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Angatealuntigror

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ōſ thonn
Chprar o. w ?

JOHN THOMAS

Selected Poems

A CRITICAL READING EDITION

EXTREMES AND MODERATIONS:
EARLY SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA POETRY

A TEXT-TECH PAPERS PROJECT

Extremes and Moderations

Early Southern California Poetry

Extremes and Moderations is a Text-Tech Papers project devoted to recovering poetry written, published, and circulated in Los Angeles and Southern California. Each volume brings neglected books and poems back into view through carefully prepared texts, archival images, biographical context, and a clear record of the surviving sources.

Edited by Brian Kim Stefans

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John Thomas

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ARCHIVAL IMAGES

A short visual record



John Thomas at work, from *Abandoned Latitudes* (1983).

Epopœia and the Decay of Satire

John Thomas

Title page of Epopoeia and the Decay of Satire, Red Hill Press, 1976.



Cover of *The Ghosts of Venice West*, the 1994 collaboration with Philomene Long.

INTRODUCTION

John Thomas and the difficult poem

John Thomas—born John Thomas Idlet—made his life at the unruly edge of several worlds: a Baltimore Catholic childhood, Air Force cryptography, Ezra Pound’s correspondence circle, the Gas House and Venice West, Los Angeles little magazines, Zen practice, jail, and the Ellison apartment he shared with the poet Philomene Long. Friends remembered the force of his conversation and his refusal of easy praise; younger writers including Wanda Coleman, Paul Vangelisti, Neeli Cherkovski, and RD Armstrong treated him as a severe but essential reader. His poems could be blunt narratives, satirical portraits, broken maps, devotional arguments, or fields of language scattered across the page. That range is clearest in *Epopoeia and the Decay of Satire*, the 1976 Red Hill Press book at the center of this edition; in the book-length prose poem from Patagonia; and in the late Venice and Zen poems written after Long helped return him to sustained work. The record also contains damage that cannot be made decorative: Thomas pleaded no contest in a case involving sexual contact with his fifteen-year-old daughter and later wrote, “I do not forgive myself.” His final incarceration ended amid documented abuse and medical neglect; both facts belong to an honest account of the life. This edition follows the original order and wording of the available books and magazine witnesses, restores a few words lost at the gutter of the surviving scan, and preserves the poems’ spatial logic while allowing necessary page continuations.

Editorial scope

This is a selected, not a collected, edition. It includes the complete text of *Epopoeia and the Decay of Satire*, the complete prose poem from Patagonia, and all separately attributable poems in the available primary periodical, *The Ghosts of Venice West*, and *Great Zen Masters & Other Holy Fools* witnesses. Prose narratives such as “The Water Wheel” and “The Holy Fool” are documented but excluded from the reading text.

The 1976 book survives here in a complete but imperfectly photographed library copy: several leaves lose a few characters at the gutter. Secure readings have been restored where grammar and continuation make them unambiguous. Remaining losses are marked by a compact editorial lacuna, [...], and itemized in the textual note. Spatial poems were reset as spatial poems; their indents and countervoices are preserved proportionally within the narrower six-by-nine-inch page, with continuations used instead of reduced type.

BIOGRAPHY

John Thomas Idlet, 1930–2002

Baltimore, school, and the Air Force

John Thomas Idlet was born in Baltimore on December 31, 1930. He grew up in a Catholic city whose speech, institutions, working neighborhoods, and family histories stayed active in his writing long after he moved west. He attended Loyola College in Baltimore. During service in the United States Air Force he trained and worked as a cryptographer near San Antonio, an experience that joined secrecy, language, coded systems, and institutional discipline in ways that later poems repeatedly worry at.

While still a young serviceman he began corresponding with Ezra Pound and visited him during Pound's confinement at St. Elizabeths Hospital. Thomas never became a simple Pound disciple: the encounter mattered as a model of uncompromising attention to language, but Pound's politics and prejudices also entered Thomas's poems as material for argument and uneasy comedy. "The Squirrels," for example, remembers both the attraction of the elder poet and the poison in his antisemitic obsessions.

Family, rupture, and Venice West

Thomas married young and became a father. His daughter Gabrielle Idlet's later account, along with testimony preserved by his daughter Susan, makes clear that the move into bohemian literary life was also an abandonment experienced by his family. In 1959, after reading Lawrence Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians*, he left for Venice, California. There he cooked and managed at the Gas House and entered the community gathered around Stuart Perkoff, Taylor Mead, Tony Scibella, Bruce Boyd, and other writers, artists, actors, and drifters associated with Venice West.

Perkoff became a crucial friend and interlocutor. Thomas in turn became known as an exacting reader: funny, theatrical, combative, capable of cutting

vanity to pieces, but also able to give younger poets a seriousness they did not find elsewhere. Paul Vangelisti, Wanda Coleman, Neeli Cherkovski, Fred Dewey, Scott Wannberg, and RD Armstrong are among those who recorded his force as a mentor or presence. The Gas House, little magazines, public readings, and the informal economy of Venice supplied not merely local color but a testing ground for his suspicion of literary careerism.

The early books

Red Hill Press issued John Thomas in 1972 in an edition of 405 copies; it opens with “Essay on Truth or Rock-and-Roll Revealed.” *Cinq: Four Poems*, made with Paul Vangelisti, followed in 1974, and *Il vecchio Stravinsky prova con orchestra* appeared in Turin in 1975. These publications established a body of work that moves between discursive narrative, grotesque portraiture, religious and philosophical reference, and a page used as visual field.

Epopoeia and the Decay of Satire appeared from Red Hill Press in 1976 with an introduction by Vangelisti and support from the National Endowment for the Arts. It is Thomas’s most substantial available early book. Its forms range from the long-lined prose pressure of “The Day of the Funeral” to the scattered countervoices of “All Your Daddy’s People Were from Kansas and Oklahoma,” the broken visual bodies of “Still Life One” and “Old Man Stravinsky Rehearsing with Orchestra,” and the three-part devotional struggle of “Apologia.” *Six Poets* followed from Vagabond Press in 1979.

Prose, collaboration, and the Ellison

Thomas never confined himself to lineated verse. *Abandoned Latitudes* (1983) opens his contribution under the full title from Patagonia, a sustained prose poem assembled from travel fantasy, quotations, notebook fragments, jokes, erotic material, and mock ethnography. The complete published text is included in this edition as poetry in prose. Stories such as “The Water Wheel” circulated separately in periodicals, while the posthumously collected *Bukowski in the Bathtub* preserves part of Thomas’s oral world; those prose narratives are documented but not silently recategorized as poems.

Thomas met Philomene Long at a 1983 reading in the old Venice jail. She became his fourth wife, closest late collaborator, and—by his own account—the person who restored his poetic voice. They lived as semi-hermits

in apartment 31 of the Ellison building at 15 Paloma Avenue. *The Book of Sleep* (1991) and *The Ghosts of Venice West* (1994) made marriage, the Ellison, and the vanished Venice circle into a shared imaginative geography. The individual authorship labels in those books allow Thomas's poems to be separated without erasing the collaborative frame; "White Petal Transmission" remains credited jointly.

