

PAUL HOMER

Lament

I lack the wit and dash of Ogden Nash
Those hints of Browning's ducal crimes
That hide within his rhymes,
Walt Whitman's unrepentant storms
Rejecting our accepted norms;
Langston's darker notes and hues:
A saxophonist riffing blues,
Sandburg's urban elegiac,
Biblical, chanted, quite Hebraic.
No—not for me the great ones' foyer—
That's why I became a lawyer.

He's A Poet?

He says he is a poet? Indefensible!
That jowly, trapezoidal grandfather,
snow capped like Mt. Rainier,
who cannot hear, has a dangerous totter
and worst, is sometimes comprehensible.
Where has he written of the soul's emetic
bringing up shards and bits that are poetic
from a final psychiatric session?
Where is angst, ennui or sexual repression?
As for pain, engine of the true poetic strain,
he confines it to the caboose,
the last car on the train.
But the penultimate indictment of his crime
is that he insists on using rhyme.

A Metaphysician's Dream

Information is our only reality
or so the solipsists say,
while scientists' definitions of totality
are amended everyday.

So I search and I ask on what rock can I stand—
how pleadingly demand
that the universe consider my case
when the chaos of space permits no definition of place?

While my dreams without face
descend into darkness so deep
that I tremble in unconscious sleep.

Yet, when waking to morning's first light
alone, wanting no wise mentor's presence,
knowing that my scribblings so slight
of patterns and rhyme
still the ticking of time,
and exist, and are proof of my essence.

It's Ten To Nine

It's ten to nine:

At the corner of Valhalla and Monroe
under shrieking wheels of a Blue Line EL,
steel sparks rain down in molten flow
on indrawn heads like turtle's shells.
While at the curb the thunderous clang
of Thorsson's shirtless jack-hammer gang
sends sprays of asphalt and concrete
across the wounded gaping street.
Luminescent stripes across her massive arms
a brawny black Brunhilde in thick-soled leather boots
signals indecipherable directions and operatic alarms
as she shunts the hooting cars along unexpected routes.

It's seven to nine:

His back against the iron pillow of the bridge on Clark,
His daily station high above the wake of passing boats,
enthroned within the lotus lattice of the arc
of iron girders, a drunk sits upon his throne of army coats.
Head down, in frozen posture, palms upended as he begs.
The unrelenting throng steps across extended legs.

It's five to nine:

In an alleyway off City Hall beside a garbage bin,
a dwarf, mischievous accomplice of Authority, leans against the
wall
and flips away his cigarette before he turns within
to perch behind the information counter of his stall,
eyes agleam with ancient knowledge that his schizophrenic Boss
will thunder in his anger, repent in childlike pity
carelessly apportioning unearned gain and unjust loss
among all who walk within his City.

It's nine o'clock:

A goggled helmeted Valkyrie delivering mail and the silent
crowd peddles recklessly,
blond pony-tail streaming in her lee,
Dismounts, and spins for them the vast revolving door
escorting them along the limitless marble floor
beneath the ceiling of the sky.
They do not understand for none of them has so elected

to be selected to enter here as heroes.
Nor why it is that all so soon must die.

Puree

We were her age,
when we knelt to better gauge
each knuckled shot that curled
within the drawn circle, circumference of our world,
upon the schoolyard earth.

Each had his favorite shooter:
striped Tiger, purple Scooter,
speckled, handsome Aggie.
Never traded, of proved inestimable worth.
But the one who owned a Puree
we would enviously agree,
owned a marble beyond all measure,
a treasure possessed of magic quality.

One could hold and warm it in the sun,
and see deep within its fragile shell
a trembling radiance, an eagerness to run
its undetermined course, a demoiselle
dancing to the silent music of a carousel.
Mirthful, mischievous, reveling in its merry
way it would ricochet
among the startled Taws,
defying all the laws
of gravity to nestle at the last, a breathless gymnast
ending her short race
within our kneeling, warm embrace . . .

‡ ‡

Upon the usual page of today's daily paper
picturing the casualties of rebellion
she looks up at me: golden, a trembling radiance
eager to be on her way,
smiling with heartbreaking anticipation.
But her fragile shell lies crushed
among the shards of glass,
her brief course at an end.
I mourn. I weep in shame.
I curse the players of this game.

