

RICHARD S. BANK

Commonwealth v. Wright
317 A.2nd 271

– for Charles Reznikoff

A few days before the incident
Lorraine, age thirteen,
had come to Mrs. Fanning's apartment
in the middle of the night
with her brothers and sisters still in bedclothes,
explaining that the appellant had attempted
some sort of sexual contact.

On the night in question
the other children ran outside to call 911
but none of them had a quarter,
they returned and watched from the street
as Lorraine stood out on the four story ledge
calling for her brother David.

Russell Wright was leaning out
from an adjacent window swinging his arms.
Lorraine lost her balance and fell
to her death.

End of an Era

*Publisher Commerce Clearing House
sold to Dutch concern for 1.9 billion.*

– Newspaper Headline

I remember you in the solemn stacks, oh CCH;
wrestled with your cold vinyl bindings
when I was the angel headed hipster
abandoning beatitude for love and war
with an agonizing slowness.

Soon you will be gone to the low country
where the ganja still is best they say,
this side of Kathmandu, Kabul, Cali
or even Chester County gold
in what seems like just a breath of time ago.

The ones who refused induction
changed to witnesses with hapless tales
and I, who was the longhair then
now attend reunions well spoken, grave and thin,
“my collar mounting firmly to the chin.”

Tourists walk the market at Pleiku.
The old bones groan and settle, empty.
How much the path we take depends
on who we are and not the race we ran.
The child is truly father to the man.

PDPOM #102

– *Francis X*

Kicked out of the house by a restraining order, you lived with friends,
Went to work in a haze, hung out at the bar, disoriented and confused.

In your demented mind, going home drunk at 1:00 AM to get some
clothes
And talk seemed like a good idea, perhaps sudden forgiveness.

Your half-awake teenage daughter opens the door, sleepy and confused,
Smiles shyly through her braces and says “Hello, daddy.”

At this, all of the sadness and terror of the loneliness of the world
Washes over you like a wave sweeping sailors off of a ship in high seas.

You push your way in and chase them all out into the neutral night,
Set the couch ablaze and with your hunting bow in hand, prepare for
martyrdom.

The cops and firemen mill around behind the safety of their trucks, the
negotiator talks
Through a bullhorn, the neighbors are evacuated in the glare of TV
lights.

You trade arrows for cigarettes until they are all gone; the entry takes
you by surprise,
Diversion grenades explode, you flail with a knife and still, still nobody
shoots.

Beanbags and pepper spray finally bring you down, they chain you hand
and foot
And haul you off; you shuffle along meekly like a compliant child.

One cop bags his cut radio cord for evidence, the firemen rush in; acrid
smoke,
Hissing steam and the wail of sirens fade into oblivion as the van drives
off.

Six months later and still in the prison hospital, we discuss a guilty plea.
I describe the lexan SWAT shield arrow-pierced like St. Sebastian.

There are photos of your gutted living room, where once things made sense.

You nod your expressionless, medicated head and agree.

You will be content with whatever sentence comes, as unafraid
As any other man who has stood at the precipice at the end of love.

PDPOM #21

– Harold and Jamar

Harold and Jamar, ages ten and twelve,
cut school, walked the west Philly streets
full of sounds and smells and strange
apparitions, crunching delightedly
on the fallen bark of the great Sycamores.

They went happily to see your pit bull pups;
unconcerned, eager for the narrow chance
of a windfall, something to love,
not seeing what almost anyone would know.

You took them to the abandoned house
where you had made a private space;
had a hotplate on bootleg electric,
two mattresses stacked like pancakes and
a kinte cloth on the Victorian hardwood floor.

When you had spent yourself, you tied them up
in a delirium and left somehow. They wriggled free,
ran home dirty and hysterical with their tale of terror
spilled out to mothers, grim cops and DAs.

Next to me in a panic in the courtroom
you call them liars. As the two embarrassed
boys pour out their shameful story
despite the stern white judge, I hide
that you refuse to show remorse.

For years you wrote to me from the prison,
drew 666 in the margins, traced your hand
across the yellow foolscap from the law clinic.
The text spoke of Jesus and the Devil. Angels
whispered to you in the hole, wrestled with
Demons for the prize of your immortal soul.

The letters denied each charge meticulously,
point by point, as if it were yesterday.
I never replied, sure that you would forget
us all in time. I keep those letters still,
in the back of an unused file drawer.

