angels were Eisenhower's devils and vice versa. The game had been played that way for quite some time. It was all very convenient.

Thomas, of course, like all poets, lies—but he and the reader are usually aware when he is doing so. It would be foolish to call this honesty, a word too often used to cover up thoughtlessness and lack of skill. But whatever term one offers to describe Thomas' critical sensibility, it is certain that this quality has unfortunately or fortunately irritated those who were drawn to his work as yet another example of "beat writing." In short, Thomas' work is not material out of which to build a literary fashion or career.

"*The first thing to do violence to your myths,*" begins Thomas' poem "Tarquin", epitomizing a mind which is not only uncommon but uncommonly in possession of itself.

—Paul Vangelisti
Los Angeles / July, 1975

*This book of poems is lovingly
dedicated to my wife Rose.*

In Toltec, the word for
artist is Toltec.

TARQUIN

"it is snail today about
4 whorls in the ice on the
Arctic floe southerly"

—Eileen Ireland

"The first thing. to do violence to your myths/
to be your own
Tarquin. . ." said almost without thought, his attention
on the barbed wire, as I held it up for him
and he climbed through.
There were patches of snow on the yellow grass, still
but they would be gone by evening

(Lucretia! were the breasts
marble? and the throat
did it pulse then? Let the snow melt enough
that I had loved it

It was a pig farm, and no way around it/
garbage and tin cans in the mud, the pigs
glancing at us from under their eyelashes/
Bill with his eyes watching where his feet stepped
among the stinking trees I think
he never stopped talking

(the surgeons would carry canes, and in the heads of the canes
cloves, rosemary, other scents to breathe
as they walked through the wards

Through the fence on the other side
then a stream we took off our shoes and waded across
the water so cold my feet ached/
and what he had said to the American girl at the Louvre
the girl who had come over to write novels about Boston
and that she lived with a psychopathic Russian
who beat her and who pretended not to understand English
and what the Russian and he (Bill) had done to the girl
in a doorway by Notre Dame
and afterwards all three in the bed
which was probably a lie, although you could never be sure, with Bill

All easy going now, low hills and dirt roads/
on the barn door two stretched coonskins
also an owl with the wings nailed out a rusty
harrow behind the barn

(lists. and maps of backcountry where no one
walks any more. is there anything else to make?

a windrow of Lombardy poplars
which we followed up the millrace
to the dam and the graves

I tied a string to the wine bottle
then lowered it into the green water of the dam
all the way down to the bottom there were
huge tree trunks and old tires down there
the mud was very still/
while the wine was chilling we examined the graves

three families only
mostly children's stones
but the ones who had gotten through childhood had lived
—ninety-four years old, ninety-eight, a hundred and four/
Bill silent now just our feet
on the brittle weeds, and a woodpecker somewhere in the trees behind us/
one fine stone, six-by-three, set flat in the dirt

Wm J Perkins
1791-1888
Last Survivor
Of The
Maryland Defenders

(that would be Fort McHenry or the Battle of North Point)
upon which we ate the lunch we had brought
a provolone cheese, bread, a fine red onion, oranges
and the bardolino, which was cold now

(lists. and rubbings from tombstones
and how cold the wine was. is there
anything else, now? anything more
now, three years later, letters from
that country telling me that Bill thinks
of little but suicide? only the lists come back
and maps of tombstones and of dry hills
—anything more is merely
possible

(Lucrece! the throat, did it pulse?
and was the grief real, or poetical only?
there, see the snow melts
and the grass is yellow underneath

the book had been in his pocket. Goethe. and he
read "Whoever works with symbols only is a pedant,
 a hypocrite, or a bungler. There are many such,
 and they like to be together. Their babbling
 detains. . ."

for coming back we chose a different way, did not
wade the stream/
he was quiet, breathing heavily because of the hills/
certainly the graves are still there
and we had thrown the wine bottle into the dam, watched it
sink, so it
remains

the weather here is different
the children are brown, have
never seen snow
so everything is different/
I, Tarquin, sit in the afternoon sun
making lists
drawing maps of that realm
all else now is
merely possible

PINE KNOB MONDO

The true path
is high, where the ground drops away on both sides.
Keep to the ridges, trust
the senses; you will not be abandoned. Their name

was Fortney. The son I met on Pine Knob. He carried a single-shot 22 rifle and eight fat squirrels in a gunny-sack. Fifty years old, tubercular, teeth bright white, cheek full of Day's Work. He was on his way home, and would I stop in and have a bite? The kitchen smelled of kerosene and damp wool. We ate sowbelly half an inch thick (smoked it himself with apple wood, he said) and cornbread dipped in the grease, then sat drinking coffee with our chairs tipped back. His maw was snoring in the bedroom but she woke up later and we went in to meet her——great fat woman, crippled, a mountain under the quilts. He brought her the squirrels; she dearly loved them, she said; and she called me darlin' and told me how her husband had been killed working on the railroad, and her husband's brother, and her own father in '09, and while she talked ("Never work the railroad, darlin'.") Maw Fortney drew the squirrels out of the sack one by one, cracked their skulls with a bonehandled knife, and sucked the brains like oysters off the half-shell. All her dead menfolk hung on the wall, in frames. The smell was blood and chamberpot and old woman. Who seeks

Nirvana? All senses
are forms of touch, says Democritus.
Ordinary mind, everyday life—these
are the koans.
Crack these, and the path is clear.

THE SQUIRRELS

we brought him peppermint ice cream &
napoleons which we
really couldnt afford
& the squirrels came up close to
catch the crumbs that didnt get
tangled up in his beard
squirrels like peppy little shortstops

missus pound knitted a sock while
it went on & on
the laast time i sawr humminway &
yes theyll let anyone visit me but westbrook pegler &
yes well lawrence yes but lawrence was such a bawr
& my friend birddogged him
about sartre and berdyaev and
didju read bean & nuthinness??
until the old boy finally
when a man reaches my ayge sez old ez
rearing up in his aluminum deck chair
triton out of a wave with
crumbs & barnacles in
his beard
whin a man reaches my ayge he becomes
thurrally ingrossed in his own wurrk
& cannot afford t'become an encyclopedyaa
of current lit ra chaw!!

which put things back in perspective
missus pound knitting that sock &
squirrels dodging among all the big shoes
one zooming exactly like willie miranda
stopping a sizzler over towards third base

and the one thing he
said
if you want to know whats really going on in
the world
note carefully what is never mentioned
in the newspapers
meaning of course
that is he meant
international money swindles &
deals between jewish gold merchants
& cabinet ministers

but when i chewed on it i
thought mainly of
old ez sittin up at nite writing
the confucian odes
& me who wanted to be a poet & my friend
hitchhiking forty miles to sit here
& these squirrels shortstopping flakes of
napoleons

NINE STAGES OF A JOURNEY FROM
CALEDONIA TO HARPERS FERRY

1

fourteen amish folk
on a greyhound bus
one
peach fuzz on his chin &
big floppy banana fingers
watches me cautiously as
i squeeze my rucksack
out the bus door
& hunch into it on the highway