Nostalgia

I fear the gray light of terminal nostalgia,
dimming passions of the past,
muffling memories in a cast,
my soul's neuralgia . . .
Such fear is an unreasoned fear,
an abdication of good sense.
There is no here and now,
no present tense.
The arc of time and space
provides no place to pause,
to look two ways.
There is no hidden mystery.
I am only my past history.

**Ode To A Young Poetess
At The Podium**

As the earnest young poetess
Rains down sibilants and tears
In a river of words
Rising over my ears,
As she oracularly proclaims
The fearful fate of mankind,
I sit quite transfixed
By her lovely behind.

Summary Judgment

The Lepidopterist peers with cool delight
into each cage where his nocturnal catch
of moths swarm about a light,
mirroring in their panicked aimless motions
the transience of facts and our emotions.
A Luna, trailing behind her long ethereal
green gown, is encircled by the arrogant
royal purple of a lordly Imperial.
Alone in his cage, a nocturnal one-eyed giant,
the Polymorphous, clings,
red hate in eye-spots on its wings.
A wrinkled Cecropia, an outstretched velvet glove,
floats above
a tipsy, white and madly dancing Gypsy.
Now he takes one from its cage,
stills its final fluttering with some
cotton in a jar, and primly pins it to a page
with nothing yet written thereon. It lies inert,
unchangeable, beneath the eye-piece of his inspection,
judging head, thorax, abdomen: each complex section.
All facts are pinned down now without dispute.
All further inferences are rendered moot.
He writes his final measurements upon the page
without a moments hesitation.
Nor will the Judge who hears our years of petty litigation
grant any plea for further time or for amendment,
or delay one day his
Summary Judgment.

Neighborhood Legends

– an oral poem

You ask: Who are the childhood heroes of my dreams?
You mean, besides the skinny railsplitter, or the heavy hitter
who refused to play on his High Holy Day?
The one who walked a solitary trail sowing apple seeds
along his way?
Perhaps that lumberjack, with Babe, his blue ox on a rope,
performing mighty deeds
in Hemingway's country full of Swedes; or the keelboat man
in sailor's rig
doing an Irish jig upon each lurch and swell of the freight canal;
or Sam Patch
who ended with a curtain call into Niagara Falls; Houdini,
slipping jointless as an eel
from his container; or Joe Hill, the union man of steel?

The real legends of my neighborhood, who die
when the neighborhood dies,
were those we chose to speak about with awe,
twirling key chains on our corner
when Henry Horner was our Governor,
eating nickel hot dogs, mustard, heavy relish,
recounting feats that we'd embellish until they echoed up and
down our narrow streets . . .

(My memories grow old, dying embers in the cold.
I bend to breathe upon them now to cast a dim light on two
legends of my past.)

I. Whitey

Why does Eliot in *The Waste Land* never mention in his cycle of
death and resurrection
the season Fall, only Winter, Spring, and Summer? Then, to us,
no question could be dumber,
more ridiculous. Fall was wholly *sui generis*.
It meant only basketball.
In my gray November I remember—I know it cannot be—
every player's name was Whitey:

Whitey Segal, Whitey Rodman, Whitey Belzer, Whitey
Todmann.
Émigrés from the West Side shtettle,
tossed into part of Zangwill's kettle.
A tough and alien simian troupe, knuckles on the floor
without a stoop,
from dribbling all day beneath an alley's iron hoop.
When one bent to get the ball the frieze of his prayer shawl—
a "tzitzee"—would float free without immodesty from underneath
his jersey . . .
I remember, it was late December. The final minutes of play.
The score was close. Our bellicose cheer like graffiti
scrawled on walls
led by the GAA's pretty bloomed girls had just finished,
(reproduced here quite diminished, propriety debatable,
untranslatable):

"Aleph Mem, Aleph Mem
Aleph Mem koch tepple,
Yiskiddy boom; boom, yea paskudnyak!
Yea team!"

Then silence. The ump threw up the ball for center jump.
Tip to someone then to Whitey who took off down the floor.
A roar. He was at mid-court. His guard moved in and slipped.
He had a shot, he had a shot!
We waited for the pause, the mandatory pause that comes
between a hyphenated clause.
The predetermined hop and then full stop, the classic stance of
Phaedra's statues:
one swift glance, one foot advanced, one slightly bent, the ball
chest high
carefully balanced between the palms.

