

## PAUL HOMER

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### Fairy Tale—1945

In the fabled land of the Brothers Grimm  
each townsman in the town I'm in  
on oath holds up his hand to swear  
in answer to our questionnaire:

“No one here has been a member  
of the National Socialist party,  
no swastika floated down  
from a rooftop in this fairy town,  
forgotten ghosts soon disappear  
in the gemutlich foam of evening beer.  
Our hausfraus sweep each spotless stoop,  
our men bring in the winter logs  
our dogs bring in the sheep to shear,  
our frauleins smile up at you  
as if you were a prince its's said  
with a kiss to wake the princess  
from her fairy tale bed.”

But fear stole in and bequeathed to me  
its cold remembered touch.  
In a post-card town like this  
I sat my buddy up to breathe  
with eyes that mirrored my stricken face.  
“I can't believe . . .” he said  
as mouth agape in wonderment, he bled.

I heard the secret murmur of his blood.  
He raised one hand in disbelief  
then carefully put it down.  
His eyes became two crystal globes,  
his fear like snowflakes drifted down  
until all became opaque.

You know—the kind of globe  
and snow  
that in fairy tales sift down  
upon a dreaming peaceful town?

## Yenta

Who would think of this,  
I mean really believe that I  
from where I came, who I am—  
from an apartment house in Brooklyn  
would be called in like a queen  
to the White House yet,  
the Marriage Secretariat, so help me God  
it's like a dream!

My new title is a Counselor  
before, they called me "yenta,"  
when I knocked on any door  
the question was "who sent' ya?"

As a matchmaker, a dollar here and there  
I negotiated my commission  
by arranging an audition for  
some old schlemiel who sought a spouse  
and vice versa for some poor mouse  
still looking for a troubadour.

To tell the truth it was no easy job  
the good-looking ones were slob or snob  
I'm half detective and half librarian  
I can guess at once if they'll be marryin.

In recognition of my artistry  
the bureaucrats have hired me  
and sent me back to my own street  
with Bush's how-to-do-it sheet.

So here I am where I began  
doing my thing for Uncle Sam  
teaching that marriage is most effectual  
so long as its only heterosexual.

## **Informed Consent**

Three times they urged that Job relent  
from contending with Authority and to assent  
to the punishment that's heaven-sent  
and cease his arrogant argument.

Three times an MD glaring down at me  
demanded my Informed Consent  
though no one knew just what it meant  
as they laid me on the gurney.

It's only legalese he said  
which explains the curious details  
of the unforeseen things we dread  
if the operation fails.

I claimed that as a member of the bar  
I learned to parse each jot and tittle  
it's far beyond my repertoire  
to uncode this Rubick's Riddle.

The alarm lights flashed code yellow  
as masked and gowned in astonishment  
they rushed in to see the fellow  
who thrice refused advance consent.

And kneeled as in my hospital shroud  
like Lazarus I rose and went  
amongst the kneeling angry crowd  
demanding my just punishment.

But the mighty voice of the Chief of Staff  
poured from speakers in the corridor  
shaking for miles around each seismograph  
as he roared this cosmic order:

“Wherefore find you this procedure, this protocol  
that subjects this man to mute assent  
whom I gave the gift to stand or fall  
of his own free will without consent?”

Let him write his own biography  
though unable to foretell  
whether solemn script or comedy  
or when I toll the bell.”

## **Ozymandias and Me**

I was told by my physician  
that in addition to my shrinking frame  
the obvious root of my condition  
is just old age, nature's end game,  
a pre-planned piece-meal demolition,  
where an outside crew peels off the skin  
and an inside crew brings from within  
parts prized high since puberty  
and now reduced to loose debris.

I'd dreamt that like Ozymandias  
whose kingly parts evoked his past,  
another Keats might now proclaim  
that mine were parts that looked the same,  
but who would pause, who pass me by,  
where only shards of grandeur lie  
beneath my spindly scaffolds fall  
old remnants of a wrecking ball?

## **Dysnomia**

My fishing line reels out and drifts  
through descending depths of consciousness  
while the dangling bait of memory's weight  
succeeds no more than Sisyphus.

I jiggle the line until it's tight  
to whet the fish's appetite  
but the water's black  
and the line goes slack  
as line and bait both sink from sight.

To bottom fish your memory  
is like counting your assets in bankruptcy  
where the referee  
accepts no plea  
until he's convinced of complete poverty.

But ultimately the pole is bent  
with no more warning than an accident  
and the water clears  
as the fish appears  
wriggling on the hook in astonishment.

Like Hemingway's fisherman sailing for home  
I head for the harbor to finish my poem  
I now have a fish that was netted in time  
for me to drop anchor with this ending rhyme.

## **The Trial of Joshua (a/k/a Jesus)**

May it please the Court of History  
which has no statute of limitations.  
May it please the lawyers born after me  
to cease their recriminations.

