

## DAVID BRISTOL

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### In Memory of Mr. Vanderbilt

When I bought my first yacht  
I knew I was leaving something behind.  
I learned  
I would go into hock for pleasure.

Now,  
I stand by idle,  
facing the heat,  
and my own indulgence.

This indulgence is paid gladly.  
It allows a glimpse of the future.  
I am a happy old man.

## Proposition for Henry

“At a time when Berryman was working on the novel ‘Recovery,’ on a life of Shakespeare, and a life of Christ, as well as continuing with other poems . . . .”

– John Haffenden, “Introduction,” to John Berryman, *Henry’s Fate & Other Poems, 1967-1972* (1977)

He believed his time spent unwisely,  
could do something with the day  
undriven by rage among books,  
real work would earn no need to forget,  
not a drink.  
And he would be entitled to retire, not escape,  
into her cave.

Working tables, a waiter  
comes home on tired feet to count the change,  
an easy estimation of the day.  
A dreamer’s coins are in the air, unmeasurable,  
while he stakes a claim.

Christ and Shakespeare and no drinking too,  
too trying.  
What to do?  
Hum to stay sane, a tune true to him only  
in tones too close, he needs them removed,  
it would more than tire.

Be a good son and pay bills,  
make himself up true to his image  
before brushing teeth  
and then sleep well to be refreshed,  
punctually.

He wanted to be dragged to Maine  
into a sea so cold his calves would numb,  
and his study isn’t.

The time would be his to kill  
with one hand while another hand  
holds his wife's or daughter's  
holding him steady to take pleasure  
so simple and stupid, his toes in the sand.  
It would be water from a spring  
that he could easy drink.

To be satisfied with the pace is the key  
to all that may pass—work and love,  
the inescapably grim swallowing us like grapes,  
pleased or not, then washed away.  
Hard to indulge in wasted days,  
hours in sleep, weeks on vacation.

But waste he needed,  
spend on the frills,  
to see himself in the mirror  
freshened, tidy and expansive.  
Sharing Rice Krispies with his girl,  
the milk too enjoyed,  
while wearing short pants in the morning sun.  
Anxious to keep all nagging from his stomach  
and work away,  
that he might know himself  
in a climate not of his own creation.

The meaning of a life,  
even as inspired as Christ or Shakespeare,  
could shrink in an afternoon's passing.  
On a beach, he too seen is less  
in these efforts reflected  
and so richer still  
unburdened on the sand.  
The cure that he wants is  
in the palm's smooth skin  
pressed out against a fleshy thumb.  
Remember one had feeling good against another,  
a memento through the day  
he'll keep.  
Something will come.

Stay dry,  
avoid confusing the hopes of his high ambition,  
record the lives of the Bard  
and the Son of God.  
His dream on the beach  
napping beneath an umbrella  
while his child plays, wife reads.  
Sleeping well and today insensitive to them.  
Relax with the distraction of a home desired,  
constant but unthreatening.  
He wouldn't be perfect,  
just not drink  
and be satisfied enough  
to be free from escape.  
Daughter, wife, job and vanity,  
the mere presence would nag he fears.  
But not now disrupting his stride  
heading off,  
the cause moves outside himself.  
Dedicated and lost,  
polite and natural to drink to a cause  
if it's not you.

All he wants is to show  
that he has a mind.

Much anger he wanted to lose,  
to drown.  
Let it sit rocking on a porch  
while he plays with his kid  
in the driveway under the gaze of all,  
her large ball slowly bouncing  
to refresh his sense of wonder.

The lack of trust in his simple hands  
left idle fingers, free to drink  
and him to follow.

Now, there is his girl  
part him  
and her mother.  
Getting together and making a universe  
is a distraction

and everything, dancing before him  
unintentional from deep within,  
is unmuzzled, rich.  
No work to seek  
would equal rewards in domestic tasks.  
What is the standard  
for accidental renewal?  
Never too rich to doubt the urge to wake,  
move, blundering around until  
in his hand is a child's soft curl.  
Miss this and throw in the towel—  
lessons of the Bible and the plays, lost.