What constrains the boundaries of our soul?
What reins in our goal?
Like Icarus, disobedient, incandesced as he flew too near the
sun,
Whitey never stopped, he continued on his run,
dribbled twice and then he soared, he shot one handed, an
ascending then descending arc,
a challenge to the heavens as he scored.

As Leakey was to anthropology, Faraday his current,
Einstein formulating light would bend, the author of his own
hagiography
had done what none had done before—a one hand running score.
Witness to the shot that shook the world at Concord, that began
a war at Sarajevo,
we rushed toward our hero on the floor.
But the coach was there before.
One hand gripped Whitey's tzitzees, the other at his throat,
His voice an angry scream: "Out, out you lousy showboat.
You're finished on my team!"
We lost, of course:
History is without remorse . . .

‡ ‡

It is sixty years now since I stood on a corner in my
neighborhood,
At a long-forgotten spot, waving to my future with an imaginary
one hand running shot.
I am too quick to make excuse. I stumble when I stoop to tie my
shoes.
I am afraid. I pause, I stop, I set:
I fear falling through the net that waits for me.
Youth's truth is circumscribed. Yet will I try at my game's
ending, descending,
to raise my clenched fist to the sky?

II. Blacky

On a mountain trail above tree line,
huddled against the granite wall,
one step from the precipice
I hear a whispering call
from the blind and bottomless abyss.
A siren's song that bound Ulysses
to his black boat's furled sail,
the veiled Aeaeon queen
promises adventures such as none
has ever seen, beyond the human pale,
if I would only step beyond the line.
But my spirit's censor, companion of my years,

fears the fall.
I huddle closer to the wall.

1.

My neighborhood was bounded by Division Street and Grace,
names most apt, for beyond, our cerebral map
pictured only empty space: jungles, ocean, yellow sand
inhabited by a strange and fearsome race.

Admonished to avoid this alien band;
our father would repeat an ancient requiem:
“Don’t play with ’em, don’t go near ’em,
above all don’t annoy ’em. They are Gentiles, Goyim.
Stay on this side of Division Street.
They eat only fish on Friday; on Sunday when it’s quiet
they partake of some strange diet
beneath someone upon a Judgment Seat.
And they believe our phylactery of leather
tied to head and arms
is like an Indian’s feather
protecting us by its barbaric charms.”

Still, from this foreign nation
sometimes issued an invitation
to play softball in some graveled school yard.
We’d play till dark
ignoring paternal entreaty
to come home, protected by our treaty
while we played. But after dark
we fled back across the line in fear
followed by their raucous, mocking cheer:
“Hit ’em with the wood, Stasho,
he no can flew,” which linguists construe to
mean “Hit ’em with the bat, Stanley,
he no can get away.”

Blacky was not permitted on our team.
Skinny, bifocaled, wrapped in his own private dream
he would, we knew, like some unworldly novitiate
trapped in a run down race between first and second base,
sit down to contemplate his fate.

2.

His seat, a board upon the rattling radiator
in his room, he devoured books on aviators
and explorers, all that he could carry
from the Division Street library,
exploring oceans, soaring over pampas, sage,
the hidden contours of the world
unfurling underneath him page by page—
until Sir Richard Francis Burton,
Victorian explorer, diplomat in the service of the Raj
drew back the curtain
on his suicidal journey as a Haj.
A pilgrim to Mecca, his death the penalty for entry
he passed beneath the sentry
as an Afghan Pashtan, walked on
naked but for a white and seamless sheet.
Seven times he circled round the Ka'aba, the holy Great Black
Stone,
seven times Mt. Ararat, to atone
beneath the fiery desert heat
engulfed in a penitential human tide,
with Blacky turning pages at his side . . .
Was it then that Blacky heard
Cassandra's ancient message, her prefatory sign,
of inevitable loss and sorrow
one step beyond the line that is tomorrow?

3.

In an early morning downpour
in his torn sweater,
his lucky brimless fedora,
Blacky touched the fragment of the Torah
on the post of his front door,
crossed over Division Street,
and drifted in his stolen role
searching for an unknown goal. Dreamlike,
before him rose a Ka'aba, high black walls,
stained with rain and clinging soil,
guarded by a malevolent gargoyle.
Within, a sculpted Edenic couple
huddled near the wall,
looking up in supplication
after the Fall;

on a bird-stained pedestal
lay Michelangelo's Dying Gaul;
nearby, the Burghers of Calais,
bent, feet splayed, tied together
with a universal rope.
Seven times he circled this encampment
of long forgotten hope.

