POETRY

JOHN WILLIAM CORRINGTON
(1932-1988)

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editor
A Former Poet Decides to Tell the Truth

A poet lies his way to the truth.
   – John Ciardi

The purpose of language, Monsieur,
is to conceal the truth.
   – Bishop Tallyrand de Perigord

And that is true. For if we did not lie
and blurted everything right out,
ten lines would tell it all:

A soldier got pissed off and said
You all can fight without me and
see how well you do.
His best friend died,
he cried,
went back to tear the city down.
And did.
And died.

That’s half of Homer with
two lines to spare.

All that got left out was pity and terror,
an old man’s prayer,
a prophetess’ dying cries—
and the concealment
and the lies.
An Exemplary Philosophy

What my old man told me was this:

You should never gamble unless the
Object to be won
Is worth a hundred times the stake you risk—
Or unless you cannot help yourself.

That men cannot plead their bellies
As women do—
Only the lack of them.

That suffering probably does not
Cease with death—
Ashes quivering and fleeing before
Ruddy tongues of autumn flame.

That age is no panacea either—
Passion departs unfulfilled;
Tearducts remain unimpaired.

You must hold your face together
No matter what happens,
And wring your hands, if you must,
Behind your back.

And finally he said that if I
Understood all this,
I would not be much of anything—
Which is, if not virtuous,
At least painless.

My old man never made a mistake.

He just died.
An Exemplary Fiction

And then there was the one
about the man with three eyes;
two flowing and curling about the neat
dimensions of his slick world,
fresh and brimming with a sort of
typical laughter his colleagues
had come to expect,

and that third staring inward
hypercritically, seeing the ruined fawn caught
between bookends, chairs housing mangled hips,
effeminate sandwiches cut in delightful
shapes, expensive jellies, and the

people laughing childlike, happily, as
someone slew her escort, and another
exposed himself candidly to the hostess’
children in a dark hallway. And best
of all, a jackal in gray flannel livery
discussing Kafka with a pig
who could not hold her liquor.

But none of this could possibly transfer,
and so he fumbled the debris
behind his consciousness,
found a useless pointed thing
And jammed it in that eye,
turning back relieved, making a bon mot for
old J. B. at coffee, and forgetting
completely.

And he never thought of it again, either.

Isn’t that the end?
The Beloved

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more . . .
– Revelation 21:1

Even on Patmos, blind, outside of time, his laughter sounded all along the strand and gulls uprose across the sky, a mime of souls unearthed, outstretched above a land blessed by his memory of things undone as yet, the prophecy of all he had seen pass. He did not age; the youngest still, the son of her whose eldest lived and died just as Isaiah said. Each night within his cell behind his eyes unfurled all history, the fall of Empire and the earthly hell of those who turned from Grace to Mystery. He watched Great Babylon consuming men and waited for the Ending to begin.
The Fifth Horseman

Who rides a soft saddle spurless
Into a soldier’s town,
Unarmored through the hectic
Roughpaved streets, and knows no
Violence, shaves clean,
Bathes often,
Loves to talk and wind smooth
Arguments through
Tedium past apathy to sleep.

Who sits at a warrior’s fire and
Mentions peace, drugs honed reflexes
With mild visions of old age revered
And phantom tots who
Play with balls instead of swords
And live ten times as long as Hector did.

Who waits until the warmth has eased
Them all to prosperous dreams
And decent fantasies, then steps outside,
Mounts up, and
Rides away,
The city gate ajar
For one who waits outside
Who’ll wake the sleepers just before they die.
Footnote

“History is bunk.”
– Henry Ford

The facts above are substantially correct,
But the United Daughters must take into account
Certain anomalies:

The ones who did not stay at Valley Forge,
Decided that a king could be endured;
Multiple enlistees strung breathless
At cold harbor; the reek of saints
Aboard a pilgrim ship,
Ripe curses, carbines, halfbreeds, whores
Who opened up the West,
A kind of hornyhanded readiness
That asked no one’s permission–
Told God what was expected of him.