Crime, responsibility, and family testimony

Any full biography must hold Thomas's literary influence beside the harm recorded by his family. He pleaded no contest in a case involving sexual contact with his fifteen-year-old daughter. Gabrielle Idlet's account refuses the protective simplifications of literary legend and describes the consequences within the family. Thomas himself later wrote, "I do not forgive myself." The legal fact, the daughter's testimony, and his statement of responsibility should not be converted either into exoneration or into a single explanation for every work he wrote.

The surviving record is unusually polyphonic. Relatives write from the position of those who lived with abandonment and abuse; friends recall loyalty, humor, intimidation, discipline, and artistic generosity; collaborators record a late domestic and spiritual partnership. Their accounts do not collapse into one portrait. Read together, they show why Thomas remains both important to the history of Los Angeles poetry and impossible to present as an uncomplicated bohemian hero.

Late work and death

RD Armstrong published *Feeding the Animal* around 2000–2001 with an introduction by Scott Wannberg. The title names Thomas's sense of art as bodily appetite and daily obligation. Recordings made with Long and Bukowski, including *Our Life: The One Secret That Surprises Death* (2002), extend the work into performance and conversation. *Great Zen Masters & Other Holy Fools* appeared posthumously in 2004; its poems turn Zen transmission into junkie directions, supermarket errands, jokes, elegies, and cavernous meditations rather than pious instruction.

Thomas died on March 29, 2002, at Los Angeles County–USC Medical Center after incarceration in the Los Angeles County jail system. Evidence

developed in *Long v. County of Los Angeles* described abuse and failures of medical care. The Ninth Circuit litigation and later settlement made his death part of a broader public record of custodial neglect. It is necessary to state both that he was incarcerated after serious harm and that incarceration did not erase his right to humane treatment.

Afterlife and archives

The *Selected Poems and Prose of John Thomas* appeared from Raven Productions in 2011. Manuscripts, correspondence, recordings, little-magazine appearances, and testimony by relatives and friends remain dispersed among institutional collections, private holdings, and online archives. The present volume is therefore selected rather than collected: it resets every poem available in the project's primary book and periodical witnesses, including the prose poem from Patagonia, but it does not claim to replace the scarce 1972 book, *Feeding the Animal*, or the 2011 selection.

Thomas's lasting subject is not simply Venice West. His poems test how myths harden, how artists turn suffering into status, how memory edits guilt, how spiritual teachers become comic bodies, and how the spatial arrangement of words can carry competing voices at once. Their abrasive diction and historical blind spots require attention, but so does their formal intelligence. Read in a responsibly framed edition, they remain difficult in the productive sense: unwilling to let the poet, the reader, or the literary scene stand innocent outside the poem.

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EPOPOEIA AND THE DECAY OF SATIRE

The complete 1976 collection

Originally published by Red Hill Press, Los Angeles and Fairfax, with an introduction by Paul Vangelisti.

Tarquin

“it is snail today about
4 whorls in the ice on the
Arctic floe southerly”
—Eileen Ireland

“The first thing. to do violence to your myths/
to be your own
Tarquin...” said almost without thought, his attention
on the barbed wire, as I held it up for him
and he climbed through.
There were patches of snow on the yellow grass, still
but they would be gone by evening

(Lucretia! were the breasts
marble? and the throat
did it pulse then? Let the snow melt. enough
that I had loved it

It was a pig farm, and no way around it/
garbage and tin cans in the mud, the pigs
glancing at us from under their eyelashes/
Bill with his eyes watching where his feet stepped

among the stinking trees I think
he never stopped talking

(the surgeons would carry canes, and in the heads of the canes
cloves, rosemary, other scents to breathe
as they walked through the wards

Through the fence on the other side
then a stream we took off our shoes and waded across
the water so cold my feet ached/
and what he had said to the American girl at the Louvre
the girl who had come over to write novels about Boston
and that she lived with a psychopathic Russian

who beat her and who pretended not to understand English
and what the Russian and he (Bill) had done to the girl
in a doorway by Notre Dame

and afterwards all three in the bed
which was probably a lie, although you could never be sure, with Bill

All easy going now, low hills and dirt roads/
on the barn door two stretched coonskins
also an owl with the wings nailed out a rusty
harrow behind the barn

(lists. and maps of back country where no one
walks any more. is there anything else to make?)

a windrow of Lombardy poplars
which we followed up the millrace
to the dam and the graves

I tied a string to the wine bottle
then lowered it into the green water of the dam
all the way down to the bottom there were
huge tree trunks and old tires down there
the mud was very still/

while the wine was chilling we examined the graves

three families only
mostly children's stones
but the ones who had gotten through childhood had lived
——ninety-four years old, ninety-eight, a hundred and four/
Bill silent now just our feet
on the brittle weeds, and a woodpecker somewhere in the trees behind us/
one fine stone, six-by-three, set flat in the dirt

Wm J Perkins
1791-1888
Last Survivor

Of The
Maryland Defenders

(that would be Fort McHenry or the Battle of North Point)
upon which we ate the lunch we had brought
a provolone cheese, bread, a fine red onion, oranges
and the bardolino, which was cold now

(lists. and rubbings from tombstones)

and how cold the wine was. is there
anything else, now? anything more
now, three years later, letters from
that country telling me that Bill thinks

of little but suicide? only the lists come back
and maps of tombstones and of dry hills
—anything more is merely
possible

(Lucrece! the throat, did it pulse?

and was the grief real, or poetical only?
there, see the snow melts
and the grass is yellow underneath

the book had been in his pocket. Goethe. and he
read “Whoever works with symbols only is a pedant,
a hypocrite, or a bungler. There are many such,
and they like to be together. Their babbling
detains. . . ”

for coming back we chose a different way, did not
wade the stream/
he was quiet, breathing heavily because of the hills/

certainly the graves are still there
and we had thrown the wine bottle into the dam, watched it
sink, so it
remains

the weather here is different
the children are brown, have
never seen snow
so everything is different/
I, Tarquin, sit in the afternoon sun
making lists
drawing maps of that realm
all else now is
merely possible

Pine Knob Mondo

The true path
is high, where the ground drops away on both sides.
Keep to the ridges, trust
the senses; you will not be abandoned. Their name

was Fortney. The son I met on Pine Knob. He carried a
single-shot 22 rifle and eight fat squirrels in a gunny-sack.
Fifty years old, tubercular, teeth bright white, cheek full of
Day's Work. He was on his way home, and would I stop in

and have a bite? The kitchen smelled of kerosene and damp
wool. We ate sowbelly half an inch thick (smoked it himself
with apple wood, he said) and cornbread dipped in the
grease, then sat drinking coffee with our chairs tipped back.
His maw was snoring in the bedroom but she woke up later
and we went in to meet her—great fat woman, crippled,
a mountain under the quilts. He brought her the squirrels;
she dearly loved them, she said; and she called me darlin'
and told me how her husband had been killed working on
the railroad, and her husband's brother, and her own father
in '09, and while she talked ("Never work the railroad,
darlin'.") Maw Fortney drew the squirrels out of the sack
one by one, cracked their skulls with a bonehandled knife,

and sucked the brains like oysters off the half-shell. All her
dead menfolk hung on the wall, in frames. The smell was
blood and chamberpot and old woman. Who seeks

Nirvana? All senses
are forms of touch, says Democritus.
Ordinary mind, everyday life—these
are the koans.
Crack these, and the path is clear.