Then he wandered down empty alleys
through unknown streets toward a lustrous bulbous dome,
upon which the sun now shown its early morning light.
Alone, three Ganymedes caressing beads,
dressed in spotless white
prayed to wash away their sin.
Seven times around he followed.
Then he went within.
Amidst the flickering flares of candles
he saw upon a board
the man they called their Lord.
He sat in silent contemplation
of the visions he had seen
then stood
and crossed over to our neighborhood.

On a corner in our neighborhood
we listened to his story, uncomprehending,
thru the very ending
as though a tale from the Talmud
that only Blacky understood . . .

4.

In April, 1945, upon a shell-pocked plain
in Germany, near Nordhausen,
I wept.
My friend, a scout from a reconnaissance
battalion, said that he'd explain:

"You see, the crazy son-of-a-bitch,
our medic, jumped from out our ditch
to care for this poor German kid—
fourteen years old—but still our enemy,
screaming on the ground with pain.
He went way out beyond our line.

He stepped upon a mine.
And listen, not for the first time
did he pull this crazy stunt,
he was always out in front
beyond our line.”

‡ ‡

To me there will never be another.
Blacky was my brother.
Now a legend from our neighborhood.

A Statutorily Protected Class

I am a member of a statutorily protected class,
which I'm quite glad to be
if only by reason of my longevity.
I'm proud to be companionate
to horned owls and chickadees,
speckled finch and purple slate.
Each month I wait with bated breath
for my AARP edition
to determine my position on affairs of state:
prevention of threats against erosion
of my Social Security,
vacation of that witless law
that taxes my estate,
articles on how much can be paid
to children to qualify for Medicaid,
a new and innovative statutory assumption
which I'm advised will aid
in preventing job dismissal regardless of merit
thus avoiding the indignity of grin and bear it,
or how the absence of a marital deduction
may not lead to a net worth reduction
or any need to share it,
as a member of a statutorily protected class.

The Meme In Our Machine

– After reading Edward Rothstein’s review
of Robert Auger’s *The Electric Meme*,
New York Times, 8.3.02

Today I read a book
which opened up the door
to my understanding of the metaphor
which I had thought simply a comparison
of one thing with another.
But now I realize that I had just begun
the study of mimetics,
a faltering step into the kinetics
of cultural transmission
which by some mysterious manumission
of meme—
a cultural imitation of the gene—
becomes the “ghost in our evolutionary machine.”

Like all organisms that seek survival
memes are planted to assure arrival
in each member of our species
a belief in our beliefs by sheer mimesis.

But just as my loosening grip
upon this heuristic rope
begins to slip, I’m given hope.
An anthropologist offers to explain
what it would seem
happens deep within my brain.
The pulsing energy of the meme
explodes within the neuron.
Ignited by the match of our accepted truth,
like sparks from a small campfire
clustered in a pattern, they act as a tripwire
and inspire the nervous neurons to follow suit.
In a nanosecond there is a conflagration,
a specific sensation,
an emotion,
produced by this cultural custodian.

So those of you who may be Freudian
or wonder why each generation
rejects their parent's conflagration,
have no concern, no consternation,
you represent a cultural mutation.

Waiting

On my porch screen this morning—
a beautiful morning—
the frieze of evergreens in the forest before me,
a bug hung
upside down.

A strange bug, six striped and skinny legs
like jointed stilts extending from
it's thorax, its head bending
as though inquiring of me,
thin antenna moving feebly,
it's translucent wings enfolded in a "V."

When I rose to get a better view
and inhospitably blew cigar smoke
on it to see what
it would do,
I first saw the web
that held it by one leg.

How could this be?
Only yesterday I cleaned the gutter
with a broom
swept aside some silky filaments
above the window of my bedroom
watching as the heavy bodied spider
took refuge within the willow tree.

Yet today in a concentric circle
with intersecting strands
invisible in the morning sun
it had returned and spun
this unseen trap that spanned
four feet across the screen.

The insect's two dark dots of eyes
protruding from the sides
of its upended head
was motionless. It's legs

twitched in tentative movements of escape
entwining it more securely
within the trembling deadly tape.

Across the lawn the neighbor's cat
disappeared within its favorite wood pile,
three small white breasted Woodpeckers
tapped busily upon a wild cherry tree.
It was business as usual
beneath the depthless summer sky,
without a hint of amnesty while
we waited, this insect and I.