Remember the printed pose is always
Half a lie: that fleas plagued patriots,
That greatness is an afterthought
Affixed by gracious victors to their kin.

Think too that posthumous praise does not erase
A boy’s terrible surprise
When alien bayonets unstop his veins
And rip him from the silly discipline of
Day-by-day into a bleak and monolithic
Past yet to be written–
And in the winner’s terms.

National honor demands that we write large
Of those who could not know–still less would care–
About the jingling mill of history
That forges meaning on their thoughtless acts
And calls the casual statement of a rogue
‘The voice of an unconquerable land.’
The Grand Inquisitor Continues

The kiss burns his cheek,
but the old man clings to his idea.

I

If it were not for these things—
these inconsistencies between your vision
of mankind and what, in fact, he is,
faith would be a tattered mask,
the simulacrum of a skull—
concealing what? A skull, of course.
That must not be. Faith is a cunning vise
to pinch our freedom into useful paths.

The myth of Godhead clinched in flesh,
mercy wedded to justice immaculately,
finding apotheosis in Golgothic slaughter
and the chill assumption on which
the mad depend—
all this requires a tension unfit
for metaphysics, bereft of human sense.

But things are not so arranged:
The universe is silent as a tomb.
We have no roots in this or any world,
no hope and hence no fear. Cosmic bastards,
strangers, castaways, and only the ship,
the sailing matters—
only a steady course. And steady courses
are the product of sailors who behave.

II

I have seen trapped wolves survive
the unspeakable, break away from angry
peasants. But the end was known: for that
night or the next—a week at most
and your wolf was rotting in deep grass,
corrupting a water-hole. And on that
shaggy corpse the marks of its own teeth.
In its fierce crystal eyes the absolute
fulfillment of despair. All of which
he might have gotten quickly, once
the trap had sprung, by simply lying still.
III
The fossil remnants of God remain to be explained. That is our function. Inventor of reason, he stepped beyond his creature, rose in smoky glory while disciples gawked. Out of his robe, by accident perhaps, fell the pebble of Rome. But through the increment of centuries, as he drifted onward beyond the limits of this galaxy, eyes still warm and kind, mouth full of figs and mustardseed, that perilous rock has grown into an anvil upon which hard sayings are tortured into steel. The hammer is discipline: the product truth—or a likeness, a graven image of it, if you will.

There are eight sacraments. The last is Obedience. Holiness is not intensity; sanctity does not consist of shrieks. The circuit of the Law is a cold road and at its end, a dark cottage in which the Holy Family waits like waxen figures in a Christmas scene, behind the house a shadowed lane. The trip is best made with eyes straight ahead. Arrival is worth the madness, the pain, and all of the dead are sane.
They had been playing Gritch for quite a while.
A game of skill and chance, a kind of dance,
a lovely violent thing
in which the central piece was called a King
invented by the man, requiring certain drives, thrusts, conventions, attitudes all natural to the man.
Mostly related to the woman not at all.

For quite a while it had been usage that the man begin with twice as many pieces as the woman; that he be allowed two moves for each of hers, and he declared the winner even when he lost.

Until at last she saw the unfairness of it all and went to Law, bent on equity, where a fresh apportionment was quickly made.

Afterward, they walked again together, odds evened out, her purse full of pieces newly won, centuries of misuse laid to rest.

He did not seem disturbed or glum. Almost amused, he said,

–We're still playing Gritch.
Lines to the South

– On seeing an equestrian statue of the late Genl. W.T. Sherman

up on his pedestal
the general hunches stony
alone
fulfilled
the dust of old victories powdering his eyes

a century of loyal pigeons have honored him
and twined a lime corona round his head

united rains
collective winds
and central suns
have bleached the fire and blood

leaving
a brassy glare
for kids and nurses confederate against him frowning back without a twinge

and lovers strolling past in twilight delirium echoing his castiron dream humming
gorgia on my mind

and under him the swart pony

with tarnished teeth
who saw enough near macon to make a burro cringe whose shoulders

withers
flanks
shrink from their burden
ooze metallic shame
    whose blind sculptured eyes
look southward with
brute sympathy–

if sherman’s horse can take it
so can you
metaphysician at huntsville
(The Texas State Penitentiary)