2

on such a grey morning
no towhees whistling in the mountain laurel
just a chainsaw
on the other side of the valley
raccoon run which you always hear
& on the moss
my bootsoles
which don't know any better

3

morning fire
this cherry birch burns smoky
ashes float into the coffee water
now pour in coffee powder
pream
big yellow spoonful
lace it with threestar hennessey
sit on a stone & slurp it
the rim of the tin pail too hot
sit on a stone slurping brandy coffee
smoking camel cigarettes
if i haul ass today
i'll cross the maryland line

4

plenty of deer droppings along here
& the wads that owls barf up
made of fur & mouse bones
& sometimes if you look in among
the blackberry brambles you'll startle
turtles
beaks smeared with berry juice
looking surprised exasperated &
unrepentant

5

what could be grander than
brandy after supper &
to read trollope in my sleeping bag
& listen to some old coon
he's been eating frogs
& now he comes up to crunch the chicken bones
i left for him

6

come on boy
down thru turner's gap
cross the creek on wobbly rocks &
a rotten log
socks wet
come on
follow the telephone wire
up to the fire tower on
lamb's knoll
out of breath up here
drop the pack and mosey around
smoking
some kid shot a hawk up here
with his twenty-two
his eyes are all gone now
stinks up here
come on boy
three more miles down the mountain
to bear spring cabin

7

rest today at
bear spring cabin
hunting mushrooms in the rain
whom can i envy

8

crampton's gap
& a plaque beside the highway
where ewell's corps bivouacked
snored & farted all nite
before the battle of south mountain
every nite the spiders spin cobwebs
across the trail
which catch in my eyes & mouth
as i swing along the spine of south mountain

9

chiggers in the greenbriar
a mile & a half with no trail
me lunging thru tangles of greenbriar
guessing which way for an hour
coming out at last on a shelf of rock
among pitch pines
high above the potomac
where i sit hunting ticks inside my socks
if i look up the river
over the charlestown bridge
i can just see where
the shenandoah meets the potomac
among rocks
& harpers ferry
where there are
tablecloths on the tables in the hotel

THE LAST FRONTIER

In the portraits he sits cross-legged on a mat,
fierce eyes glaring from under shaggy brows,
and his right fist clenched in his lap
(always reminding me of Jersey Joe Walcott,
how he could catch them coming in, the young eager ones,
with that stiff right).

Rinzai, the old giant-killer—came up the hard way:
hung around Vulture Peak for years
and every time he opened his mouth to ask a question,
Huang-Po hit him again;
ran off finally to Ta-yü, who said,
“Don’t cry on my shoulder, boy;
git on back where you belong and be grateful
for Huang’s grandmotherly kindness!”
It is said that these words enlightened Rinzai
and he walked all the way back to Vulture Peak
and punched Huang-Po in the nose, saying:
“Your Buddhism ain’t so much after all, you old buzzard!”
So when Huang died Rinzai sat in his place
and he was a holy terror, catching them coming in,
the young eager ones, with that sledghammer right.

They were a hard and desperate bunch,
real mountain men, half horse and half alligator,
hanging by their toes from foggy cliffs,
yodelling obscenities across the river gorges.
Live up there long enough, wild garlic for breakfast and
tiger tracks in the back yard,
and you just naturally get disrespectful
—the Emperor T’ai Chung came up one year,
travelling light and hiking twenty days to get there,
hoping for some answers;
asked some innocent question and Huang-Po
slapped him twice and ran the Son of Heaven clear off the mountain.
Or as Rinzai said to the monks,
“If you want to make it, kill anyone who gets in your way!
If you encounter the Buddha, slay him;
if you encounter the Patriarch, slay him;
if you encounter the Arhat or the parent or the relative,
slay them all without hesitation: that’s the only way.
I tell you, no Buddhas, no holy teachings, no discipling, no testif
What do you seek in a neighbor’s house?
Why put another head above your own?

You're all crazy, biting into every pile of shit in your path!
I tell you, don't get hung up on anything,
but stand above, pass on, and be free."
Rinzai, the old giant-killer, the old hatchet man!

It's a long way to Rinzai's roost—
the gorges are steep, the trails are choked with bramble bushes;
broken-down bridges over roaring mountain creeks,
bitter cold at night and the air thin, like a knife at your windpipe;
your pack gets heavy so you're dropping things all along the way;
if you make it at all, you'll be empty-handed,
big blisters on your heels and skinned knees.
When you get there, don't be surprised if he sets the dogs on you.
This is the last frontier, boy,
too steep for horses and a thousand miles from the nearest Sunday school.
nobody comes out here unless he's crazy or wanted for murder.
This is the last frontier, boy:
think twice before you start
and never say I didn't warn you.

SOME OF THEM END AS SUICIDES

(in memory of Fowad Magdalani)

The painters are lonely here because the poets won't be friends with them or even treat them as equals. Besides, the painters cannot sell their paintings in this town. Sooner or late the painters become nervous and evil. Then they stop painting and become truck drivers or go to jail.

But some of them end as suicides. What they do, they hang themselves from a beam in the garage and swing there with their toes two inches from the ground. It is very hard at first. Like amateur actors they do not know what to do with their hands. But the ones who really want to be suicides keep their hands very still by their sides and after awhile it is all right. They can hang that way for seventeen days before they are found. Some of them are buried in sealed coffins at public expense, which is rather glorious. They always swore that if they hadn't made it as painters by the time they were thirty-two they would and they did which is glorious. Seventeen days.

They do this and then the smell leaks out and then the news and then the poets take over and write poems about it using glorious images. Yes, there is a smell of glory about it all. Soon you can smell nothing but the glory. Even if you visit the grave and sit by it you smell only the earth and the glorious new grass.

It is fine to be a poet in this town. If you are a poet you can give readings for money and despise the painters and write glorious poems about the suicides. Best of all, you do not have to cope with your hands as the amateur actors and the suicides do. You do not have to keep your hands still.

MINOR CLASSICS

Atalanta

"Leona looks so wholesome," I remarked.
"I'll say she's wholesome!" he replied.
"Get in bed with her and you'll feel like
one of those poor Spaniards on San Juan Hill.
She's like Teddy Roosevelt in a shorty nightgown!"

Aphrodite Pandemos

At least one can admire sincerity:
when asked if the keys around her neck
were for her chastity belt, she answered, "No,
it works more like a coke machine."

Echo

"I don't play roles," she said.
"Roles play me."

Egeria

This year she's thinner than ever, and more frantic;
still, transparent fingers fluttering,
she sits beside the great poet, the local hero,
wipes the vomit from his shirtfront,
looks blissful when they spin Charlie Parker,
and waits for something wonderful to happen.
If he weren't impotent, the waiting would be easier.