Uncle Sam and Ashcroft Want You!

I am a meter reader.
I walk the streets of the City in my uniform
submerged in the crowds that swarm about me,
while high above the gathering clouds
give warnings of conspiracy.

Wearing masks of friendship I am invited in
to crumbling basements, ancient tenements,
low rents, where within, none among
them speak our native tongue.
Rusted pipes crawl down each wall,
tentacles of octopi encircling all
within their moist embrace
as above me in the hall
these members of a dark and foreign race
silently listen as I crawl
through their claustrophobic space.

But, there is one I knew would understand
this danger to our beloved land.
John Ashcroft, whom I feared had gone soft
invited me today to join an elite troop
of mailmen, bus drivers, cablemen, a group
to search out each suspicious activity
that they might see
called "TIPS" the apt anachronism
for "Terrorist Information & Protection System."

I have my long sought role:
appointed soldier in our country's goal,
a cover impossible to discover,
TIPS number at my fingertips
ready to rip off their masks of false friendships.
Yet still at night I cannot sleep.
I hear their stirrings in the deep
as we graze above like placid sheep.

Unsolicited Manuscript

Alone, muttering in a private dialectic,
worn and grey as the books cluttering
the library table before him, he sits
in mute discourse, parsing the source
of religion, of culture and fable.

Each, he writes, mutates
along a predetermined course, a transient smear
upon the mirror of history,
shibboleths of each ruling class,
whether cave, kingdom, or nation-states.
Comrades in arms to lance of conquerors,
chariots, bowmen, swaying armored elephants,
riflemen, the blast of iron shells,
shamans, priests, the holy men
calling upon their deities
to cast protective spells.

But each society, he writes, regardless of
convictions, contains within it contradictions,
the seeds of its destruction,
until at last the proletariat
will rise up in rebellion
to construct, inevitably, the advent of utopia,
the wonder of classless society.

He stopped his hand upon the page.
Trembling with age, sick with despair
he bent within his chair.
Was he engaged in useless fiction
compelled by the addiction of poverty?

That morning in the Soho rain
the bailiff came, checked his clipsheet,
served a writ of ejectment,
and stored the goods upon the street.
His wife and four children wept.

Not more than several months before
he had lost his dear Franziska,
daughter with an elfin grin

fading to a smile of wonderment
as the light began to dim.
He borrowed money for her coffin.

And Guido, too, his son, that some
for poverty of better words
accused as “sacrifice to bourgeoisie misery.”

He could not go on.
He had finished but one chapter.
Beneath the dome of the Great Reading Room
he wrapped it in brown paper,
tied string around, and then went down
the broad stairs beneath heroic lions
guarding the Empire’s bookshelves,
crossed Museum Street,
walked in river mist to Fleet Street
to the office of the Great Publisher
where he dropped it in a basket.

The Great Publisher was proud
that he would never fail
to read each day’s incoming mail,
but as a matter of convenience
kept beside him a large basket
which he amusingly called his “Golden Casket,”
the last repose of some hopeful author’s tale.
He made short shrift of the daily invitations,
moved on to standard proclamations
of great books that would shake the world.
Then picked up a brown wrapped paper package,
whose strings had come untied
so that one could see inside
soiled pages in a crabbed and foreign script.

In accordance with the office protocol
some good soul had stamped upon it
“Unsolicited Manuscript.”
The amateur had left no return address.
The name was indistinct: he could only guess
it said “K. Marx” and that the
pompous title spelled “Das Kapital.”

He swivelled to his amusing basket
and dropped it in the Golden Casket.

Finish It!

Behind me each morning at a quarter to eight
my father glares down at my half eaten plate,
reminding me that just outside our gate
the starving masses are lying in wait.
And shouts "*Finish It!*"

Through the passing of years
it has rung in my ears.
Will nothing ever diminish it?

Spectral, he hangs over me
shouting the same litany:
"*Finish It!*"

If a hostess mixes cilantro with unpeeled pear
as I watch in the depths of culinary despair
at this gruesome growth upon my dish,
I hear his voice, I have no choice:
I Finish It!