Every life is many days,
day after day.
– James Joyce

it is a wall

only if i realize it
as a wall
brick by brick

jets of paused mortar
bellygray sinuous
almost in motion
almost a serpent
fluid

brick by brick
why not cells
why not tiny futures about
to shift and scuttle
like bloods minuscule
runabouts

brick by brick

solid only in the
timeserving illusion of
our brief staccato lives

not wall at all
but a long
instants chance arrangement
frozen in metabolic tempo
awaiting the relative
to start a drunken gallop
through glum dimensionality
    as i blink centuries
    and smile a thousand years

then they reassert the static lie

    from a tower

the eternal whistle
    of a guard
Middleman

His wealth of attitudes
cannot support him now:
the blindfold hides nothing,
and the ropes that fuse his hands
about the post in backward prayer
require that he stand upright
just this once.

The lounging riflemen understand
and grin, for while they battled
his murderous late friends
across the lethal fields, past
a crimson angle where two roads
and four machineguns crossed,
this smug convenience gnawed
his checkered cap
and wished them dead,
thinking of the starchy commandant
who despised his usefulness
far more than the threat of
returning locals scattering their
lives like costly chips
in the pasture west of town.

And now the use of usefulness
is done:
his kinsmen’s bullets shatter
a gathering whine,
and in the grim neutrality of earth
he sprawls in static sorrow,
arms outspread,
alibis choked in blood–
and nothing but roots to betray.
The Mystic

Someone was always asking him the time of day, expecting him to be precise; another wanted nickles for a dime. At table he was always asked to slice the meat because he had a certain style of carving to the bone with even strokes. Each afternoon he walked a tortured mile; at evening charmed the neighbors with his jokes and never thought to mention what he saw scrawled on the office wall, or how the Jews kept baiting him and howling for the law while someone turned from music to the news. No use to press the mandate of a king or tell them what he suffered every spring.
Notes for an Undelivered Sermon

I
This evening twelve gaunt clouds
the color of iron
shiver overhead like unfilled shrouds.

All day I fished and caught
far more than I can eat
or give away, though I was taught

that fishing is a skill, not a profession;
that one’s rod, one’s tackle
and its use is, so to speak, a mute confession

of what inhabitants the heart gives room
and which it turns away.
So my earthly father whispers out of gloom

as large and final as that flowery plot
where mother and congregation
set him down, a quiet spot

after his noisy shameful accident.
I think we are all in love
with sleazy metaphor, and what he meant

I am afraid, at last, I know.
Now Sunday comes on
like a hurricane, a brief disastrous blow

to sweep the week’s debris away
and clear a place to build
some new confusion. An empty day

on which I speak out of
my father’s book, my father’s
pulpit, of strength, longing, brutal love

tall as Sinai, deep as a whale’s gorge.
I have one hour (barring the
choir’s singing overlong) to shape, to forge
the kind of chains one yearns to wear,
a helmet not to be put off,
a chivalry to strive within our hearts, to share

with anyone we come across who might
be meek, or hunger and thirst, or suffer
for justice’ sake. Whose vision, tight

and limited, can grow to fit the mail,
the greaves, the whole armor
Paul spat about from out his horny grail.

II
 Those fish that trouble me are scaled and
in the freezer chest.
I sit and read a story of David retailed

in Askalon and Gath: about a son who sold
his birthright not for pottage
but to be, if we believe what David told,

just what his father was: a king.
For which he died.
And should have—fool enough to want a thing

so pointless, full of rot and indolence, so vain.
But after all, we are
our father’s sons, hunched in the rain

waiting to fish again, not knowing yet
nor believing, if we know,
what father knows: that troubled waters,

though moved by an angel’s hand,
can cure but one, and
spawn no fish. And what we’ve planned

has all been done before and proved no use.
I fished and read this afternoon
of Pharoah’s agony and Jacob’s ruse,

the singing lines playing through my head
and reel. But when I was done the book
seemed stale, the sun low; and all my fish were dead.