The Squirrels

we brought him peppermint ice cream &
napoleons which we
really couldnt afford
& the squirrels came up close to
catch the crumbs that didnt get
tangled up in his beard
squirrels like peppy little shortstops
missus pound knitted a sock while

it went on & on
the laast time i sawr humminway &
yes theyll let anyone visit me but westbrook pegler &
yes well lawrence yes but lawrence was such a bawr
& my friend birddogged him
about sartre and berdyaev
and didju read bean & nuthinness??
until the old boy finally
when a man reaches my ayge sez old ez
rearing up in his aluminum deck chair
triton out of a wave with
crumbs & barnacles in
his beard

whin a man reaches my ayge he becomes
thurrally ingrossed in his own wurrk
& cannot afford t'become an encyclopedyaa
of current lit ra chaw!!

which put things back in perspective
missus pound knitting that sock &
squirrels dodging among all the big shoes
one zooming exactly like willie miranda
stopping a sizzler over towards third base

and the one thing he
said

if you want to know whats really going on in
the world

note carefully what is never mentioned
in the newspapers
meaning of course
that is he meant
international money swindles &
deals between jewish gold merchants
& cabinet ministers

but when i chewed on it i
thought mainly of
old ez sittin up at nite writing
the confucian odes
& me who wanted to be a poet & my friend
hitchhiking forty miles to sit here
& these squirrels shortstopping flakes of
napoleons

Nine Stages of a Journey from Caledonia to Harpers Ferry

1

fourteen amish folk
on a greyhound bus
one
peach fuzz on his chin &
big floppy banana fingers
watches me cautiously as
i squeeze my rucksack
out the bus door

& hunch into it on the highway

2

on such a grey morning
no towhees whistling in the mountain laurel
just a chainsaw
on the other side of the valley
raccoon run which you always hear
& on the moss
my bootsoles
which don't know any better

3

morning fire
this cherry birch burns smoky
ashes float into the coffee water
now pour in coffee powder
pream
big yellow spoonful
lace it with threestar hennessey
sit on a stone & slurp it
the rim of the tin pail too hot
sit on a stone slurping brandy coffee
smoking camel cigarettes

if i haul ass today
i'll cross the maryland line

4

plenty of deer droppings along here
& the wads that owls barf up
made of fur & mouse bones
& sometimes if you look in among
the blackberry brambles you'll startle
turtles
beaks smeared with berry juice
looking surprised exasperated &
unrepentant

5

what could be grander than
brandy after supper &
to read trollope in my sleeping bag
& listen to some old coon
he's been eating frogs
& now he comes up to crunch the chicken bones
i left for him

6

come on boy
down thru turner's gap
cross the creek on wobbly rocks &
a rotten log
socks wet
come on
follow the telephone wire
up to the fire tower on
lamb's knoll
out of breath up here
drop the pack and mosey around
smoking
some kid shot a hawk up here

with his twenty-two
his eyes are all gone now
stinks up here
come on boy
three more miles down the mountain
to bear spring cabin

7

rest today at
bear spring cabin
hunting mushrooms in the rain
whom can i envy

8

crampton's gap
& a plaque beside the highway
where ewell's corps bivouacked
snored & farted all nite
before the battle of south mountain
every nite the spiders spin cobwebs
across the trail
which catch in my eyes & mouth
as i swing along the spine of south mountain

9

chiggers in the greenbriar
a mile & a half with no trail
me lunging thru tangles of greenbriar
guessing which way for an hour
coming out at last on a shelf of rock
among pitch pines
high above the potomac
where i sit hunting ticks inside my socks
if i look up the river
over the charlestown bridge
i can just see where

the shenandoah meets the potomac
among rocks
& harpers ferry
where there are
tablecloths on the tables in the hotel

The Last Frontier

In the portraits he sits cross-legged on a mat,
fierce eyes glaring from under shaggy brows,
and his right fist clenched in his lap
(always reminding me of Jersey Joe Walcott,
how he could catch them coming in, the young eager ones,
with that stiff right).

Rinzai, the old giant-killer —came up the hard way:
hung around Vulture Peak for years
and every time he opened his mouth to ask a question,

Huang-Po hit him again;
ran off finally to Ta-yü, who said,
“Don’t cry on my shoulder, boy;
git on back where you belong and be grateful
for Huang’s grandmotherly kindness!”
It is said that these words enlightened Rinzai
and he walked all the way back to Vulture Peak
and punched Huang-Po in the nose, saying:
“Your Buddhism ain’t so much after all, you old buzzard!”
So when Huang died Rinzai sat in his place
and he was a holy terror, catching them coming in,
the young eager ones, with that sledgehammer right.

They were a hard and desperate bunch,
real mountain men, half horse and half alligator,
hanging by their toes from foggy cliffs,
yodelling obscenities across the river gorges.
Live up there long enough, wild garlic for breakfast and
tiger tracks in the back yard,
and you just naturally get disrespectful
——the Emperor T’ai Chung came up one year,
travelling light and hiking twenty days to get there,
hoping for some answers;
asked some innocent question and Huang-Po
slapped him twice and ran the Son of Heaven clear off the mountain.
Or as Rinzai said to the monks,

“If you want to make it, kill anyone who gets in your way!”

If you encounter the Buddha, slay him;
if you encounter the Patriarch, slay him;
if you encounter the Arhat or the parent or the relative,
slay them all without hesitation: that's the only way.
I tell you, no Buddhas, no holy teachings, no discipling, no testifiers.
What do you seek in a neighbor's house?
Why put another head above your own?

You're all crazy, biting into every pile of shit in your path!

I tell you, don't get hung up on anything,
but stand above, pass on, and be free."
Rinzai, the old giant-killer, the old hatchet man!

It's a long way to Rinzai's roost—
the gorges are steep, the trails are choked with bramble bushes;
broken-down bridges over roaring mountain creeks,
bitter cold at night and the air thin, like a knife at your windpipe;
your pack gets heavy so you're dropping things all along the way;
if you make it at all, you'll be empty-handed,
big blisters on your heels and skinned knees.
When you get there, don't be surprised if he sets the dogs on you.
This is the last frontier, boy,

too steep for horses and a thousand miles from the nearest Sunday school.
nobody comes out here unless he's crazy or wanted for murder.
This is the last frontier, boy:
think twice before you start
and never say I didn't warn you.

Some of Them End as Suicides

in memory of Fowad Magdalani

The painters are lonely here because the poets won't be friends with them or even treat them as equals. Besides, the painters can not sell their paintings in this town. Sooner or later, the painters become nervous and evil. Then they stop painting and become truck drivers or go to jail. But some of them end as suicides. What they do, they hang themselves from a beam in the garage and swing there with their toes two inches from the ground. It is very hard at first.