Atē

She could look at nice old ladies with shopping bags
and see armies of vengeful crocodiles,
a faculty called "insight" by her admirers;
she swallowed great quantities of benzedrine
and shouted obscenities in public places,
wherefore she was known as courageous;
that she was an intellectual was beyond question (did she not
stare long and often at an open volume of Kafka's diary?);
and now that she has been carried away to a mental hospital,
her reputation as a tragic heroine is firmly established.

Sappho

Men are such oafs, most of them,
and whenever she finds one she really likes
he turns out to be a queer.
Recently, she's had outrageous, disgusting dreams.
She worries secretly and wonders if she'll ever get married.

Scylla

For this one,
picture a fat, middle-aged madam
with rings on her fingers and blotches of powder on her chest,
playing solitaire in her parlor
with a fat little dog in her lap.
Picture this, then subtract thirty years.

Artemis Ephesia

At times she plucks the lute and simpers
and sings about her thousand lovers
and the Rabelaisian richness of her life.
She knows what men need—flesh!
And she has it, spongy trembling acres of it,
this Emily Post of the casual screw.

Hecatë

Watch out for this one:
she begins by peeling your sunburn;
the next week she'll squeeze your blackheads, if you have any;
she wants to devote her life to picking your scabs.
and if you don't let her,
she'll try to come to you in the night
when you are sleeping and your throat is exposed. . .

ALBA

Crouching in my arms against this old army shirt,
breathing the tin taste of my day's sweat, she
says nothing and concerns herself with her pre-
carious balance, the tightwire she walks from
fleshcage to fleshcage.

This is her scene, and it is quite right among the
bongos sounding through the wall,

Jack the Lush pounding bad riffs on a borrowed drum—
splintered, frenetic, out on the slippery edge of
dementia,

And up the airshaft sounding the toilet-edge vomit
of a nameless drunk, Gallo tokay, you can puke all
day, tired past dismay.

This is her scene, this quiet crouch within bad sounds,
surrounded by her ten cent shoes and her yesterday's
pants and her just-in-case jar of peanut butter, this
crouch against my shirt with her nose in my sweat.

She is nervous on three bennies and has tentative soft
fantasies about spooks and she will stay a little while
if I don't hold her too tightly.

I have lived like a priest in this bare room three months
and to have her here, a sad tired robin, well, I feel
honored and a little incredulous.

Orange lipstick on my pillowcase and the smell of her
in my beard are enough to make me hum in private,
a luxury of long ago.

And if the poems fails it is not because her smile is
not beautiful to touch.

THE DOZENS

"Donald?" he sd, "well. . .

"to put it bluntly man your buddy Donald is just another smart uptown faggot I mean. . ." & he charged me head on with D.H. Lawrence & all about Passionate which you gotta be & I helped him along with a word here an eyebrow there until I swear in no time at all he was misquoting litanies from *The Plumed Serpent* thumping his own soPassionate shirt pocket real it was like a classroom demonstration

so help me god I began to love him he was so perfect every flick of the cape he charged it hard & straight with never a hook no guile none at all he wanted to kill me that bad

just wanted to kill me with Lawrence & Rimbaud he was sweating harder spit collecting in the corner of his mouth Wow! so I planted one last banderilla in his hump & while he snapped at it I took time to dedicate him to Sharon who smiled back solemnly

oh he was a dreamboat oh how I loved him when he pawed the tabletop lowered his head & thundered in roaring about he was a Column of Blood yippee Apocalypse holy Fucking holy Passion holy Death he never felt it go in didn't know he was dead until he saw I wasn't playing any more not even looking just talking to Sharon & he died all alone with his tongue hanging out & his wife hauled him home still warm

EPOPOEIA

1

in the Ur-chasm, the Organza Deep
among anemones big as elm trees
move whole herds of kraken, grazing
on eel larvae 6 ft. long

& at the very bottom, nothing, the mere
navel of the world, bed of primordial slime
boulders of solid manganese
scrawled tracks of great blind worms

2

the volcano they passed in the night, at sea
& the whale alongside that paced the ship all week
scratching its hide against the barnacled hull

prowls along strange interminable coasts
hideous reconnaissance
the march to the interior: valley of dry bones
his friends dying of yet-unclassified fevers
fruitless expeditions

tokens

& mementos: grisly fetish

brown & faded snapshot of himself
beardless, flanked by grinning aborigines

plaque or gorget of sea-ivory
inscribed with curious characters
he can no longer read

gold watch, dented, the works
frozen with salt & rust

bottle of powdery dirt (the handful of
bottomslime brought back as proof he had
been there

3

wallowing galleons
dragons dolphins camelopards

serpents unicorns
great volcanos spouting whales & mermaids
& the four fat faces

spewing wind

*Nullus nostrum ad illos neque illorum ad nos
pervenire potest*

he destroys the chart
lest others waste their youth upon it

4

(a nomic exode)

the act, the
axis mundi

the smoke hole

(Hassan & the Assassins. Assassins slew Raymond of Tripoli
& Conrad of Montferrat

(the Ismailite society at Cairo: 9 degrees
of instruction, the last being
“that naught was to be believed, everything
might be done”

in Paradise (traditionally): conversation
with animals
& immortality

e.g. the shaman as heteroclit, as tribal jester
goofy gesture: tripping out
climbing right out
through the smoke hole
to talk to Buzzard, who sez: when acorns ripen
they will have no shells. snow
will be salmon flour

cf. zen master's peculiar behavior
the immediate crazy gesture (Q: “Does Goofy
have the Buddha-nature?”

& he climbs right out
through the smoke hole

STILL LIFE ONE

a clown (I
suppose)
,sadly,
in
sneakers

only the corner of
the folding cot, and
even the lifesize
poster of Bull
Moose Jackson is up-
side down, but
this champion toilet
stands in the open
doorway, fully re-
vealed

her
lips
shine
but her eyes turn
you to stone anyway.
She's a swinger, with
jewelled starfish—
one
for
each
nipple

and if American
Legion Post 148
Knox (ville) would
only take his
fingers away from his mouth we
would see
that he
is smiling

from Dorothy Wordsworth's journal:

"William
tired himself
himself
seeking
an epiphet for the cuckoo."

ALL YOUR DADDY'S PEOPLE WERE FROM KANSAS AND OKLAHOMA

“ . . .doing a
man's work in the fields
fields
at eight year
old

Dear mom
well i am fine
& hopes this finds you same
& sure sorry to
hear Minta's buster
has got the
infantigoe

out of fourteen:
Uncle George, big as a
house, who died in the
flu epidemic (1918).
Aunt Cora married an Indian
agent and died
of tb on the
Cherokee reservation
(19 aught 9).

Grandmaw was all torn
up in her insides
having 15-lb. George,
the youngest, and from
then on,
whenever she moved
her bowels she would
get crap in her vagina.
The dropsy took her off in '26.