And I sat at the pier like a delivered woman
stuffed full again of what
she had lately borne; a latter-day Roman

who swears by Zeus and then laughs, recalling
what the gods have come to
and how all faith, at last, is just a way of falling

for a line with dull and pointless hook.
Calvin cursed our works
all raw with Self; gave us a look

into the tiny cavern where our heavens and hells
are paved indifferently with gold or tears,
furnished with antique dooms; our selves

portrayed outsize and gross, the flawed and broken
parody of election posters
splashed across these strengthless vacancies, a token

of our best, which is also our worst
and all we are
or were, or could be. The flesh is cursed–

So Calvin and Paul, Luther and even Clement knew–
and the spirit, for all John’s saying,
is as dead as a blind man’s eye, and Calvary’s tenant, too.

III
Which is, all told, enough to say;
too much really to bear,
much less to sob and whisper in this ebbing day.

Except, knowing so much, from first rising to last fall,
I wish I could at least say
why a fisherman should use a gun;
why saying nothing finally must tell all.
On the Self-Immolation of a Monk in Saigon

– Nam mo amita Buddha

At first you called to mind
a tiny badge of cloth
with Christ’s Sacred Heart
burning for love of us all
that someone,
priest or nun,
gave me when I was small
and moved by mystery
as flame draws the moth.

Jesus’ heart afire, purging
in its unutterable temperature
my sins, my faults—
hotter than the sun’s deep vaults,
a molten scourging
to right the weak’s wrong start.

But then, beyond the smoke,
the stench of gasoline and broiling flesh,
I saw that you were old and scarred
and human after all—
not cleansed but charred,
not at the heart alone,
but to the bone.

So much of what we dread is history
flaming at an intersection, eternal heat,
a crusty residue like melted tar
fouling our moral cloak.
What more than cry out for grace,
floating like shards of ice
in the tepid fluid of our days,
shall we do?
What shall we do?

This and other questions
have occurred to me—
which, considering the statement
of your withdrawal,

I shall not ask.
Pastoral

in the fields
    where larks emoted
    where tender summer
    groomed green children
and the miraculous
    sea wove its
    breath among parvenu leaves

tiny cattle strolled in the
    circle of a wooden bell
    demi-sheep cropped wonderful
    vegetables
    along a stream wound silver
    through rare trees

–my god, farmer surakawa gasped
    the breath of armageddon
    on his neck
    and turned to see
    a brook leap into steam
    cattle tumble
    their delicate legs snapped
    like hoofed matchsticks
    leaves puff white to sift
    on fields of glass
    as larks burst into flame

and on the August horizon
    the city being eaten by a sun
At Recess

the kids were playing marbles
  in the
  yard
betting god had a big blue
  nose
  and wore pink undies
like miss grunyon
  the school nurse

and bertie said
  —god is a goof because he owns
  the whole works
  and lets it go to pot

and dannie said
  —god is allright if you take
  him with a grain of salt
  like lots wife did

and lazy andy hunched reading
  billy budd
  until
  bertie asked him
  —what do you think
  about god

poor andy we never knew much about
andy except his daddy killed
his mom and hung and some uncle
sent him to the school and when
his marks fell reminded him but
andy just read and read and not
much else and his big round eyes
fixed dark and awful on old bertie
  who only asked

  —what do you think
  about god
and andy put down billy budd
  his mouth squeezed into a
  running sore
  open so we could see
  in its wideness
  the palate hanging
  like a tiny body in his throat
  and
  he screamed

  —i think god is a son of a bitch

  and he screamed and screamed
  until miss grunyon came
  and he went on screaming
  till after it got dark
Our Man in Gomorrah

My Lord, these statues!
If I described the least offensive of them, this hand would wither, the down in my nostrils char.

And the booming streets full of terrible women—howling, laughing, exposing their parts. Alone, bereft of men who smirk and turn away; alone together, winking their sisters awake, playing Persian widow for the price of a skinful of wine. The judge is a bald demon who trafficks in undefiled children, who has no time for law but much for lust, who fouls his robes with bribes, uncommon loves.