Like amateur actors they do not know what to do with their hands. But the ones who really want to be suicides keep their hands very still by their sides and after awhile it is all right. They can hang that way for seventeen days before they are found. Some of them are buried in sealed coffins at public expense, which is rather glorious. They always swore that if they hadn't made it as painters by the time they were thirty-two they would and they did which is glorious. Seventeen days. They do this and then the smell leaks out and then the news and then the poets take over and write poems about it using glorious images. Yes, there is a smell of glory about it all. Soon you can smell nothing but the glory. Even if you visit the grave and sit by it you smell only the earth and the glorious

new grass. It is fine to be a poet in this town. If you are a poet you can give readings for money and despise the painters and write glorious poems about the suicides. Best of all, you do not have to cope with your hands as the amateur actors and the suicides do. You do not have to keep your hands still.

Minor Classics

Atalanta

“Leona looks so wholesome,” I remarked.
“I’ll say she’s wholesome!” he replied.
“Get in bed with her and you’ll feel like
one of those poor Spaniards on San Juan Hill.
She’s like Teddy Roosevelt in a shorty nightgown!”

Aphrodite Pandemos

At least one can admire sincerity:
when asked if the keys around her neck
were for her chastity belt, she answered, “No,
it works more like a coke machine.”

Echo

“I don’t play roles,” she said.
“Roles play me.”

Egeria

This year she’s thinner than ever, and more frantic;
still, transparent fingers fluttering,
she sits beside the great poet, the local hero,
wipes the vomit from his shirtfront,
looks blissful when they spin Charlie Parker,
and waits for something wonderful to happen.
If he weren’t impotent, the waiting would be easier.

Atë

She could look at nice old ladies with shopping bags
and see armies of vengeful crocodiles,
a faculty called “insight” by her admirers;

she swallowed great quantities of benzedrine
and shouted obscenities in public places,
wherefore she was known as courageous;
that she was an intellectual was beyond question (did she not
stare long and often at an open volume of Kafka’s diary?);

and now that she has been carried away to a mental hospital,
her reputation as a tragic heroine is firmly established.

Sappho

Men are such oafs, most of them,
and whenever she finds one she really likes
he turns out to be a queer.
Recently, she's had outrageous, disgusting dreams.
She worries secretly and wonders if she'll ever get married.

Scylla

For this one,
picture a fat, middle-aged madam
with rings on her fingers and blotches of powder on her chest.
playing solitaire in her parlor
with a fat little dog in her lap.
Picture this, then subtract thirty years.

Artemis Ephesia

At times she plucks the lute and simpers
and sings about her thousand lovers
and the Rabelaisian richness of her life.
She knows what men need—flesh!
And she has it, spongy trembling acres of it,
this Emily Post of the casual screw.

Hecate

Watch out for this one:
she begins by peeling your sunburn;
the next week she'll squeeze your blackheads, if you have any
she wants to devote her life to picking your scabs.
and if you don't let her,
she'll try to come to you in the night
when you are sleeping and your throat is exposed . . .

Alba

Crouching in my arms against this old army shirt,
breathing the tin taste of my day's sweat, she
says nothing and concerns herself with her pre-
carious balance, the tightwire she walks from
fleshcage to fleshcage.

This is her scene, and it is quite right among the
bongos sounding through the wall,

Jack the Lush pounding bad riffs on a borrowed drum—
splintered, frenetic, out on the slippery edge of
dementia,

And up the airshaft sounding the toilet-edge vomit
of a nameless drunk, Gallo tokay, you can puke all
day, tired past dismay.

This is her scene, this quiet crouch within bad sounds,
surrounded by her ten cent shoes and her yesterday's
pants and her just-in-case jar of peanut butter, this
crouch against my shirt with her nose in my sweat.

She is nervous on three bennies and has tentative soft
fantasies about spooks and she will stay a little while
if I don't hold her too tightly.

I have lived like a priest in this bare room three months
and to have her here, a sad tired robin, well, I feel
honored and a little incredulous.

Orange lipstick on my pillowcase and the smell of her
in my beard are enough to make me hum in private,
a luxury of long ago.

And if the poems fails it is not because her smile is
not beautiful to touch.

The Dozens

“Donald?” he sd, “well. . .

“to put it bluntly man your buddy Donald is just another smart uptown faggot I mean ...” & he charged me head on with D.H. Lawrence & all about being Passionate which you gotta be & I helped him along with a word here an eyebrow there until I swear in no time at all he was misquoting litanies from *The Plumed Serpent* thumping his own so Passionate shirt pocket real hard it was like a classroom demonstration

so help me god I began to love him he was so perfect every flick of the cape he charged it hard & straight with never a hook no guile none at all he wanted to kill me that bad

just wanted to kill me with Lawrence & Rimbaud he was sweating harder spit collecting in the corner of his mouth Wow! so I planted one last banderilla in his hump & while he snapped at it I took time to dedicate him to Sharon who smiled back solemnly

oh he was a dreamboat oh how I loved him when he pawed the tabletop lowered his head & thundered in roaring about he was a Column of Blood yippee Apocalypse holy Fucking holy Passion holy Death he never felt it go in didn't know he was dead until he saw I wasn't playing any more not

even looking just talking to Sharon & he died all alone with his tongue hanging out & his wife hauled him home still warm

Epopoeia

I

in the Ur-chasm, the Organza Deep
among anemones big as elm trees
move whole herds of kraken, grazing
on eel larvae 6 ft. long

& at the very bottom, nothing, the mere
navel of the world, bed of primordial slime
boulders of solid manganese
scrawled tracks of great blind worms

2

the volcano they passed in the night, at sea
& the whale alongside that paced the ship all week
scratching its hide against the barnacled hull

prowls along strange interminable coasts
hideous reconnaissance

the march to the interior: valley of dry bones
his friends dying of yet-unclassified fevers
fruitless expeditions

tokens

& mementos: grisly fetish

brown & faded snapshot of himself

beardless, flanked by grinning aborigines

placque or gorget of sea-ivory
inscribed with curious characters
he can no longer read

gold watch, dented, the works
frozen with salt & rust

bottle of powdery dirt (the handful of
bottomslime brought back as proof he had
been there

3

wallowing galleons
dragons dolphins camelopards

serpents unicorns
great volcanos spouting whales & mermaids
& the four fat faces
 spewing wind
Nullus nostrum ad illos neque illorum ad nos
pervenire potest
 he destroys the chart
lest others waste their youth upon it

4

(a nomic exode)

the act, the
axis mundi

the smoke hole

(Hassan & the Assassins. Assassins slew Raymond of Tripoli
& Conrad of Montferrat

(the Ismailite society at Cairo: 9 degrees
of instruction, the last being
“that naught was to be believed, everything
might be done”

in Paradise (traditionally): conversation
 with animals
& immortality

e.g. the shaman as heteroclit, as tribal jester
goofy gesture: tripping out
climbing right out
through the smoke hole
to talk to Buzzard, who sez: when acorns ripen
they will have no shells. snow
will be salmon flour

cf. zen master's peculiar behavior
the immediate crazy gesture (Q: "Does Goofy
have the Buddha-nature?"
 & he climbs right out
 through the smoke hole

Still Life One

a clown (I
suppose)
,sadly,
in
sneakers

only the corner of
the folding cot, and
even the lifesize
poster of Bull
Moose Jackson is up-
side down, but
this champion toilet
stands in the open
doorway, fully re-
vealed

her
lips
shine
but her eyes turn
you to stone anyway.
She's a swinger, with
jewelled starfish—
one
for
each
nipple

[...] Stone
[...] Nebuchadnezzar,
Ramses, some
Chaldean or other.
[...] Porsena (smiling) [...]

and if American
Legion Post 148
Knox (ville) would
only take his
fingers away from his mouth we

would see
that he
is smiling

from Dorothy Wordsworth's journal:

"William
tired himself
himself
seeking
an epithet for the cuckoo."