I'm just a little lad
not much higher than this ta
so if you want to hear my story
you'll have to wait until I'm

sonofabitch run amuck on
Okinawa, tried to machinegun
his own platoon, crazy
sonofabitch. And them
doctors tried everything
on him, didn't do no good
so they had Maw to sign
the papers and did that
operation to his head. Shoot,
he ain't give a damn about
anything from that day to this,
only just lays around the house
clipping coupons out of magazine
—gets the strangest junk in
the mail!—and he smiles
all the time, won't so much as
mow the lawn, sonofabitch

well must
close now As
ever Cleota

from White Cloud, Kansas, a
family photo for doughboy son
in AEF:

all grouped in parched
field, house behind
them, no trees, Grandmaw
in mother hubbard, seated.
Minta standing,
holding bridle of
plough horse

A

tab
ory
m a

nes

THREE WAYS OF GETTING IT

- a. Imagining oneself possessed
- b. Leading an evil life
- c. Living alone
- d. Chronic ailments, unusual symptoms, a deep sleep, the vomiting of strange things
- e. Blaspheming and frequent reference to the Devil
- f. Making a compact with the Devil
- g. Being controlled by spirits
- h. Having a face that inspires horror and fear
- i. Being tired of living and the giving up of hope
- j. Being enraged and violent in action
- k. Making the cries and noises of a beast

“A peculiar custom prevails of wearing, as charms, various parts of the body of a deceased relative. On her breast, suspended by a piece of string around her neck, a widow wears her late husband’s lower jaw, the full set of teeth looking ghastly and grim. The small bones of the arms and legs are taken out soon after death, and formed into spoons, which are used to put lime in the mouth when eating betel nut.”

some Eiffel Tower (as it seemed to me) atop the spinning world shooting off sparks / a tiny airplane circling circling
 RKO!! always the Mad Scientist—isolated megalomaniac perverted sex drive / the old castle high in the Carpathians where (in cape and evening dress) he worked on his Theory / the tower room a jungle of electrical apparatus that did arc crackle shimmer flash hum roar snarl—quite terrifying

The Theory was always correct, but its Consequences always disastrous (the pitfalls of reckless experimentation, of meddling with Matters Better Left Alone

fearless hero cleancut muscular and gay who always saved all of us (from the menace of mentation) and of course demolished that gorgeous maze of wires and tubing / deathscreeams of evil transformers and worse / all smashed. but

always identically reconstructed in time for the next RKO horror flick

we remember that constant electric jungle better than the changing faces of the villain

PASTICHE: WHIPPING A DEAD HORSE

"A post-card from your mother-in-law
and a letter from Lousy Lou"

He saw some mermaids on the coast of Menagueta,
but that they were not so like ladies, as they are painted.

A pink monster,
or an appalling thing
with the look of a cherub

Adepts
are men who after stern self-denial
and consistent self-development can

5. the tongue
18. the lower jaw
23. half of the brain
(from "Parts of the Body
the Average Man Can
Live Without")

sez But he's
a Jewish dog
and I
sez Well you
tell him to take
his Jewish nose
outa my
Catholic ass!!

Immediately there issued from William's mouth,
among other odds and ends, the whole of the
front part of the trousers of a shepherd, stones,
some whole and others broken, small bundles of
thread, a peruke such as women are accustomed
to use, needles, a piece of the serge jacket of a
little boy, and a peacock's feather which William
had pulled from the bird's tail eight days before
he became ill.

(or as Al Capone
put it:

"Wit's
grand opera in
the berries."

(the anti-
matter
gambler's
pieces in
their places
rearrange
the places
of the other
gambler's
pieces)

Albertus Magnus spent thirty years
perfecting an artificial man of brass.
Aquinas his pupil dashed it to pieces,
"being impelled by its
perpetual and unceasing
garrulity."

(When bones of a monster are found,
the pattern-makers of a museum
arrange whatever they can into
conventional structures, and then
fill in with plaster. . . .

THE DAY OF THE FUNERAL

The Trailways bus let me off in Hamstead and then continued up the Hanover Pike. I was early for the funeral, and anyway I had forgotten where the mortuary was, so I walked across the highway to the drug store. I ordered a chocolate malted milk and asked directions of the country woman who made it for me. She told me: one street back, a couple of blocks off the Pike, across the street from the flour mill. Was I a relative? I said I was his son. She said what a shame and that she remembered him well, he had often stopped in for a malt himself, such a nice fellow.

(It was the only sweet he liked, except for all the sugar he put in his coffee. He bought me my first one when I was four, drove me to the Read's Drug Store in Gwynn Oak Junction especially for that, and we each had one. Two men together, drinking their chocolate malted milk. It was too rich for me and I vomited on the floor by the cigarette counter. He apologized to the clerk and hustled me out of there. From then on, for me, a malt was a man's drink. Sundaes and ice cream sodas were suspect, effete. Even now.)

I silently toasted him, drank the glass in two draughts, and left.

Damnation, it was hot! My shirt stuck to me and the crotch of my drawers were soaked with sweat. I had bought black shoes specially for the funeral and they were rubbing blisters on my heels.

I found the flour mill, all right, a tall building with corrugated metal walls and the mill hands sitting on the loading platform eating their lunches. As she had said, the mortuary was across the road, a little brick bungalow.

My mother was already there, and my half-sister Fern and her husband Harold. Mother was shaky. Fern was tense and popeyed in a dowdy dress and a hat. She has red hair and green eyes but she's not pretty, never was. Now she's forty and her hair is stringy and her ankles are getting thick and you can see the cords in her neck. Harold just lounged around with his hands in his hip pockets. He is a cop in Newark, New Jersey, a Polack, fat and lazy. He doesn't look like a cop, doesn't even look competent. He drinks a lot of beer.

We talked in muted voices and stole glances at the coffin. It was closed, of course. Beige-colored wood, it was. Looked cheap. Dammit, I'm crying as I write this. If I had had any say in the matter, I'd have bought him an ebony box with silver handles, something for a prince. Then I'd have slit their throats, all of them, and buried them with him, wives and retainers to accompany the dead prince, all of them: my mother, damn her black soul, and Fern the Greedy, and her fatass husband. Plenty of

others, too, if I had my way. And I'd have thrown out the damned calla lilies and the stinking gardenias and piled up his coffin with orchids because he was a beautiful man. He was an orchid, damn their eyes!

But. . . I only say these things now, after. At the time, I just stood around with my family (God! what a family!), looking at the closed coffin and the rows of camp chairs, smelling the stench of gardenias, wishing I could take off my shoes to ease the blisters.

Pretty soon the place began to fill up: Sam Rappaport, Dad's boss for so many years; Mister Meister, the old man who lived next door and worked on the road gang, looking lost without his two-dollar pipe; Bessie Ferraro, who was our neighbor when we lived on Woodland Avenue in the city—she used to bleach her hair and I was shocked, now, to see it grey; Bessie's daughter Alameda—I used to pull her hair and now she has a beauty parlor; some of the damned Baptists from my mother's church; others I didn't know at all.