Let me set the record straight:  
The defendant would not cooperate  
so the Saducees and Pharisees  
released each others throat  
and conceived a secret strategy  
in which I was the goat.

It was not yet dawn, not yet cock's crow  
when they brought the Nazarene within  
the High court of the Senhedrin  
to begin the ordained show.

He was a Rabbi from up the Galilee,  
a blue-collar guy that did carpentry  
charged with multiple counts of apostacy.  
He refused to enter a guilty plea.

Though I'd never tried a capital case,  
nor had I ever seen my client  
or prepared for use a habeas  
or examined an affiant  
the High Priest pulled me from the crowd-  
the other lawyers laughed aloud  
when Caiaphas appointed me  
as the indigent's attorney.

In my innocence and youthful pride  
I announced I'm glad to take his side  
but since this comes as a surprise  
I move for time to strategize.

"Motion denied,"  
the High Priest said, and then  
"Let the scribe take up his pen.

Show this hearing has begun. Amen."



[Here follows the verbatim Transcript of the trial of the defendant Joshua a/k/a among certain of the Jews as Jesus.]

A: (Defense Attorney): Your honor, I again move for continuance and release from jail by fixing bail on my client's own recognizance.

HP: (Caiaphus): Denied. what is your plea?  
Guilty or not guilty?

A: I cannot agree to enter a plea.  
You invite my dereliction.  
To do otherwise I'd be criticized  
for conceding jurisdiction.  
For since this case is a capital case  
and my client's home is Galilee  
I cite to you clear precedent  
that only where he's resident  
does a court have authority.

HP: Are you unaware that we sent him there  
for a hearing at his domicile  
and he was remitted back for trial?

A: I ask the court to enlighten me.  
How came this all to be?

HP: Because Herod after due inquiry,  
proposed to find him not guilty  
and returned him with an apology.

A: But wait! This is an absurdity!  
This trial is double jeopardy!  
I move dismissal immediately!

HP: Dear counsel you mistake the rule  
that's taught to you in your law school.  
The governor acted administratively,  
no act was taken by the judiciary.

A: Oh now the shroud of night has disappeared!  
What I had feared has now appeared  
in daytime's clarity!

I will not ask we suffer through  
another useless hour or two  
but will make my points with brevity  
and pray for Pilate's fair review.

HP: I commend you for your diligence.  
I'll ignore your clear impertinence.  
So none who are here may then report  
your client lacked his day in court,  
proceed.

A: I enter the following motions:  
First, the Sanhedrin is short a quorum.  
Such rule is not a pendulum that one may halt if  
troublesome.  
Next, I seek a change from here to a venue with an  
atmosphere  
that's free of fear,  
where no drummed-up crowd  
outside the gate  
stands howling for a flagellate.

HP: Young man, I hold you in contempt.  
I'll reserve for you your punishment.  
Defendant, now approach  
the bench.  
Long enough have you been silent.  
I will put to you one question—  
one question only—  
and before the  
sun shines in the east  
I command that you shall answer me.

[Scribe: The defendant does not answer.]

HP: I adjure thee by the living God, that  
thou tellist whether thou be  
Christ, the son of God.

Defendant: Thou has said: nevertheless I say  
unto you, Hereafter shall ye see  
the Son of Man  
sitting on the right hand of power  
and coming in the clouds of heaven.

HP: What further need have we of witnesses?  
There is no ambiguity.  
Behold, we have heard his blasphemy.  
This man walks free upon the earth  
with those who claim his virgin birth  
and proclaim his immortality.  
He is a danger to the state.  
I find that he is guilty.

A: Wait! Do you not see?  
unwittingly, for his offense  
he has offered up his own defense!  
This man, from a dysfunctional family,  
is acting out a fantasy.  
I enter here a plea  
of his diminished capacity!

HP: Denied, denied! Thrice denied!  
You have no right to flout the court  
and turn his answer inside out.  
Shall I then question him again?

A: You mock me, sir,  
we need no interrogator.  
Under the doctrine of res ispa loquitor  
his words speak for themselves.

HP: Scribe: This trial is at its end.  
I will certify the record now and send  
him on to Pilate. I recommend  
the penalty he seeks so ardently.

[The Transcript ends.]

Enchained, they led him out the gate.  
As though rehearsed, the crowd disbursed.

Exposed as a novitiate  
who'd failed his final test  
my colleagues looked away from me  
and left with all the rest.

It was then I knew I'd been a pawn  
on the chessboard of this consistory,  
but tell me the truth, I if had won,  
would it change the course of history?  
If my client survived, if I'd set him free,  
would it have made any difference to you or me?

For if looking back from your century  
the lives we led remained the same,  
the fears, the hopes, brutality,  
you must conclude I bear no blame.

But if the meaning of this decree  
gives hope for an eternal amnesty  
my conclusion's the same,  
it would be error to defame  
the lawyer who lost in Jerusalem.