All Your Daddy's People Were from Kansas and Oklahoma

“...doing a
man's work in the fields
fields
at eight year
old

Dear mom

well i am fine
& hopes this finds you same
& sure sorry to
hear Minta's buster
has got the
infantigoe

I'm just a little lad
not much higher than this
so if you want to hear my story
you'll have to wait until I'm [...]

out of fourteen:
Uncle George, big as a
house, who died in the
flu epidemic (1918).
Aunt Cora married an Indian
agent and died
of t b on the
Cherokee reservation
(19 aught 9).
Grandmaw was all torn
up in her insides
having 15-lb. George,
the youngest, and from
then on,
whenever she moved

her bowels she would
get crap in her vagina.
The dropsy took her off in '26.

sonofabitch run amuck on

Okinawa, tried to machinegun

his own platoon, crazy
sonofabitch. And them
doctors tried everything
on him, didn't do no good
so they had Maw to sign
the papers and did that
operation to his head. Shoot,
he ain't give a damn about
anything from that day to this,
only just lays around the house
clipping coupons out of magazines
—gets the strangest junk in
the mail!—and he smiles

all the time, won't so much as
mow the lawn, sonofabitch

well must
close now As
ever Cleota

from White Cloud, Kansas, a
family photo for doughboy son
in AEF:

all grouped in parched
field, house behind
them, no trees, Grandmaw
in mother hubbard, seated.
Minta standing,
holding bridle of
plough horse

WAYS OF GETTING IT

Imagining oneself
possessed

Leading an evil life

Living alone

Chronic ailments, unusual
symptoms, a deep sleep,
the vomiting of strange
things

Blaspheming and frequent
reference to the Devil

Making a compact with
the Devil

Being controlled by
spirits

Having a face that inspires
horror and fear

Being tired of living and the
giving up of hope

Being enraged and violent
in action.

Making the cries and noises
of a beast.

“A peculiar custom prevails of wearing,
as charms, various parts of the body of
a deceased relative. On her breast, sus-
pended by a piece of string around her
neck, a widow wears her late husband’s
lower jaw, the full set of teeth looking
ghastly and grim. The small bones of
the arms and legs are taken out soon after death, and formed into spoons,

which are used to put lime in the mouth
when eating betel nut.”

some Eiffel Tower (as it seemed
to me) atop the spinning world
shooting off sparks / a tiny
airplane circling
circling
RKO!! always the Mad
Scientist-isolated
megalomaniac perverted
sex drive / the old
castle high in the Carpathians where
(in cape and evening dress) he worked
on his Theory / the tower room
a jungle of electrical apparatus
that did arc crackle shimmer flash hum
roar snarl—quite
terrifying

The Theory was always correct, but its
Consequences always disastrous
(the pitfalls of reckless experimentation, of meddling with Matters
Better Left Alone

fearless hero

cleancut muscular and
gay who always saved all of us
(from the menace of mentation)
and of course demolished
that gorgeous maze of wires and
tubing / deathscreeams
of evil transformers
and worse / all
smashed. but

always identically reconstructed
in time for the next RKO horror flick

we remember that constant electric jungle
better than the changing faces of the villain

Pastiche: Whipping a Dead Horse

“A post-card from your mother-in-law
and a letter from Lousy Lou”

He saw some mermaids on the coast of Menagueta,
but that they were not so like ladies, as they are painted.

A pink monster,
or an appalling thing
with the look of a cherub

Adepts
are men who after stern self-denial
and consistent self-development can [...]

5. the tongue
18. the lower jaw
23. half of the brain
(from “Parts of the Body
the Average Man Can
Live Without”)

Immediately there issued from William’s mouth,
among other odds and ends, the whole of the
front part of the trousers of a shepherd, stones,
some whole and others broken, small bundles of
thread, a peruke such as women are accustomed
to use, needles, a piece of the serge jacket of a
little boy, and a peacock’s feather which William
had pulled from the bird’s tail eight days before
he became ill.

sez But he’s
a Jewish dog
and I
sez Well you
tell him to [take]
his Jewish [nose]
outa my
Catholic ass[!!]

(or as Al Capone [put it:]
“[With me,]
grand opera [is]
the berries.”)

(the anti-
matter
gambler’s
pieces in
their places
rearrange
the places
of the other
gambler’s
pieces)

(When bones of a monster are found,
the pattern-makers of a museum
arrange whatever they can into
conventional structures, and then
fill in with plaster. . . .

Albertus Magnus spent thirty years
perfecting an artificial man of brass.
Aquinas his pupil dashed it to pieces,
“being impelled by its
perpetual and unceasing
garrulity.”

The Day of the Funeral

The Trailways bus let me off in Hamstead and then continued up the Hanover Pike. I was early for the funeral, and anyway I had forgotten where the mortuary was, so I walked across the highway to the drug store. I ordered a chocolate malted milk and asked directions of the country woman who made it for me. She told me: one street back, a couple of blocks off the Pike, across the street from the flour mill. Was I a relative? I said I was his son. She said what a shame and that she remembered him well, he had often stopped in for a malt himself, such a nice fellow.

(It was the only sweet he liked, except for all the sugar he put in his coffee. He bought me my first one when I was four, drove me to the Read's Drug Store in Gwynn Oak Junction especially for that, and we each had one. Two men together, drinking their chocolate malted milk. It was too rich for me and I vomited on the floor by the cigarette counter. He apologized to the clerk and hustled me out of there. From then on, for me, a malt was a man's drink. Sundaes and ice cream sodas were suspect, effete. Even now.) I silently toasted him, drank the glass in two draughts, and left. Damnation, it was hot! My shirt stuck to me and the crotch of my drawers were soaked with sweat. I had bought black shoes specially for the funeral and they were rubbing blisters on my heels. I found the flour mill, all right, a tall building with corrugated

metal walls and the mill hands sitting on the loading platform eating their lunches. As she had said, the mortuary was across the road, a little brick bungalow. My mother was already there, and my half-sister Fern and her husband Harold. Mother was shaky. Fern was tense and popeyed in a dowdy dress and a hat. She has red hair and green eyes but she's not pretty, never was. Now she's forty and her hair is stringy and her ankles are getting thick and you can see the cords in her neck. Harold just lounged around with his hands in his hip pockets. He is a cop in Newark, New Jersey, a Polack, fat and lazy. He doesn't look like a cop, doesn't even look competent. He drinks a lot of beer. We talked in muted voices and stole glances at the coffin. It