The organist began to play something disgusting, the sort of thing you hear whenever Baptists get together, just before the bullshit begins. Everyone grabbed a chair and sat up straight. Mother couldn't look sad, but she sure looked scared. Fern's hair was falling down. I was wishing the organist would play "The Cowboy's Lament."

At the last minute the minister from Mother's church hurried in, had a whispered conversation with the funeral director, then came over to us. He was a plump, short young man in a dark grey suit and black loafers. He smelled of Aqua-Velva. He murmured to my mother. She introduced us and I shook his hand. Then he skipped up to the lectern, unzipped his portable bible, and began the service.

Mother had wanted a quick one and that's what she got: a few words about "our dear departed brother" and "Gawd in His mysterious ways," and then one of the Psalms. Nothing I could associate with Dad or with the way he died. But it was a quickie; at least there was that.

I was one of the pallbearers. That is, after the "service" I helped to hustle that ugly box out back to a shed with a concrete floor, then into the hearse. I cut around to the front right away.

Standing there, too shy to come inside, were three niggers who used to work for Dad: Willie Green, his night foreman, and a couple of the hands. They showed plenty of white eyeball, but they had come. I guess they had liked Dad better than Mother or Fern or anyone had. I put my arm around Willie and hugged him hard and I shook hands with all of them, wishing I had grown up with them for my brothers. They were shy and embarrassed and

they took off quick in Willie's Packard car. Back to work, I guess.

The cars lined up behind the hearse and we drove up the Hanover Pike to the cemetery at Manchester. Mother did a lot of dry-eyed moaning on the way. Harold was patting her and calling her "Mom" in his Newark cop voice. Fern cried, red-nosed and ugly.

They put him underground quickly. A few stock prayers from Tubby the Preach and then down he went. Mother didn't want to stay while they covered him up, so the four of us left.

At the house everyone brightened up a little. We ate cold chicken and apple sauce and home-made bread and peach cobbler and Mother told how it had happened, how he just got out of bed at three in the morning, said he was going to do it, said she'd better get out of the house. By the time she came back with Mister Meister he had done it. With his single-shot twenty gauge. Etcetera, etcetera, while we finished the peach cobbler and Fern filled our coffee cups. How the State Police came and all that, and how wonderful Mister Meister had been, etcetera. We sat over coffee for a long time, Harold and Fern smoking their filter-tip mentholated cigarettes. I gave Harold a Picayune but he didn't like it. Finally Mother began to moan again and I told Harold to take Fern and her for a ride.

When they were gone and the house was quiet, I went into the bedroom. Mister Meister had cleaned up the worst of it. The mattress was gone from Dad's bed, burned or thrown out on the dump, I guessed. I took a deep breath and went to work.

It was hard to believe that one old head could explode so violently. There were little spots of blood everywhere, even on the underside of his night table. I found two scraps of bone on the moulding up by the ceiling. With my jack-knife I scraped clots of sticky yellow material off the top edge of the bathroom door. I kept wagging my head, amazed.

Afterwards I washed my hands and the blade of my jack-knife and sat down in the parlor. There was a framed photograph on the wall—Dad when he was a kid in Kansas, with his brothers and sisters and his blacksmith father and his mother in her mother hubbard, all of them glaring out at you with that wild stare of lonely country folks. Dad just four years old with white hair and button shoes. Mother thought that picture was just too quaint for words.

Well, you did it, I thought. All those years with that mean bitch, that mother of mine, all those years of her bad mouth, calling you common and ignorant, the years going by and you getting old and sick and she gaining on you, growing stronger as you grew weaker. Oh, that holy badmouth bitch! So in the end you had a choice: give in or go. And by God you did it the big way! I give you that, old man—you went out big!

They hadn't come back yet so I went up to the attic and found his old foot locker where he kept his souvenirs. I sat on a pile of magazines and went through the stuff while a mud dauber buzzed around the rafters. Photographs: him on the deck of a cruiser in Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet, 1907 or '08; him on a bridge gang in Idaho; him in the Argonne, wearing sergeant's stripes, with a gas mask at his side; him leaning against the fender of a 1928 Auburn, cocky and grinning, high-top shoes, vest and a cap (tilted rakishly over one mahogany eye). There were bundles of cancelled checks, two German bayonets, some old letters, the tarnished plaque from his mother's casket ("*At Rest*," it said.). I began to cry. Aw shit, I thought, what an unhappy life he had! He was a beautiful man, a prince; he should have known nothing but glory. Mother complained because he never washed and his comb was always greasy, but he was a prince. He had beautiful hands and Popeye forearms, small feet and narrow hips, and he wasn't dirty, only smelled like a man—armpits and feet and vanilla and motor oil. He had tatoos from faraway countries and old scars and a broken nose. He could fix anything. He loved whiskey and steamed crabs and he pinched the girls who worked for him. He was a prince, a dispossessed prince. Well, I just sat there and cried.

When they came back, Mother looked pretty steady. Harold and Fern drove me to the bus stop in Manchester. Fern kept saying how sick Dad must have been to do himself in like that. Yeah, I thought. No woman will ever do that to me, I thought.

That night I went to a bar and started drinking straight shots of rye with beer chasers. I saw a woman in a booth who looked like Fern so I called her a whore. She was with a marine. I had to go out in the alley and fight him. Somehow I had the idea in my drunken head that I was battling for my dad. It was a long gorgeous fight and I won it. Afterwards I sat in the alley and cried.

ASSEMBLAGE FIVE (TO THE SPAWNING GROUNDS)

on the appointed night, incantations—
her lips, or strips her glistening body

silent,
transported / the lustrous crystal
docile in July

Down there
life and death, yes / to her he was only a

good-by," he said

soon see. She'd soon
its clasp, and in gold. . . her single
time she would.

all unbraided, lay / There, and motionless
turning over and over
irresistibly advancing

(swift currents, past the shore, a wharf,
a rock, a mud flat / deep water
of the original winter—
wisdom, on and on along the river,
piling itself, breaking and pulverising,
it will grind and grind, it has
prodigious momentum

(floats slowly down the stream, queer freight
of drift-wood, a pile of ashes or an old hat,
remains of bridges, or a broken stove. . .

(saw three large wagons
crimson tapes, packed beneath

could not get up. She

and were gently
to a stop. He
. . . Ah, how he
nobody had ever

in her warm, open

and flake

violet, dim

eyes

THE PURE LAND

the light:
you can look at it
all ways)

sat on the curb at night
under the lamp-post, squinting
through a splinter of broken bottle—child's

play. as if it could be grasped in my

(twisting, breaking

burst into forty thousand

(they enter, dancing

suns, blazing systems of.

(shivering, diffrangent. see

too quickly, gone. and again

(no, changed—they

change. pause, tremble on my pulse

(shatter. shimmer, as my hand turns
the archeus? as a child might, in caprice

(who seeks Nirvana?

streams through, bends

into. spins.

will not be caught or
held ever.

escapes, dancing.