My Lord, I have served you in six provinces; an eye have I lost for your sake. I have been a stranger to mercy, truth’s assassin. In Alexandria I have spilled the blood of princes, purged their issue; in Illyria sold populations—yet have I seen nothing like this.

My Lord, I will be plain: what this place bodes is a doom beyond dimensions, the death of armies, the hiving of multitudes matched not in normal opposition but in kind.

The flesh is rebel, and the prudent man, torn always by the rake of the obscene, succumbs in little ways, tames his unspeakable appetites easily through pedestrian extremes.
But here a god has pinched each shrieking pulse, has rendered every decent gesture as its dark alternative. What passes for conduct in our kingdom would be mortal here: the body’s prize undone, the heart’s bright emblem scorned.

Until at last, my Lord, this ruinous contest between what men must be, and what their gods insist they should become has driven a city mad.

Here there is no shame, and from the depth of shamelessness there spurts, like the body’s precious liquor brewed and spent against archaic law, a beastliness, disorder absolute, a horror beyond this simple quill’s ability to mark. And know you this, my Lord, the thing breeds here— but here it will not stay.

And if our kingdom should be walled with bronze, if every careful archer, quick for blood, should sting his man (or what you will), yet must this pestilence still scorch the very marrow of us all.

Unless, by luck, we cast about and snare a likely god to elevate, search out his pleasure— unless, with prayers, we set him on this place with fire and the providential instruments that only gods can wield.

And, my Lord, as terrible as all of this may seem, it is as nothing when compared with a town across the plain.
For a Woods-Colt Miscarried

I know the barn where they got you
the night they tricked each other
and themselves.

In that season, the nights are
full of rain, the sky shakes
like a lost child and for an hour
it is cool enough to love.

Out of such cool love you came
to burgeon day by day,
carelessly made and moving darkly
like the land your most distant bending
fathers tilled, crying for Israel,
hoping for Jesus.

Your nearly mother felt trouble
in her depths
where an ignorant angel
stirred the waters
with his holy staff.
She sat big on the shack’s long porch
watching cars dart South for Baton Rouge,
watching fingers of young pine
fondle
tumid clouds above the field and shed
where you took place.

Cars throbbed toward the city. The shack
stayed where it was. And stayed
till her time came. And yours.

At the clinic they found something wrong:
her blood, his seed–your own blind weaving
of them both. They said that you were dead.
And it was so.

Some time in the sixth month, you gave it up.
Maybe you heard some talk of what there was,
could feel the chill dissension in her gut:
her wanting and her fearing and her shame.
And gave it up. Collapsed, began to junk limbs and fingers,  
the tassel of your kind,  
the piggish brooding something like a face.  
Each cell dissolved, left off  
its yearning,  
its moist prophecies.

In the Felicianas,  
there are no coffins for what is not born but loosed, a stewy discharge almost the same as if the bowels went wrong.  
Preachers, fine at birth, adroit at marriage, inured to burial, have no rite for those who almost were.  
A near thing does not count.  
A miss had just as well be fifty miles.

Just as well: no matter what they say—each coming and each leaving is a feast, a celebration of the sun we squall to see and weep to leave: a leaping forth, a going down, each swings its own harsh joy and the round of its perfection has no words.

But for you, what?  
Who lay for a brief time within the confines of her deep uneasy space, your sun her heart thundering there above red as the wounds of Jesus.  
Who turned and turned amidst a tideless inward sea as ghosts of her body taught your spindrift hands to be and made a tongue for speech and eyes to see.

For you, what?

Somewhere near in the fields your father turns the land waiting for a first bold thrust of green out of the earth’s confusion. Maybe relieved, as mute and unaware as she, he will watch the stalks
and leaves spread out, will bless
the flower and bole. Will shout and
carry the first opened fruit,
a pale victory, running down the rows
pulling its long staple through his fingers
like a sheaf of dollar bills.