was closed, of course. Beige-colored wood, it was. Looked cheap. Dammit, I'm crying as I write this. If I had had any say in the matter, I'd have bought him an ebony box with silver handles, something for a prince. Then I'd have slit their throats, all of them, and buried them with him, wives and retainers to

accompany the dead prince, all of them: my mother, damn her black soul, and Fern the Greedy, and her fatass husband. Plenty of others, too, if I had my way. And I'd have thrown out the damned calla lilies and the

stinking gardenias and piled up his coffin with orchids because he

was a beautiful man. He was an orchid, damn their eyes! But . . . I only say these things now, after. At the time, I just stood around with my family (God! what a family!), looking at the closed coffin and the rows of camp chairs, smelling the stench of gardenias, wishing I could take off my shoes to ease the blisters. Pretty soon the place began to fill up: Sam Rappaport, Dad's boss for so many years; Mister Meister, the old man who lived next door and worked on the road gang, looking lost without his twodollar pipe; Bessie Ferraro, who was our neighbor when we lived on Woodland Avenue in the city—she used to bleach her hair and I was shocked, now, to see it grey; Bessie's daughter Alameda—I used to pull her hair and now she has a beauty parlor; some of the damned Baptists from my mother's church; others I didn't know at

all. The organist began to play something disgusting, the sort of thing you hear whenever Baptists get together, just before the bullshit begins. Everyone grabbed a chair and sat up straight. Mother couldn't look sad, but she sure looked scared. Fern's hair was falling down. I was wishing the organist would play "The Cowboy's Lament." At the last minute the minister from Mother's church hurried in, had a whispered conversation with the funeral director, then came over to us. He was a plump, short young man in a dark grey suit and black loafers. He smelled of Aqua-Velva. He murmured to my mother. She introduced us and I shook his hand. Then he skipped up to the lectern, unzipped his portable bible, and began

the service. Mother had wanted a quick one and that's what she got: a few words about "our dear departed brother" and "Gawd in His mysterious ways," and then one of the Psalms. Nothing I could associate with Dad or with the way he died. But it was a quickie; at least there was that. I was one of the pallbearers. That is, after the "service" I helped to hustle that ugly box out back to a shed with a concrete floor, then into the hearse. I cut around to the front right away. Standing there, too shy to come inside, were three niggers who used to work for Dad: Willie Green, his night foreman, and a couple of the hands. They showed plenty of white eyeball, but they had come. I guess they had liked Dad better than Mother or Fern

or anyone had. I put my arm around Willie and hugged him hard and I shook hands with all of them, wishing I had grown up with them for my brothers. They were shy and embarrassed and they took off quick in Willie's Packard car. Back to work, I guess. The cars lined up behind the hearse and we drove up the Hanover Pike to the cemetery at Manchester. Mother did a

lot of dry-eyed moaning on the way. Harold was patting her and

calling her "Mom" in his Newark cop voice. Fern cried, red-nosed and ugly. They put him underground quickly. A few stock prayers from Tubby the Preach and then down he went. Mother didn't want to stay while they covered him up, so the four of us left. At the house everyone brightened up a little. We ate cold chicken and apple sauce and home-made bread and peach cobbler and Mother told how it had happened, how he just got out of bed at three in the morning, said he was going to do it, said she'd better get out of the house. By the time she came back with Mister Meister he had done it. With his single-shot twenty gauge. Etcetera, etcetera, while we finished the peach cobbler and Fern filled our coffee cups. How the State Police came and all that, and

how wonderful Mister Meister had been, etcetera. We sat over coffee for a long time, Harold and Fern smoking their filter-tip mentholated cigarettes. I gave Harold a Picayune but he didn't like it. Finally Mother began to moan again and I told Harold to take Fern and her for a ride. When they were gone and the house was quiet, I went into the bedroom. Mister Meister had cleaned up the worst of it. The mattress was gone from Dad's bed, burned or thrown out on the dump, I guessed. I took a deep breath and went to work. It was hard to believe that one old head could explode so violently. There were little spots of blood everywhere, even on the underside of his night table. I found two scraps of bone on the moulding up by the ceiling. With my jack-knife I scraped clots of

sticky yellow material off the top edge of the bathroom door. I kept wagging my head, amazed. Afterwards I washed my hands and the blade of my jack-knife and sat down in the parlor. There was a framed photograph on the wall—Dad when he was a kid in Kansas, with his brothers and sisters and his blacksmith father and his mother in her mother hubbard, all of them glaring out at you with that wild stare of lonely country folks. Dad just four years old with white hair and button shoes. Mother thought that picture was just too

quaint for words. Well, you did it, I thought. All those years with that mean bitch, that moth er of mine, all those years of her bad mouth, calling you common and ignorant, the years going by and you

getting old and sick and she gaining on you, growing stronger as you grew weaker. Oh, that holy badmouth bitch! So in the end you had a choice: give in or go. And by God you did it the big way! I give you that, old man—you went out big!

They hadn't come back yet so I went up to the attic and found

his old foot locker where he kept his souvenirs. I sat on a pile of magazines and went through the stuff while a mud dauber buzzed around the rafters. Photographs: him on the deck of a cruiser in Teddy Roosevelt's Great White Fleet, 1907 or '08; him on a bridge gang in Idaho; him in the Argonne, wearing sergeant's stripes, with a gas mask at his side; him leaning against the fender of a 1928 Auburn, cocky and grinning, high-top shoes, vest and a cap (tilted rakishly over one mahogany eye). There were bundles of cancelled checks, two German bayonets, some old letters, the tarnished plaque from his mother's casket ("At Rest," it said.). I began to cry. Aw shit, I thought, what an unhappy life he had! He was a beautiful man, a prince; he should have known nothing but glory. Mother complained because he never washed and his comb was

always greasy, but he was a prince. He had beautiful hands and Popeye forearms, small feet and narrow hips, and he wasn't dirty, only smelled like a man-armpits and feet and vanilla and motor oil. He had tatoos [...] from faraway countries and old scars and a broken nose. He could fix anything. He loved whiskey and steamed crabs and he pinched the girls who worked for him. He was a prince, a dispossessed prince. Well, I just sat there and cried. When they came back, Mother looked pretty steady. Harold and Fern drove me to the bus stop in Manchester. Fern kept saying how sick Dad must have been to do himself in like that. Yeah, I thought. No woman will ever do that to me, I thought. That night I went to a bar and started drinking straight shots of rye with beer chasers. I saw a woman in a booth who looked like

Fern so I called her a whore. She was with a marine. I had to go out in the alley and fight him. Somehow I had the idea in my drunken head that I was battling for my dad. It was a long gorgeous fight and I won it. Afterwards I sat in the alley and cried.