THE EMPTY BLUES

hitchhiking
46 hours no sleep no
food either
except for chocolate pie & coffee in San Luis Obispo
I'm up in the empty hills now
north of Paso Robles
(always a badluck town for me)
eating dexedrine smoking cigarettes
up in the hills & empty cold
cold cold & the night
slams in my face cold
now the big tandems come barrelling by
ZOOM BAM gone in the night
hours & hours & I curse them for not stopping
finally get the
Blues the true
Empty Blues

what it is
46 hours no sleep no food just leapers
so I feel cold & dry & empty
not bad quite
but I know
nothing will be right I
KNOW all I have to do is hope something
& it won't ever happen—these
are the Empty Blues

oh, the trucks don't stop
on El Camino Real
no
so I'll never get there
no no
& when I do
no
(big diesel rig
ZOOM BAM)
knew it
they never stop on 101
be here all night I know
Got the Empty Blues

what it is
a kind of knowing
—I know all about it
don't even care
just know

I know I'll never get to San Fran
& when I get there
it'll be just like here, I'll stand
till two in a bar
watching the barkeep drink Bromo
he'll drink Bromo all nite
with a stiff arm
& the Bulova on his wrist
won't it shine? Oh yes
I know
I'll stand in the bar & watch those
girls blasé-ing down the street
they never stop
no
& when they do
oh no
I'll even sound the barmaid
& she won't
& when she will
she'll live in some Filipino hotel
doormat shackled to the wall
bathroom way down the hall
don't tell me
I know it all
these are the Empty Blues

THE PASSIONATE SHEPHERD TO HIS LOVE

O if I had bunions & grey hairs sprouting from my ears
& your breasts were down limp near your waist
if you had liver spots & carried odds & ends in a knitting bag
all over town, muttering to yourself with bare gums

O if we lived on Social Security in a furnished room
cooking Cream-of-Wheat on a gas burner
if there were a Sacred Heart calendar on the nasty yellow wall
& the buffet full of rusty tools & rent receipts

if we got a letter once a month from a daughter
named Sister Mary Francis in a Kansas City convent
& one night a week you went to bingo at St. Ambrose Social Hall
& I played pinochle with the Golden Age Club

O my light o' love, then I would have secrets from you
I would receive sex magazines in plain envelopes
& hide them in the back of the radio
I would take the bus downtown, secretly
to the Gayety Burlesk where I would
play with my limp old self under my hat

yes, I may as well be honest now
that's just what I would do
I'll write you a pretty poem tomorrow, love
tonight I feel the need to write an honest one
about what will surely never happen to us

I'll never have a great hernia bulging my pantsleg
but if I did let's tell the truth—I would
curse feebly with my teeth clicking
& load my Postum with saccharine

you'll never walk twenty blocks in your rubber orthopedic stockings
to see the homeopath for cancer pills, but if you did
then truly you would spend your evenings
sipping sassafras tea & reading the death notices

I'll write you a pretty poem tomorrow, Sweetheart-elf
tonight I must rattle my bonebag & speak oracles
in an unreasonable spirit of fair play

VARIATIONS ON THE DECAY OF SATIRE

for Taylor Mead

1

Most gentle of duellists, you asked: "Why brandish the sword so,
before the thrust?" then passed on to other things,
me perhaps the only one who saw the flashing blade;
now, therefore, a parry with the wrist, in the Italian manner,
and no riposte, only the twist that essays to disarm:

2

it is simply this, man: we lack opponents, could only
fight each other, and to what end? two good blades shattered?
a mutual killing? no,
in these quiet times the samurai becomes a tea man,
builds temple gardens, floats plum blossoms
in a shallow bowl before the image. . .

3

it is the times;
one has inherited this wax museum—
ten cents for a walkaround, see the
heroes, see the famous murders, see here Charlotte Corday
in dusty chiffon bending over the famous bathtub
and Marat's vital blood melting, now, from the faulty furnace—
it is the times, Taylor. I had hoped
for a better legacy, but must be the curator of this one with good grace.

4

Or consider it from the inside, as structure:
see the mind lunging, no sabre now,
without the linear precision of the fencing strip,
but as through a thicket, simply away from
the center, inattentive to symmetry—
building holes in the rain forest,
stumbling over treetrunks in the green shadows—
Conquistador! you crossed the Andes, headed east, and the dagger
rusted among rivers that lost themselves in mud and breast-high weeds—
it is the times, Conquistador, and the structure:
twenty years' paid service in the Italian wars, siege of Milan,
pitched battles from end to end of that unhappy peninsula,
had not prepared you for these dripping slopes.

The good steel becomes red powder in its sheath,
and only the Spanish shape of mind is useful now,
only that willfulness and melancholy vanity that say,
“There, where the dead horse lies, will be the Church of St. Jude,
and there, by that sour pond, the market place. . . .”
and make it so.

5

And finally—
it is the times, Taylor, and the shifting of the image on its base.
We have seen so much blood.
The corpses mock us—we stink of our victories.
And there is this secret we share:
one of them rode up the center of the street,
gun strapped low, brave in the summer sun,
and in the subsequent blur of fear and fatigue
we shot him. Dead brave face in the dust of the street
—and he was the wrong man.
That was the time to turn in the badge and move on,
take up farming or run freight to Silver City
—because, you see, he was the wrong man, and after him
we’re always wrong. So do not tempt me, Taylor.
I have retired from that trade.
I have set my mind to building a basilica. . . .

POEM ABOUT SOUTH MOUNTAIN

it was customary in those days to
invoke the muse
but let it be remembered that

gentle greek mountains will tolerate
arrogant female deities
& the comfortable hills of britain have

had to accomodate themselves to even
more prideful beings
eleanore of aquitaine speared wolves among them

with the other gentle ladies of her court
south mountain
has other manners other less graceful ways

south mountain big hillbilly chewtobacco mountain
he knows no greek
& very little english & has to sign his name

with a big ignorant thumbprint on the us army
topographical maps
in these glades of chokecherry & fox grapes no muse reclines

south mountain endures only his own things
possums & bobcats &
at night after a rain the salamanders that chirp among

the roots of the willow trees by bear spring
people yes
not revenue agents but people yes if

they walk softly along the tumbled granite spine of
the mountain
softly without arrogance & invoke no muse

ALL THE BEN TALBERT I KNOW

Years ago in Baltimore someone showed me a book about Venice, California. It was a silly book all about the beat scene in Venice, all about how glorious, how secret and beautiful and important and glorious, etc. It was one of those books. I riffled the pages. I wasn't interested. At the back of the book there was a selection of photographs—of Kinney's pseudo Italian buildings, of some people being cool in a coffee house, of (for no discernible reason) some eminent poets who lived elsewhere. And there was a photograph of Ben Talbert, the painter.

I thought, "What a beautiful man!" Naturally I didn't say it aloud. If you're a man you don't say another man is beautiful. Anyone in America knows you don't do that. But I thought it. And I looked at the photograph for a long time.