Now, he finally eased off himself, and still  
he wanted to be fetching something,  
hands for grabbing, unused, made him feel a fop.  
Wanted to carry it off in his teeth,  
a rose or a carcass part,  
and witness ambiguity pulled together,  
claimed as his.

Could that be on the mirror of the page  
with Papa and the other brothers haunting?  
To be what he is—  
he who records on paper  
the notions of the soul he wanted to be—  
is what he makes on the table that day  
and always unsure.  
A day off and become nobody  
or a hack coasting.

Work and work,  
squeeze it out, try a little scholarship,  
then satisfied, relaxed and impulse imagined,  
“I drink, a proud toast,  
free and sleepy.”  
Off the wagon into losing habits and fuckt again.

Rage drained into books,  
vain monuments to pain and accident.  
He could take his girl to buy saddle shoes,  
brown and white, her feet in them solid.  
Make a little joke in the store,  
trust the salesman

and the untrained eye of the Papa.  
So, boxed and free,  
he would not make himself the story.

## **To Flower**

Too hot and without sun, June begins.  
He hates the office,  
he doubts he will ever laugh, so sleepy.  
The sweat running onto his glasses  
drives him crazy.  
He wanted to kick a dog.

What to do with anger  
when the good children have ruined the tulips?  
A week at the beach is unappealing.  
If he could flee, he'd have a hobby.

No vacation genes  
and he can't get a transfusion.  
Now, on his knees  
he pries weeds out of a modest plot,  
turning over the soil and sweating.  
Fighting the natural course of things is a pleasure.

## **Balance**

Yet, another poem about the checkbook  
possessed him—  
a life of recording desire and obligation  
expressed in dollars,  
noted with a pencil point.

Locate the hope in this counting?  
By the window or by the wall—  
know for certain, you too can be a CPA—  
unsure, keep counting.

What's the equation for joy,  
the relief of sorrow,  
to be happy looking inward  
and unhungry?  
We're told a mind should grow beyond the checkbook  
without concern for the gas bill.  
And we're told to be of this world.



## **Columbia Station**

I give hours of thought to kicking the poetry habit. It's a drag sitting in unfriendly bars listening to songs of the plunging arrow. With artists I want to talk business, and with bankers I expose the heart of a frightened puritan. This confusion is alarming, and the politics—so heavy. I have to ask who I am. I must order beer too, and leave a tip. But still, like a moth at a garden party, I am here singeing my wings on candles I imagine to be the sun.

## **Judgment at Lums**

I thought I was surrounded by penguins,  
and that was interesting. But the issues  
are deeper than that. Less interesting  
than penguins, but more compelling, the  
question: Is it enough to be an attorney?  
I wake up thinking today I will fly the coop,  
buy 16% junk bonds, replace a BB gun, invest  
in land, today daddy will win the lottery.  
This dwarfs me. I forget the cool posture  
which I gather watching the arms of the fat  
lady in the booth. They are penguins and seals,  
and that's cute but without a future.

**I Put My Two Fingers, Pound And Whitman,  
Into A Wall Socket**

I will confess to anything that works  
long suffering,  
easy profit,  
exploitation of any and all souls.

At the root is desire  
for a harmony which  
no simple purity can offer.

Besides confession is good for the soul.  
So here it is  
my bucket of heartfelt passion  
like an urn twisting slowly  
on a lazy-susan,

and all I ask  
is a dollar  
for shoveling snow.

## **The Weeper**

I want a maid and a bookkeeper  
business agent  
and someone to take out the garbage  
before I become a rock n' roll star.

Oh, mother  
forgive this limited mythology  
of myself  
which turns like a jealous aid-de-camp  
on all my intentions;  
put me down for an hysterical nap.

Daddy, do these odd jobs,  
end my petty flops  
I suffer so in your cloud,  
empty your pockets and  
give me your calendar.