Assemblage Five (To the Spawning Grounds)

on the appointed night, incantations—
her lips, or strips her glistening body

silent,
transported / the lustrous crystal
docile in July

Down there
life and death, yes / to her he was only a

good-by,” he said
soon see. She’d soon
its clasp, and in gold. . . her single
time she would.

all unbraided, lay / There, and motionless
turning over and over
irresistibly advancing

(swift currents, past the shore, a wharf,
a rock, a mud flat / deep water
of the original winter—

wisdom, on and on along the river,
piling itself, breaking and pulverising,
it will grind and grind, it has
prodigious momentum

(floats slowly down the stream, queer freight
of drift-wood, a pile of ashes or an old hat,
remains of bridges, or a broken stove...

(saw three large wagons
crimson tapes, packed beneath

could not get up. She

and were gently
to a stop. He
... Ah, how he
nobody had ever

in her warm, open
and flake
violet, dim
eyes

The Pure Land

the light:
you can look at it
all ways)

sat on the curb at night
under the lamp-post, squinting
through a splinter of broken bottle—child's
play. as if it could be grasped in my

(twisting, breaking
burst into forty thousand

(they enter, dancing
suns, blazing systems of.

(shivering, diffrangent. see
too quickly, gone. and again

(no, changed-they
change. pause, tremble on my pulse
(shatter. shimmer, as my hand turns
the archeus? as a child might, in caprice

(who seeks Nirvana?
streams through, bends
into. spins.

will not be caught or
held ever.
escapes, dancing.

The Empty Blues

hitchhiking
46 hours no sleep no
food either
except for chocolate pie & coffee in San Luis Obispo
I'm up in the empty hills now
north of Paso Robles
(always a badluck town for me)
eating dexedrine smoking cigarettes
up in the hills & empty cold

cold cold & the night
slams in my face cold
now the big tandems come barrelling by
ZOOM BAM gone in the night
hours & hours & I curse them for not stopping
finally get the
Blues the true
Empty Blues

what it is
46 hours no sleep no food just leapers
so I feel cold & dry & empty
not bad quite

but I know
nothing will be right I
KNOW all I have to do is hope something
& it won't ever happen—these
are the Empty Blues

oh, the trucks don't stop
on El Camino Real
no
so I'll never get there
no no
& when I do
no

(big diesel rig
ZOOM BAM)

knew it
they never stop on 101
be here all night I know
Got the Empty Blues

what it is

a kind of knowing
—I know all about it
don't even care
just know

I know I'll never get to San Fran
& when I get there
it'll be just like here, I'll stand
till two in a bar
watching the barkeep drink Bromo
he'll drink Bromo all nite
with a stiff arm
& the Bulova on his wrist

won't it shine? Oh yes
I know
I'll stand in the bar & watch those
girls blasé-ing down the street
they never stop
no
& when they do
oh no
I'll even sound the barmaid
& she won't
& when she will
she'll live in some Filipino hotel
doormat shackled to the wall
bathroom way down the hall
don't tell me
I know it all
these are the Empty Blues

The Passionate Shepherd to His Love

O if I had bunions & grey hairs sprouting from my ears
& your breasts were down limp near your waist
if you had liver spots & carried odds & ends in a knitting bag
all over town, muttering to yourself with bare gums

O if we lived on Social Security in a furnished room
cooking Cream-of-Wheat on a gas burner
if there were a Sacred Heart calendar on the nasty yellow wall
& the buffet full of rusty tools & rent receipts

if we got a letter once a month from a daughter
named Sister Mary Francis in a Kansas City convent
& one night a week you went to bingo at St. Ambrose Social Hall
& I played pinochle with the Golden Age Club

O my light o' love, then I would have secrets from you
I would receive sex magazines in plain envelopes
& hide them in the back of the radio
I would take the bus downtown, secretly
to the Gayety Burlesk where I would
play with my limp old self under my hat

yes, I may as well be honest now
that's just what I would do
I'll write you a pretty poem tomorrow, love
tonight I feel the need to write an honest one
about what will surely never happen to us

I'll never have a great hernia bulging my pantsleg
but if I did let's tell the truth-I would
curse feebly with my teeth clicking
& load my Postum with saccharine

you'll never walk twenty blocks in your rubber orthopedic stockings
to see the homeopath for cancer pills, but if you did

then truly you would spend your evenings
sipping sassafras tea & reading the death notices

I'll write you a pretty poem tomorrow, Sweetheart-elf

tonight I must rattle my bonebag & speak oracles
in an unreasonable spirit of fair play

Variations on the Decay of Satire

for Taylor Mead

1

Most gentle of duellists, you asked: “Why brandish the sword so,
before the thrust?” then passed on to other things,
me perhaps the only one who saw the flashing blade;
now, therefore, a parry with the wrist, in the Italian manner,
and no riposte, only the twist that essays to disarm:

2

it is simply this, man: we lack opponents, could only
fight each other, and to what end? two good blades shattered?
a mutual killing? no,
in these quiet times the samurai becomes a tea man,
builds temple gardens, floats plum blossoms
in a shallow bowl before the image ...

3

it is the times;
one has inherited this wax museum—
ten cents for a walkaround, see the
heroes, see the famous murders, see here Charlotte Corday
in dusty chiffon bending over the famous bathtub
and Marat’s vital blood melting, now, from the faulty furnace—
it is the times, Taylor. I had hoped
for a better legacy, but must be the curator of this one with good grace.

4

Or consider it from the inside, as structure:
see the mind lunging, no sabre now,
without the linear precision of the fencing strip,
but as through a thicket, simply away from
the center, inattentive to symmetry—
building holes in the rain forest,

stumbling over tree trunks in the green shadows—
Conquistador ! you crossed the Andes, headed east, and the dagger
rusted among rivers that lost themselves in mud and breast-high weeds—
it is the times, Conquistador, and the structure:
twenty years' paid service in the Italian wars, siege of Milan,
pitched battles from end to end of that unhappy peninsula,
had not prepared you for these dripping slopes.
The good steel becomes red powder in its sheath,
and only the Spanish shape of mind is useful now,
only that willfulness and melancholy vanity that say,
“There, where the dead horse lies, will be the Church of St. Jude,
and there, by that sour pond, the market place. . . .”
and make it so.