When at the critical time I see
my girl stop and look up at me
with hesitant and tender smile
suggesting that I stop and wait awhile,
she does not understand:
I obey his shouted demand:
"*Finish It!*"

Even if I would stop this poem
resembling a peculiar palindrome,
fearful that it's sheer gibberish,
I hear his ethereal command,
his shouted reprimand:
"*Finish It!*"

Our Pear Trees

In my yard this Spring, the twin pear trees
have flowered again, thrusting up into
the sky like two arrows through my heart.
I don't remember when we planted them, or
if we marked their growth
outside our bedroom window
from where I watch alone, or
why, charged with our remembrances,
I lose myself among the strong white lovely flowers.

Requiem

I circled the circumference of the sun
that lit the woodland trail
I walked.

No more.

It flamed in one brief moment,
then consumed itself, its residue
two handfuls mingling with the earth
beneath the trees.

A Literary Guide to Advanced Legal Writing

The object of this writing class is clear:
It is how to instill fear,
to render your client
completely compliant
upon receipt of your long legal bill.

A skill that will enhance your vocation
is the art of careful obfuscation
to do with more than less that could appear.

Observe our renowned Chicago School's aims,
which vacillate between Ayn Rand and Jesse James,
and though you write in empathetic style
remember, the measure of man is mercantile.

Observe the interior monologue of James Joyce,
who took six hundred pages to log one day,
and that your time sheet, like the dance of Salomé,
is but precursor to the last act in the play
concluding with unveiling of a beautiful invoice.

But lest you think my scope is much too narrow,
and that I claim like Clarence Darrow
that true justice cannot be defined:
it can be refined just as I outlined
slicing through the fat to the marrow.

North Shore Channel

– for Captain Lew Rudnick

The canoe slides down the steep embankment
in Wilmette and rides the currentless canal.
Above, within the local Taj Mahal
tourists flock behind their docent.

Straw hatted women on an iron floor
of rusted locks stained with grease
speak Vietnamese, cast lines
to fish for carp along the shore.

The hum of Green Bay's traffic dies away.
A Great Blue Heron folds its legs
and soars along the water's blue runway,
above lagoon and crumbling quay.

Beneath loose planks and split crossbars
of an unused bridge, sumac, chokeberry,
willows, climb and filter rays
of golden sparks from distant cars.

Upon the branches of a fallen Poplar tree
a cormorant revolved its black reptilian head,
and watched as duck and goslings fled
in frightened and inverted "V."

Across the gunnel paddlers bow in slow duet
and shower liquid notes upon the topless tunnel's
water that pools about the black
and stilted legs of a snowy white Egret.

The current quickens, the channel bends.
At River Park the canoe descends
the outflow of the waterfall
where the River's North Branch ends.

Green frogs croak harp-like notes
from pulsing throats, a snapping turtle,
dispossessed, swims heavily away,
the raucous crows caw anecdotes.

At Henry Horner Park we pass
along the shore. A young Latino fisherman
holds high in triumph his catch,
a wiggling, small mouth bass.

At Addison, upon the River's heights
raccoons atop a garbage can
pause to watch our passage like
fur-coated bleacherites.

Lattice works of steps along
the shore climb down to wooden docks.
Beyond, are signs which warn "No Wake!"
the hurrying hum of City-Song.

Beneath a trunnel bridge at Courtland,
at Armitage the heritage of steel plants,
of tanneries, the wake of "six pack" barges,
the fork of steel-bound Goose Island,
where geese once honked a warning
of aliens in their midst.

The low-slung East Bank Club lies to port.
In leotards they emulate its architecture.
In military grandeur where River's Branch's meet
the Mart looms as the City's fort.

The early sun sparkles from glass towers,
the Blue Line runs along its elevated way,
speedboat waves ricochet from steel pilings.
We fix to the dock, held by our uncharted hours.

Tamms

*– A feared prison in Southern Illinois
to which transfer is used both as punishment
and threat.*

Beneath beautiful and spacious skies,
below amber waves of grain,
lies an Indian, white, and black man's
burial ground, deep within the fruited plain.

A concrete Purgatory where men abide
who have not yet died,
without a name, upon bowed head
the mark of Cain,
alone, they toll the endless hours
upon a faceless clock.

Hear only the murmur
of armored men,
feel only the grip of encased hands
as though upon the Leper's flesh,
see only the eye within the aperture.

On visitor's day the Curators display
this alien species within a glass-screened lair,
feet enchained within the floor,
hands bound in parody of prayer.

"Ne Exeat" is signed on doors of this Perdition,
no sign for amnesty nor for parole,
only death or time or Judas-like contrition
that we demand to cleanse the soul.