*Note: "The Trial of Joshua."* As an aid to non-lawyers who may stumble upon this poem at some future time, some of the legal concepts and language may be helpful. Thus: a plea of any kind by the defendant may waive jurisdictional requirements. A "recognizance" is a document permitting release pending arraignment or trial upon a person's signature. The residential requirements for capital cases were fixed by Roman law. An administrative hearing is not usually deemed a substitute for the judicial hearing which may trigger a later defense of double jeopardy. The procedural requirement of a quorum (as is the continuing quarrel between the battling religious factions of Sadducees and Pharisees) is described in *The Dartmouth Bible* (Chamberlin and Feldman eds., 3rd ed.)(the source for many aspects of the poem). The inquiry of the Defendant and his response is taken verbatim from Epistles, 26:64 Matthew. The plea of diminished capacity is a recognized defense in many state criminal codes. "Res ipsa loquitur" means "the thing speaks for itself." Insertion of a defense counsel is my own invention. You will not find one in the Bible. Trust me. And the reader himself must, of course, answer the ultimate question posed.

Finally, the poem was originally conceived as a very short play presented by more than one actor.

## **Marseilles Harbor—1945**

Near the harbor we pronounced “Marsays”  
loaded with shit and bouillabaisse  
we lie on cots and wait  
a hundred to a tent for transport to  
the land of the little yellow man.  
It’s 1945, an inauspicious year  
except for the end of World War Two,  
with nothing to do but read  
“Stars and Stripes” which proclaimed the party line  
that we’d be home for Christmas,  
to which we’d add “in 1949.”  
We’d watch the trucks each day  
pull into camp and on each ramp  
disgorge their load  
of whores and spam and cigarettes,  
as the MP’s looked away,  
and lay big money bets  
as to who would be the last to come  
when the whores would finish in the tents.

Our sergeant was called Humpty Dumpty.  
He weighed 300 pounds.  
Riddled by shrapnel in the Ardennes  
the medics put Humpty together again  
except for the fact that with no one around  
at any loud noise he’d command “hit the ground.”

At mail call our corporal  
would mispronounce each foreign name.  
In the tent an endless poker game  
continued through the night  
in the beam of a hand-held flashlight.  
On a weekend pass at the compound gate  
the husky French grisettes would wait  
to trade their francs for cigarettes.  
If we had a pass we’d take a cab  
to the hills above the city,  
a universe away,  
above the small cafes that fringed the bay,  
inhaled the sweet aroma  
of mimosa trees in bloom

from which we squeezed  
our own perfume of homeland memories.

The darkening sky accompanied us  
upon our slow descent  
fearful of what awaited us  
beyond the compound tent . . .

\* \* \*

Do you remember "Enola Gay,"  
a name redolent of calico  
or a rose that wins  
in a flower show?  
Do you remember the day  
of her bomber run  
when beneath the flames  
of a man-made sun  
a city disappeared?  
We stood on bunks and cheered.

It was August 7th, 1945.  
At night chaplains arrived.  
We stood in separate groups,  
each a different faith, to contemplate  
what man and God contrived.  
Our young rabbi bowed his head to pray  
and silently wept as though his tears  
would quench the fires  
that burnt the heart  
of victim and victor alike,  
then wonderingly looked up at us  
and wordless walked away.

## **A Decalogue Society**

Before time began, within the limitless ambient  
there was the Word, existing eternally,  
encompassing unformed ocean, sky and fundament,  
a void of wonderment and mystery.

Within itself the Word contained  
man's bloody fate by tooth and claw  
but promised life if man maintained  
subjection to the rule of Law,

To the "I Am That I Am" of the burning bush,  
to the Code in the books of the Pentateuch  
condensed in ten words of the homologue  
given Jacob's tribe by the Decalogue.

We inherit an ancient metaphor  
a dangerous tool that's razor-edged  
forged in a fire that we have pledged  
to feed by the fuel of reason.

But truth may be obscured by metaphor,  
or the shifting winds of the season,  
and laws which shape our identity  
may be the voice of a new ventriloquy  
and we the dummy on the knee.

Awake! the Prophets say, reaffirm our Covenant  
of justice, truth, humility;  
these are the goals of our society  
this what the Word has meant.



## **Over Olympus**

I rode the wild steed of poetry last night.  
It raced beyond our galaxy  
In the ecstasy of endless flight  
Beyond the pull of gravity,

Untamed, it soars within  
the clouds, across the sunlit poles,  
where endless parallels begin,  
to unplumbed depths of souls.

No rope or noose  
Can bind or halt this unreigned force  
Nor can the mind that turned it loose  
Confine it to a chosen course.

Strange voices borne up to me  
On roaring winds of the Antipodes  
Reveal the human mystery.  
I grip my steed with trembling knees.

On Olympus, home of Gods, Zeus waits,  
As he waited for Belepheron  
To end my ride with thunderbolts,  
And bring me crashing down to earth.