And you who lost nothing that you had,
no trees or blooms or words
rising against Louisiana’s sun, will stir,
if ever, in the evening breeze, a trouble missed,
a junction passed and never seen
like a field or shack at the edge of sight
down a highway to the Gulf.
The Functions of a Complex Variable

She was designed for pleasure, given and received. And fragile things were all designed for her: The dainty china cup suspended by a wish, The tarnished silver of a winter moon, A kind of sigh fit to be orchestrated, And lambs and gentle eyes, communion veils; All woven into unsubstantial mist, Not things to be discussed, but to be kissed.

Or to be reduced—against her will somehow— To a regular kind of agony, Carved into delicate disillusion, Sorted and related honestly:

Like tears: an induced secretion. Or love: a biological gambit—open at both ends. And sacrifice: what you cannot help if either Of the above mean anything.

But stars and souls are nonreducible, It takes a star to know another star; Still cosmic doubt is self-inducible, And souls may not acknowledge what they are. And then the earth is ashes and debris, A cup is made for simply drinking tea, A sigh is only oral expiration; The moon engenders madmen’s inspiration.

And so she holds the sterile sky at bay— In a world of pieces she doesn’t like that way.
The Rainmaker

There is no such thing as a job well done.
The rule is, I must leave as soon as it's begun.

I live deserts. In my wake green explodes
like the dream of a winter tree.

A woman in Tulsa, late one night,
came to slake my thirst. We drank.
Lips wet and shimmering, she said
she had dreamed me
long ago, a weather cock
turning windless above a crumbling barn.
She asked why?
I could not say
whether she asked about the deluge
or that wooden contrivance
that serves me for what I do not need.

Dressing quickly, feeling my virtu go,
the motel pipes beginning to play,
awaiting my lie:
Because it isn't there,
I said, leaving her all the money
I had got
for bringing what was not.

What they do not know is that the rain seeks me.
It is my tempest that they see.
I have been fragments of an ancient thing
wedded together again,
and love or the sight of green,
the touch of mist
would melt me like the Witch of the West
upon whose breast
I fed
Last Spring
When I was dead.

And when I dream in a dry bed,
rutted with dusty sweat,
I see my brother on his way
beneath our Father's eyes,  
to set about that lethal thing he does so well:

Perhaps an Iowa field in July,  
full of prayers and striving, ending  
as you would surmise

in a flash flood.
The Portable Goya

I get nightmares when I think that

Goya might have gotten a Guggenheim.
– Ben Shahn

whether he was learning or forgetting
no one could be sure
as he chronicled famine
traced the cramped history of
hands
deaths static wonders
and
scrawled a peoples misery
in pigmented
cries

what i have made i have made
let it stand

his unroyal colors clinched and
twisted
one hot magenta seemed
to grudge the fat
the satinclad
an umber
shamed
the healthy and
accused the rich

there had to be napoleon
critics nod
so he could render
the incredible fictions
that kept coming true

a soldier with a ratty little beard
red shadows where
his arms and legs had been
impaled on a stake and
tongueless whispering
– my soul doth magnify
the
lord
a catalan mother squatting solo
wrapped in hellknit
desolation
her three beheaded children
draining baby blood onto
her dusty breasts

if there is an error
it is simply this
that flesh shapes its own ends
and will not suffer
tooled impertinence

and then there was the double-duchess
snuggling
her large perfections
en deshabille
and otherwise

but surely after peninsular holocaust
and the stench of broken towns
under a mercenary sun
she could not alter
his appointed rounds
or prevent
the arcane triumph
that waited swinging limply
in a later century
like
a convicts last worst dream
or a
giltframed classic
in
a swank salon

there is no art without risk
as dr frankenstein
wheezed dying to a
village constable
Reunion

Packed tight in lobbies of the best hotels,
They favor loud silk ties and talk to match.
A stranger walking past is bound to catch
The stench of barrack-humor and the smells
Of aging frauds conspiring to pretend
Heroic stances none of them has dared
To hold. Bald yokels who have only shared
The means of valor, not its deadly end.

They quaver stars and stripes, a bitter song
Composed by shattered friends whose history
Involves their swagger in its mystery;
This vision of the past’s great swelling wrong:
That those who live were apt at dodging lead—
The ones who have a right to sing are dead.
The System

In contemporary portraits he looks tired,
On edge and a little dulled, perhaps, by
The incessant craving of the famous to be right;

Querulous, and determined not to yield
On any point so late, so close to night.