America, America, who sheds his grace on thee
who knows no good,
no brotherhood,
within this hidden reliquiae.

90 Days

Get in he said so I lay down in
a foxhole dug by a guy I'd never know,
maybe the one that I'd replaced
before he used it for his coffin.

The Master Sergeant looked down at me
and said stay down, don't get up to pee,
and walked away, lit by the tracery
of flames from 105s that shook
the mud enfolding me.

The mud of Belgium or of Germany?
Who knows? I'd come up at night,
climbed off the truck in rain.
Someone tossed me a blanket.
No one asked my name.

A guy at the repple depple
walking with a crutch, explained
that if I made it through for 90 days
then it might be worthwhile
for someone to learn my name, or try.

Maybe even buddy up
because I possessed some of the luck
doled out in short supply.

I did my time. I even saw "Private Ryan."
But when you talk to me of camaraderie,
I count those 90 days.

A Corner Man's Advice To His Son On His Engagement

When your opponent comes out pushing hard
as though the last round in the fight upon the card,
breathe deep, back off, and then
do the rope-a-dope,
put your back up against the rope
and count to 10.

Remember, there ain't no referee,
as Wordsworth said, the referee is Thee.
Don't expect a bell
to sound the knell
of this round or any other.

Keep your right above your jaw to guard
against a hook, a feint, or stab,
shift your weight and jab—
but not too hard.
Don't hit below the belt
or kidney punch,
call time out for lunch
and then resume.
But don't draw blood,
don't try to wound.

Keep the salve of your affection handy
to slow the flow from cuts of pain,
it ain't the time or place
to assert your manly traits.
So go for the draw, no win,
remember how it would have been:
your loss, my loss, if she had refused to enter in
the diadem of life encircled by your ring.

* A corner man ministers to a boxer between rounds
(see F.X. O'Toole, "Rope Burns").

Draft of Lease

*– written to opposing counsel whose client
(a theater group), insisted on terms for a lease of
performance space departing from a prior letter of intent*

Three years the writers worked upon the script
with collaborative invention, finally content
that what it said
expressed their clear intention.

What the writers failed to see
after public hosannas, is that after
Acts One and Two
someone else would write Act Three.

A new producer skimmed through each page
and announced “this thing won’t play on stage.
For a start let’s change these parts, omit
these troublesome lines.
Its what we call in architecture
a total redesign.”

But one writers’ group objected to
this different manuscript,
saying perhaps the curtain should come down
before its gone up,
unless this new producer
sticks to the agreed script.

The Lease

*– On delivering the Woman’s Library Club
of Glencoe lease to Writers Theatre*

Like an organism that in a frenzy feeds upon itself
and needs no food from fridge or shelf
but multiplies by parthenogenesis,
a Collective Memo menaces
the sickly phrase, the legal blunder,
tearing each asunder
as it uncoils along its paginated way.

One can only stop this fearful feeding
by a document which on close reading
is impregnable, filled with so many definitions,
counter-admonitions, charming circumlocutions
requiring locks upon the washroom, keys for every door,
until, as a famous fighter prayed,
“Please, no mas, no more.”

For here, dear counterpart,
is the product of our mutual art
for signature.
A lease that may endure
in the history of war
with Thermopylae, with Ilium and Troy
acclaiming the heroic feats
of Halberstam and Homer,
of Nagelberg and Adams,
of Jim and Peg Malloy.

Come With Me

again and stand
above the sea's promontory
Turn face about and touch my hand,
take all my love and still the glory.
Comet and comet's fire a moment race
ahead. The holy fire burned your face
but it soon died.
Dissatisfied,
you ran
retracing footsteps on the strand.
The waves washed on . . .
Driftwood rides the foam,
a cork-like pine comb,
belly-up perch, sick yellow-white
it rolls,
and dips from sight.

April Storm

The early April storm is coming near.
Last drifts of March's snow
begin to disappear
within the muddy forest floor.
The impatient wind strums bass notes
upon the naked limbs
of lofty, leafless oaks
waving spectral fingers as the score
enfolds the strings of sycamore
and juniper below in rising pitch.
The castanet of rain begins, small rivulets
begin to pond along the ditch
that I had dug another life before
to mark the boundary of my yard,
circumference of my soul,
now empty of my children's play,
and she who'd stroll with me
at the end of each work day
in wonderment of sudden life
released from winter's tyranny.

