

**POETRY**

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(1932-1988)

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*editor*

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**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  
Youall 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

<sup>1</sup>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.

**Lib**

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  
georgia on my mind

and under him the swart  
pony  
with tarnished teeth  
who saw enough near macon  
to make a burro cringe

withers whose shoulders

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,  
ruttled 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 catalonian 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 deshabelle*  
    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 unpliable 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 tranced 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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