— *Um so schlimmer fur die Tatsache*, he said,
And went on saying all the wrong things in
A muddled diction no one could refute—
Highvoiced, bold of pen and resolute,
Roaming dialectic jungles he'd pioneered,
Murdering unpliant data in the stacks—

And forgetting how all history takes its shape
From shoeless cads, from spinsters who bury
Their mistakes, from the tense mystery
Inherent in old men who haul
Manure alone to spread it lovingly
On somnolent roots behind a
Cottage at the village end,
Who cough, scratch, yawn, and finally trudge
Out to meet the world,
A book in hand with which to kill an age.

And he forgot how all dialectic depends on
Sullen boys who cannot bear home-cooking,
The provinces' slim trance atmosphere,
Who write a frenzied verse or two,
Then disappear
To turn up briefly in Marseilles
Minus a leg, or sporting a yellow beard
Before they scurry to a documented fate
In Abyssinia, Venice, or Lake Charles.

And though he neglected to explain why the
Same sun should rear a speck of scum
Determined to make something of itself
And later scorch a squat priest's brains to ash,
Others picked up the wicked triad,
Worshipped the queer circle,
Wedded bits of outraged flesh to it
And died in Paris at the barricades,
In a snowclothed square at Petrograd:
Ill-tempered anchorites,
Shag martyrs of a crimson dispensation
Hammered out in study’s stale air,

To plague us now, to last a little while
As if it made good sense

 till history,
Pressed too far by the silliness of it all,
Breaks the phoney stasis, shrugs him off,
And rears the old antitheses again.
Take a Letter

Where is the weeping prince nowadays?
Overextended his resources, banked on the
Market of Magnanimity; got nailed for it?

Dropping porcelain tears still in the
Static epic of middle-aged art,
Into flat martinis, cups of thin tea,
Trays of ices carefully prepared and aptly placed
For business reasons.

For business reasons that we stay indoors
When gladiators are abroad, no matter what
They wear or say, no matter what their cause.

This we understand, and prudently contain
Errant prophets by massed regiments of
Eyebrows askance, whispering campaigns,
Rotary devices, and economic bludgeons
That can be wielded from a safe distance.

(Statisticians even suggest that we can breed
out revolution and unrest if the
contraceptive has a golden base.)

But what we have learned,
Learned while fighting
For what we prefer to life,
Is that revolt need not be violent,
Can be a courteous demon beneath the skin;
All enemies do not announce themselves,
And a single can be worse than double cross.

So fear men with runover heels who don’t care,
Men who prefer last year’s Fords,
Read carefully,
And can conceive a social debt
That Haig and Haig on rocks will not discharge.
We had a close call, remember that:
Remember too that profits are deceptive;
Those derived from altars and the vested interest
Are never worth the risk that they incur.

But that is past: the world has been bought off,
Convinced until next time that a cross of gold
Has its stylish side,
That any return worth seeing will be advertised
Through the usual channels,
That love and passion are safer on the screen,
That their future is assured.

We'll give them the business—as usual.
By the way,
Where is the weeping prince nowadays?
Police Report

And so he knelt in the slippery highway
listening to the last ragged bars
of her ruined breath,
hoping by an act of will
to make it right again,
to sweep the shattered glass and
fractured steel from the road,
bring together severed nerves
and blasted arteries.

But the tortured music stopped:
the crowd closed in to see what had
what had been done
while his finger traced shrill arabesques
in something darkly shining on the road
and he indulged himself
in the saving understatement
of a scream.
Old Man among His Flowers

When I was young it was Thermopolae,
the Alamo’s stark cry,
Pickett’s men at the high water mark,
lives lost
like poker chips at the edge of dark
on a steamboat table tossed
by a lacy arm. Why
not, why not?

Bleeding was living;
no cross, no crown,
no guts, no glory,
no pain, no gain.
Drink like a fool,
drive like a fool,
let every extra dawn be a surprise.