In re Grand Jury Matter 87-759

– for Linda Backiel

I put aside the weekend business,
took the winter morning
and visited at the county jail.

The prisoner, some strange creature,
a puzzle to them all
and I, another curiosity
adding my name in ballpoint
to the notables who had come before.

The journey was pristine,
too much so for its purpose;
as if the pleasures of the day
would not be silenced either.

The swirl of birds
over the stubble of winter cornfields
promised new birth,
as did the fat white barns of Bucks,
gleaming with bounty and shiny trucks.

I had forgotten
the agrarian ways of America.
I had forgotten
the simple desire
for belonging,
for commerce and its tranquility.

Later I learned
that I was a twilight tiger;
Prufrock
in the gloomy courthouse corridor
waiting as my beard turned gray.

Backpacking after Long Absence on the Appalachian Trail

The healing mist which colors the skyline blue washed pewter
from the human highway passes like spirits, makes it seem
as if we were emerging from the light, reborn, relieved
and moving like Pilgrims toward a certain end.

Each morning we awake to the gray slate of cold ash,
set out again with our store of powdered soups, pasta
and mismatched plastic bottles filled at springs
and protruding at all angles from the netting in our packs.

The trail is burnt green earth, like living tissue,
loping along the ridges and through the gaps.
Yellow box turtles from the Pleistocene ignore us.
Snakes, elegant in retreat, disappear into the ghost leaves
of the Sassafras; the through hiker with his dog,
the scented air, the distant hawk which sees what we do not.

The forest breathes and stretches, some nights I hear it sigh.
Heaved rock under the growing roots groan imperceptibly,
adding and subtracting as the tectonic plates command.
The fauna shifts in number as the need demands,
the seasons process nutrients in the busy soil
and all is more or less in balance.

There is no death in nature, only a changing.
The downed red oak that blocks our progress now
will be humus in its turn, feeding both the deer and
the scarlet Teaberry that beckons from the underbrush.

This reveals where we are in the universe,
The hominid pacing fitfully, dimly aware
that there is something grounded, inexplicable
within the heart's unexplored core.

Opposites

Assume that we are older poets,
constrained by dead and rigid form;
watching the young ones read,
attempt to imbibe Bukowski's muse.

Watch them drink too much beer,
proud as heroes of the Marne;
try to parse truth's particulate
from within the anomie of their lives.

What can we learn from this?
What can we learn from his life
of melancholy, desperation and despair?
What did he lack that we Burghers do not?

Simple enough—he was missing love.
Romantic love, platonic love, familial love;
all of them, all of them.
What then was left to him?

Simple again, oblivion—
which is waiting for us all;
the root fear of theology,
the terror of unfinished lives.

Drink up young poets, drink up.
Soon enough you will discover it,
that single opposite of all these loves.
Not hate, pain, betrayal, loss.

Something more profound and certain,
oblivion's earthly sister/twin,
Indifference.

Walking to the Train on a Snowy Morning

Whose street this is I think I know.
They sleep in now on snow days though
And will not see me stopping here
To watch the way fill up with snow.

My two old cats, they think it queer
That icy winds have come so near
And made the lawn a frozen lake
This major blizzard of the year.

When I left home they gave a shake
As if there had been some mistake.
The only other sounds the sweep
Of cold wet wind and stinging flake.

The streets are quiet, pale and deep.
I too have promises to keep
And work to do before I sleep,
And work to do before I sleep.

Becoming Part of it

*The mountains, I become part of it
The herbs, the fir tree, I become part of it.
The morning mists, the clouds, the gathering waters,
I become part of it.*

– Navajo Chant

I am out of breath, sprawled on my back on a wet stone
by the frigid bank of a nameless creek, swollen with snowmelt.

The roar drives my red blood, cold moss glows emerald,
translucent leaves of aspen offer shade, the green fuse is everywhere.

“Mr. Bank, are you OK?” a voice calls from the trail.
I’m listening to the creek” I reply, “I’ll catch up.”

Coming late into the busy camp, I drop my pack and rest again.
It reminds me how the forest is patient, out waits its passagers.

Tonight, under the blue black sky, we will eat our fill,
The boys will return to their patrols weary with the days march.

I will lay supine; the Milky Way will fill the moonless night,
the nocturnal world, the spirits that whisper in the ancient trees.

– *Hickory Run State Park*
May, 2003