Later that year I set out for San Francisco but I didn't get there. I got as far as Venice and I stayed. I met most of the people in the book. I went to the coffee house of the cool-being people. I came to know the man who had written the silly book and he was just what I expected him to be. But always in the first months I did not meet Ben Talbert. I never saw his paintings. I think I only heard his name spoken once.

Then late one winter night I walked into Jim Shaw's bookstore and there sat Ben Talbert talking with Jim's Maxine.

I knew right away that it was Ben. To see him so suddenly and without preparation gave me a strong emotion. It was an emotion anyone has had at least once and no one can write about it rightly but if I just say that I had it anyone will understand me.

We chatted about commonplace things. Ben didn't talk about his painting. I privately enjoyed my emotion. There was some talk of pornographic photographs—I seem to remember that Ben wanted some to sketch from. I told him I thought I could get them for him.

I was never able to get them. But after that from time to time I would meet Ben walking on the Promenade or riding his bicycle down back alleys and I would say that I was still trying to get those dirty pictures for him and he would smile and we would go our ways.

One day much later I saw Ben in a big truck on Speedway. He was making some kind of delivery. He had shaved his beard. He needed money. He looked embarrassed. He smiled as he always does but he was pretty savage behind the smile. For the next few weeks I would see him slamming around Venice in the truck but then he quit that foolishness. I don't know whether he got all the money he needed or not but he quit. After that he turned up usually quite late at night with one or two or three always lovely

girls, all tooling through the quiet streets on bicycles. He always smiled when he saw me.

A few days before I left Venice he and Helen came to visit. Trudy had been badly burned and was lying in bed feverish and tearful. Helen talked with her and made her smile, even made her laugh—which warmed me so much that I was actually ready to be Helen’s knight or her brother or whatever she might require and I still have some of that feeling for her.

I went into my work room with Ben. We talked. I remember thinking, “At last we can really talk and I can find out what it is inside Ben that I admire so.” But we just chatted and he smiled. He was as opaque as ever and I didn’t try to force it because as anyone in America knows you don’t do that. You don’t come on. We traded anecdotes and he didn’t talk about his paintings. I told him I had to leave town and was all packed and that if he wanted the books and other things which were still in my room he could have them. I remember he took an old incomplete set of *Britannicas* and also a sabre, a dress sword and two foils. He seemed especially pleased about the weapons. He loaded up his car and he and Helen drove off. Everything was incomplete and I felt sad.

I left Venice a few days later. Nearly two years ago it was. Then last April I came back for a visit. I was lying on the grass with Trudy, vaguely watching the holiday strollers on the Promenade, and then there was Ben, a stroller himself, mooching along with Helen and some guy I’ve always nodded to but whose name I’ve never known. When they saw us they came over to where we lay on the grass. Where Trudy lay. I had jumped up and was trying to compose my face.

Ben had gained a lot of weight and Helen looked drawn and tired. But Ben smiled and I just stood there liking him. Trudy began to show Helen how her burns had healed so nicely and without scars. The guy I’ve always nodded to stood fidgeting and jingling the change in his pocket. Ben said we should visit him while we were there. And he smiled and we chatted and it was just as damn casual as ever. We promised to visit them and then they backed off and faded away down the Promenade.

We never did go to see Ben. We just didn’t and I don’t know why. Perhaps it was because I was afraid we’d just chat again. Perhaps I was afraid we would really talk and Ben would decide I was no one he liked after all. Perhaps I was afraid we would really talk and I would discover that Ben was not beautiful. Perhaps we just didn’t go.

Later I wrote him a note telling him how sorry I was that we hadn’t managed to. . .etc., etc. That kind of note. Then yesterday an announcement came in the mail: “BEN TALBERT Woodcuts, Pasadena Art Museum, Opening July 10, 1962.” The thing lay on

my table all day. And all yesterday and this morning too I have had Ben on my mind, had him on my mind so strongly that I knew if I wanted any peace I had better write him down.

I find that what I have written is very flat, very opaque, but I didn't want to say more than I knew. Not this time. And however little it may please me this is the only Ben I know. Perhaps one must be somewhat cool about a person to portray him well. No doubt I could have made some other man (my landlord, say) appear solid and convincing on the page. Not Ben. And although it makes me uncomfortable to say so, nothing I know about Ben supports my extravagant admiration of him. But evidently no support is required: the admiration continues without it. There is even a kind of satisfaction for me in writing down my total and uncritical approval of another human being.

Ben Talbert is a man of stature and a beautiful man because I say so. Anyone will know what I mean and anyone will know that it's true.

APOLOGIA

I

each day I wd have prayed
to Him / grant me a
poem I'd have sd &

St Joseph St Rocco
St Alphonsus Liguori
intercede for me—& I know
they wd have done

Chrysostom wd have
charged my afternoons with
metaphor (St John Chrysostom the
Golden-mouthed)—metaphor to

clothe my May & October gifts / Queen of
Heaven her special months—& much
reverent imagery to shew
the frequent boons of My Lady
—that I might make a bluebell poem
for spring / a chrysanthemum later
for her October aspect

He wd have granted me more: as these:

St Ildefonsus, how he so particularly loved
Our Lady & then he died

St Teresa & how dry & stony Ávila is
on its slope
& that she suffered much from lust
even when older, a builder of nunneries
so that Satan tormented her with certain
suggestions during her very prayers
& that she saw God & how He seemed

Christ how He tastes on the Sunday tongue & how
He is lord specific to those old men who
sit all nite in brite cafeterias how His tears
are their four a.m. coffee

these ways & voices to serenade Him
poems enough for all my days &
never tired

II

I wake, my beard is mashed & sticky
I still hear the morning praiseGod birdsong
but know it is their way of shrieking
about their hunger cramps
only that

I think maybe today a poem I hope
after breakfast I start trying
pulling it out of my own gut
mostly by force—thin stuff
& careless, about people in Venice here &
things that happened to me once

I smoke a lot of cigarettes, forget
lunch, forget to be civil to
my girl, forget all the most
obvious & necessary processes

most days even all my strongarming
doesn't help me & I
give up, read, or
whine about it in my journal
& piss away the day
swimming / eating / sneering around in a coffeehouse

because
what is there to sing
now that I can't sing of
St Elizabeth how the breadcrusts
became roses to cover
her saintly lie?

what for, really, if I can't write
that St Francis Borgia died young &
pure as a tiger club?