Stranger, I used to mutter as
night faded and liquored sleep came on
like an Asian dawn,
Go tell the Spartans Leonidas and his men
still wait in Bossier City
according to your word,
like blossoms caught in a Spring rain.
No crown, no glory, no gain.

Not that I am afraid.
Better say the years,
like plans and women best laid,
somehow have strayed.
The fun of fear
and violence is gone.
I am too old to understand
what fearing means.

To leave these daisies and the slopes
I’ve tended, shepherd of being in the sun,
is not to step beyond some thing I own.
Just bright measures of the blessed earth
I will surely call to in the last short
precious dawn,
life draining like a garden hose,
as Stephen seeking in the streets of
Dublin after Mollie's song,
must have cried out
across the dry steppes
of the seventeenth of June,
Bloom, Bloom.
Second Childhood

Is not so bad. It flows
as the waves of hot desire
begin to ebb, old postures washing up from
an epic past we all possess
—whether we did or not—
pulsing like a rediscovered role
we played with matchless fire
in the outback of our soul.

First love, much
better in
its untried splendor: a thing apart,
complete as artless art,
thoughtlessly made,
bereft of sting.
If you should see her now
or she see you how
would you meet?

First sex, a very
different thing,
not to be confused with its confusion.

First death, Jerry
Potter from next door
or
that kid in Seventh Grade—
was it fever caught in winter damp,
a fall from some great tree to solid ground,
gone down in the lake at summer camp,
still waiting to be found.

First fear, never
mind just what.
It came and stayed and learned domestic
ways.

Now the images wash
back, shorn of their
firstness, their preternatural power.
Now they are reduced to thoughtful art at last,
held fast,
a kind of parting prayer
for disconnection,
in hope that knows no goal but
last fast breath.

And then
our old mistakings come back as final truth.

There is no virulent God skulking about
on a silent steaming purposeful run
from sweet Antares
to the Magellanic Clouds.
He is right here, pooled
on our failing eyes like a deep
carpet of winter grass, a disconsolate
sapling aimed at the winter sun,
an elderly tobogganist coursing the blood
eager to find the heart.

Strange we should love Him better there
in old worn slippers,
a tattered nappy robe,
with thinning hair,
voice like a splintered reed,
tilling an autumn garden
gone utterly to seed.

If we like, He will tell us old stories again,
deconstruct the zodiac,
contemplate giving us wings—
and list the planting seasons
for all the Ten Thousand Things.

I heard Him say that the Last Judgment
will be a snap You see,
He simply takes us aside
in twilight before the dark
and tells us
how we failed, whom we hurt,
and why we missed the mark.
Then at the bourne of eternity,
spared salvation and sin,
we shall have ice cream and candy and cake
and go out to play again.
Stay Where You Are

And shape a phrase that will not stop the throat
Of him who spots the lock and finds a key;
Erect a bridge to span the bloody moat
Between our future and our history.

There are no pious fools to guide us now,
The literate have taken every trick;
The finest brain is stabled like a cow:
Sacred or not, the milk still makes us sick.

Raise graces: grind the reasonable to seed,
Teach children to unearth an antique ore
That can be mined and smelted to our need—
Then tell us how and what to use it for.

Assign us angels: offer strength for hire—
Or stay your judgment till we master fire.
You Don't Say

He would hand you the text unopened, invite you to start wherever you might choose, and once begun he would recite the next verse and as many more as you had heart to hear. But afterward alone, you would muse on that strange perfection. Consider at evening, his absence firing no empathy, in what possible direction such a talent leads, what work it does. Is it no more than the mind's hiring while the soul drifts on, godless and alone? Simply a polished inconsiderable buzz like signals from the stars? Or expression leached into the bone beyond spirit's caring, by a father, a mother also possessed?

There are straight lines across the face of Mars, or something of the sort. Perhaps mere scratches gouged by ancient rains, by one wind or another—or carved by purposeful things whose last concern died before we broke the waters, whose final words are cosmic patches snarling past dumb suns. Who came to choose between breaking silence or long rest.
Acknowledgments


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