Imperium: Old Men at War

Old men like me
tie yellow ribbons to a tree
to clot the seep of memory,
a tourniquet
to hold within
that which is not but once has been:
the imperial glory of each vignette.

I sway within the howdah of my Humvee,
hurdle highest hedges of Normandy,
sing of the roses of Picardy,
stand highest in the trench at Chateau Thierry.

Come: time is but the interval suspending fate.
Come: I can no longer wait.
Let us ride together into eternity.

Managua, Nicaragua 1990

The Stage Manager advances to the lip
of the deep proscenium,
stares at the script,
and in voiceless eloquence
beckons us, two tourists, his only audience.
He draws the bullet-torn curtain above the ruined tableau
of crazily decanted buildings of the Central Zocalo.

Front walls sheared off, a hundred hive-like cells
are set with cooking stove, strung hammock, a family that
dwells
beneath a single pulsing bulb that's tied
to the artery of the stolen line outside
where rivulets and trenches of communal open sewers
democratically mingle feces in stinking embouchures.

Sandinista signs of victory still bleed
from knife cut walls, still plead "Defenda la Revolucion,"
"viva Daniel,"
and "Viva Violetta." The great cathedral's shell
lies buried in the baking sand,
wind-devils stalk the living across this lunar land.

A bare-chested statue of a worker raises high
a bandolier and Uzi against the cloudless sky,
a pick raised in the other hand above a bird-stained plaque
announcing the prescription for an aphrodisiac:
"Only workers and peasants shall ascend
along the path until its glorious end."

At the pyramidal Intercontinental across the road, new
communards
alight from chauffeured cars to sign the aide-memoirs
prepared by black-suited men and bureaucrats
dissecting the body politic with checks and charts and stats.

Above a kneeling angel Ruben Dario
stands at the place upon the Zocalo
where poets who made the revolution
marched to the Palacio Nacional.
Stone arms held by an unseen cross

embrace us, stone eyes weep for our loss:

**“Donde Esta Cristo?
Porque no ha llegado?
Nos ha Olvidado?”**

The Tear-Down

An invisible line is drawn in sand. Beyond,
you enter deeded sacred ground,
my quarter acre platted lot, my sine qua non,
my metaphor, my poem, my triple mortgaged home.

When my friendly neighbor served his short petition
politely warning me of impending demolition
of his tidy home that looks the same
as every other in my subdivision,

I dreamt the monster that I dread
slithered to the line of my homestead
higher than the wall that split Berlin
swallowing light and sun and oxygen.

I knew the endgame of the chess game had begun,
the legal clock that marked my move had almost run.

But in the wings strumming Stradivarius
my neighboring nimble consiglieres
began their music protecting my abode,
their lovely fiddling with our local Zoning Code.

Close behind came architectural acrobats
hurling symbols, drawing charts and tossing stats
dedicated to preserving whomever they are serving
whether deco or provincial or aesthetically ersatz.

Then as required in Grecian tragedies,
whether Euripides or P.Homer or Sophocles,
a chorus of my neighbors prayed to Zeus
(though a group confused the God with Dr. Suess)
beseeching manumission from the Preservation Commission
or at least a temporary legal truce.

We sought the intervention of the oracles at Village Hall
upon whom the Gods of Mt. Olympus had graciously bestowed
the Kabbalistic mysteries and complex protocol
of prophesying destiny from the Preservation Code.

They heard our mournful prayers and sighed

and here's the course of conduct the Chief Oracle prescribed:

"Abandon rhyme or rhythm here, abandon artful prosody.
Like Islamic scholars in maddrassas, retain in memory
the definitions that we teach. Now repeat each after me.
If emotionally and angrily, the meanings secondary.

A residential zone's exclusionary
whether one's alive or in the cemetery,
separating homes and tombstones of the masses,
by income, wealth, and artful classes.

Zoning-speak is sui generis. Only those who're able
to interpret the Rosetta Stone of symbol, chart and table
have standing to speak here. Are you able to explain
the beginning point of set-back plane,
or "FAR" or "GFA," the mean between the roof and gable,
the way to find the doorway of a corner lot,
whether an appurtenance includes a chimney pot,
whether you may reproduce a non-conforming use?
We cordially suggest that you excuse
yourselves and retire to the public foyer
and then come back with a zoning lawyer."

Some several weeks have passed, our street is quiet.
The house still stands.
We hope that someone else will buy it.