Venice California is a very murky universe for
man-alone and no god around

III

These desperations
are not unique I
don't say that
I only make affidavit of their solidity

simply testify to the reality
of a certain kind of sullen rage
that grows out of having only such
trifles to work with as

the twentieth century
squirmings of two people in a bed
that mountains are big
that pain hurts
that friends die
—such things as these

& I tell you
all that keeps me at it is
that to form a living poem
of such flimsy material
to make it breathe & sing
under these conditions
is so preposterously difficult
that it is an undertaking
not unworthy of a man

THE POEM IS A TRUE & ROOTED CACTUS

after all the
mirages incident to
desert, these apparent

lakes with such
apparent water birds &
whispering reeds
after all these
images

that seduce in the
far air
& dry the tongue to black &
kill

after these / but in the
geographic foreground
this true & rooted cactus
most real & tough
with thorns
rooted in the genuine dry

having sucked deep
& with its toughness held
held

its thorns make blood
hands & lips
but cut into that
leather fruit
& the water is truly there
tasting green

SKETCH OF A YOUNG GIRL, FROM MEMORY

June was scarcely more than a child, still—not quite seventeen. And she had been Dick's wife for almost two years. So there was no way I could have known to be on my guard when, ten days after that rather innocent orgy, I wandered into Ellen's never-locked backyard cottage and came upon them. . . .

Ellen's cry of surprise and fear. Ellen trying, then to swim back up to the surface of her day. From where she lay splayed, amid teacups and tattered magazines, across the coffee table. And from wherever her mind had been. June's eyes, cautious and fully alert, ready even to be amused. She did not budge, stayed kneeling there, just raised her head to gaze at me. Across her belly, long fresh welts where Ellen had clutched her and clawed her. (Ellen never understood June in the least; in the weeks that followed, she even came to fear her.)

I want to write these things down, no matter that some of the true words are not permitted to me. But, you see, *it was all there*, gazing up at me from some secret place at the back of her eyes. She let me see it *all*. I cannot say what it was that she let me see: it is not permitted me to name that. . . .that *appetite*. But it lay so far beyond the supposed frontier of erotic abomination that simply by recognizing it in her eyes I became her accomplice. . . .

I should have taken absolute possession of her that very day—or else I should have killed her. I knew it then as surely as I know it now. But I did neither.

Yes, and June knew it also. Later that year she tried to persuade me. "Kill me, John," she had said. "Kill me before morning comes. You know, you have to do that—or else the other. And to kill me will be better." Gently, while she spoke, she had taken my hands from her cool silky buttocks; now she raised them to her throat.

"Oh, do it now! Please, before daylight. I *want* you to!"

"No," I had said. Slowly I withdrew my fingers from her throat, used them instead to spread her thighs. "I should do it, as you say, girl, but no. I will not kill you."

(And so I permitted Dick to die—the choice was clearly mine. Then in my madness I flung wide all the doors, one after another, until at last I opened the door which let me out of the cage. But in that, too, there was a sadness, for in stepping from that cage I locked two others inside it forever.)

When dawn came we were still locked together in a fuck which seemed to have no temporal bound, nor any frontier to contain its ferocity. Keening first my name and then her own, she would always begin to come again. She kept on naming our names while she was coming. Her lips were bruised, swollen, flecked with

drops of my semen; her lips wearily formed our names while she came, transfixed and spasming on my cock. Each time I would not quite make her die—and she always came out one more time. And then it was full daylight, far too late for any one of us.

That word which names what we were to one another, she and I, is not. . .permitted me. But always thereafter, even when we were alone together, we behaved as if we were nothing more than ardent lovers.

My mind flinches, now, and veers off—as when the tongue, while probing deep in some spectacular cavity, flicks across bare nerve. . . .

*

“I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your fathers as the firstripe in the figtree at her first time: but they went to Baalpeor, and separated themselves unto that shame; *and their abominations were according as they loved.*” Hosea 9:10

“It is because we are in Paradise that everything in this world hurts us. Outside of Paradise, nothing embarrasses because nothing matters.” the poetess Komachi

“The gay courtiers set out to sea
at Nigitazu:
but how far away in time—
who knows?”

from the Mannyoshu

OLD MAN STRAVINSKY REHEARSING WITH ORCHESTRA

(in memory of John Gifford)

1

this
voice
so po
lite bene
volent & such
pa
tience
with these Los
Angeles mu
 si
 cians—be
comes (this
voice) the
archetype of sweet old
 genius everyone's
 papa Jungian wise old
 man all of
 that &

I can cite many who have acquired it (that
voice): Robt Frost Carl Sandburg Wm Williams Black
Jack Pershing Einstein even old Ez Pound &

hearing Stravinsky now so sweetly patient
working with his orchestra
No I sd No I
remember certain things / he is not
like that
& in my mind such very specific
matters as: Stravinsky the Evil Unscrupulous
Mephistophelian Mastermind who
every time Nijinsky tried to break with Diaghilev
somehow got the poor sod to climb back gloomily
into D's socratical bed / poor
Nijinsky he really wasn't that way didn't
dig all that suave & Arty cornholing he was getting
from the prick of that prick of a
secondrate impresario
Stravinsky-Svengali his schemes ruining Nijinsky's
married life just to suit his own devious
purposes heh! heh! heh! he sniggers like the
villain in some old villain flick

Stravinsky yes one of that bunch—mad
evil silly cloak-&-dagger Tsarist émigrés of
fifty years ago &
now sounding for all
the world like good old Papa Haydn
rehearsing his toy symphony
somewhere in lollypop land

2

!! does it truly happen that way
that you can be the crulest sonofa
bitch in the world then
lose it all with age?
lose yr

nuts lose all yr
evil all yr
badass potential
lose that fine buccaneer swagger
that One False Move & I'll Blow Yr Brains Out!

lose it? & git old? lose all yr taste for

raping teenagers insulting
princes of the blood royal & just generally
fucking with people
out of pure evil joy

?? watching your diet instead
carrying that silverheaded ebony stick now
because you fucking well need it
to hold you upright on yr feeble & arthritic pins
& oh sweet Christ suffering
those horrible disciples they all
sit around yr gouty feet
so industriously copying down
those brainless afterdinner ruminations
(yr Tabletalk they call it

do you really have to
run out your string in toytown
sooo po
lite you
droll & foxy grampaw you!

Papa Haydn rehearsing toy
symphonies in disneyland!
“Now chentlemen if you would chust
hold that B-
flet pleass a bit longer &

mek an old man happy oh thenk
you sooo much chentlemen pairfect''

is that how it will be?
that phony mellowness like a
rotten old cantelope?

3

I hope it needn't always be that way / let me
suggest a certain developmental
path which only seems to leave you so
utterly nutless

getting old means getting lucky sometimes
means sometimes you *learn*
& along with other sweeter acquisitions
you learn that nine
tenths of what goes down is
bullshit
that there's just no way to be with people & not
smear yr tongue with bullshit lies
that it doesn't help to fuck with people & anyway
once you know how it's no fun any more

& when you've learned
these things & like *really*
know them every minute
oh then its like a gear shifts inside
so that now you can
just git on with it, yr
work
you can be God all day now
spinning out new suns & feathery nebulae
doing yr
own
proper
work
thank goodness finally!
just stand there smiling

another old Haydn
polite & patient
patiently rehearsing yr
toys yr
symphonies
in disneyland

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