5

And finally—
it is the times, Taylor, and the shifting of the image on its base.
We have seen so much blood.
The corpses mock us—we stink of our victories.
And there is this secret we share:
one of them rode up the center of the street,
gun strapped low, brave in the summer sun,
and in the subsequent blur of fear and fatigue
we shot him. Dead brave face in the dust of the street
—and he was the wrong man.
That was the time to turn in the badge and move on,
take up farming or run freight to Silver City
—because, you see, he was the wrong man, and after him
we're always wrong. So do not tempt me, Taylor.
I have retired from that trade.
I have set my mind to building a basilica

Poem About South Mountain

it was customary in those days to
invoke the muse
but let it be remembered that

gentle greek mountains will tolerate
arrogant female deities
& the comfortable hills of britain have

had to accomodate themselves to even
more prideful beings
eleanore of aq uitaine speared wolves among them

with the other gentle ladies of her court
south mountain
has other manners other less graceful ways

south mountain big hillbilly chews tobacco mountain
he knows no greek
& very little english & has to sign his name

with a big ignorant thumbprint on the us army
topographical maps

in these glades of chokecherry & fox grapes no muse reclines

south mountain endures only his own things
possums & bobcats &
at night after a rain the salamanders that chirp among

the roots of the willow trees by bear spring
people yes
not revenue agents but people yes if

they walk softly along the tumbled granite spine of
the mountain
softly without arrogance & invoke no muse

All the Ben Talbert I Know

Years ago in Baltimore someone showed me a book about Venice, California. It was a silly book all about the beat scene in Venice, all about how glorious, how secret and beautiful and important and glorious, etc. It was one of those books. I riffled the pages. I wasn't interested. At the back of the book there was a selection of photographs of Kinney's pseudo Italian buildings, of some people being cool in a coffee house, of (for no discernible reason) some eminent poets who lived elsewhere. And there was a photograph of Ben Talbert, the painter.

I thought, "What a beautiful man!" Naturally I didn't say it aloud. If you're a man you don't say another man is beautiful. Anyone in America knows you don't do that. But I thought it. And I looked at the photograph for a long time. Later that year I set out for San Francisco but I didn't get there. I got as far as Venice and I stayed. I met most of the people in the book. I went to the coffee house of the cool-being people. I came to know the man who had written the silly book and he was just what I expected him to be. But always in the first months I did not meet Ben Talbert. I never saw his paintings. I think I only heard his name spoken once. Then late one winter night I walked into Jim Shaw's book store and there sat Ben Talbert talking with Jim's Maxine.

I knew right away that it was Ben. To see him so suddenly and without preparation gave me a strong emotion. It was an emotion anyone has had at least once and no one can write about it rightly but if I just say that I had it anyone will understand me. We chatted about commonplace things. Ben didn't talk about his painting. I privately enjoyed my emotion. There was some talk of pornographic photographs-I seem to remember that Ben wanted some to sketch from. I told him I thought I could get them for him. I was never able to get them. But after that from time to time I would meet Ben walking on the Promenade or riding his bicycle down back alleys and I would say that I was still trying to get those dirty pictures for him and he would smile and we would go our ways.

One day much later I saw Ben in a big truck on Speedway. He was making some kind of delivery. He had shaved his beard. He needed money. He looked embarrassed. He smiled as he always does but he was pretty savage behind the smile. For the next few weeks I would see him slamming around Venice in the truck but then he quit that foolishness. I don't know whether he got all the

money he needed or not but he quit. After that he turned up usually quite late at night with one or two or three always lovely

girls, all tooling through the quiet streets on bicycles. He always

smiled when he saw me. A few days before I left Venice he and Helen came to visit. Trudy had been badly burned and was lying in bed feverish and tearful. Helen talked with her and made her smile, even made her laugh-which warmed me so much that I was actually ready to be Helen's knight or her brother or whatever she might require and I still have some of that feeling for her. I went into my work room with Ben. We talked. I remember thinking, "At last we can really talk and I can find out what it is inside Ben that I admire so." But we just chatted and he smiled. He was as opaque as ever and I didn't try to force it because as anyone in America knows you don't do that. You don't come on. We traded anecdotes and he didn't talk about his paintings. I told him I had to

leave town and was all packed and that if he wanted the books and other things which were still in my room he could have them. I remember he took an old incomplete set of Britannicas and also a sabre, a dress sword and two foils. He seemed especially pleased about the weapons. He loaded up his car and he and Helen drove off. Everything was incomplete and I felt sad. I left Venice a few days later. Nearly two years ago it was. Then last April I came back for a visit. I was lying on the grass with Trudy, vaguely watching the holiday strollers on the Promenade, and then there was Ben, a stroller himself, mooching along with Helen and some guy I've always nodded to but whose name I've never known. When they saw us they came over to where we lay on the grass. Where Trudy lay. I had jumped up and was trying to compose

my face. Ben had gained a lot of weight and Helen looked drawn and tired. But Ben smiled and I just stood there liking him. Trudy began to show Helen how her burns had healed so nicely and without scars. The guy I've always nodded to stood fidgeting and jingling the change in his pocket. Ben said we should visit him while we were there. And he smiled and we chatted and it was just as damn casual as ever. We promised to visit them and then they backed off and faded away down the Promenade. We never did go to see Ben. We just didn't and I don't know why. Perhaps it was because I was afraid we'd just chat again. Perhaps I was afraid we would really talk and Ben would decide I was no one he liked after all. Perhaps I was afraid we would really

talk and I would discover that Ben was not beautiful. Perhaps we just didn't go. Later I wrote him a note telling him how sorry I was that we hadn't managed to...etc., etc. That kind of note. Then yesterday an announcement came in the mail: "BEN TALBERT Woodcuts, Pasadena Art Museum, Opening July 10, 1962." The thing lay on

my table all day. And all yesterday and this morning too I have had

Ben on my mind, had him on my mind so strongly that I knew if I wanted any peace I had better write him down. I find that what I have written is very flat, very opaque, but I didn't want to say more than I knew. Not this time. And however little it may please me this is the only Ben I know. Perhaps one must be somewhat cool about a person to portray him well. No doubt I could have made some other man (my landlord, say) appear solid and convincing on the page. Not Ben. And although it makes me uncomfortable to say so, nothing I know about Ben supports my extravagant admiration of him. But evidently no support is required: the admiration continues without it. There is even a kind of satisfaction for me in writing down my total and uncritical approval of another human being.

Ben Talbert is a man of stature and a beautiful man because I say so. Anyone will know what I mean and anyone will know that it's true.

Apologia

I

each day I wd have prayed
to Him / grant me a
poem I'd have sd &
 St Joseph St Rocco
 St Alphonsus Liguori
 intercede for me—& I know
 they wd have done

Chrysostom wd have
charged my afternoons with
metaphor (St John Chrysostom the
Golden-mouthed)—metaphor to
 clothe my May & October gifts / Queen of
 Heaven her special months—& much
 reverent imagery to shew
 the frequent boons of My Lady
 —that I might make a bluebell poem
 for spring / a chrysanthemum later
 for her October aspect

He wd have granted me more: as these:

 St Ildefonsus, how he so particularly loved
 Our Lady & then he died

 St Teresa & how dry & stony Avila is
 on its slope
 & that she suffered much from lust
 even when older, a builder of nunneries
 so that Satan tormented her with certain
 suggestions during her very prayers
 & that she saw God & how He seemed

 Christ how He tastes on the Sunday tongue & how
 He is lord specific to those old men who
 sit all nite in brite cafeterias how His tears

are their four a.m. coffee
these ways & voices to serenade Him
poems enough for all my days &
never tired

II

I wake, my beard is mashed & sticky
I still hear the morning praise God birdsong
but know it is their way of shrieking
about their hunger cramps
only that

I think maybe today a poem I hope
after breakfast I start trying
pulling it out of my own gut
mostly by force—thin stuff
& careless, about people in Venice here &
things that happened to me once

I smoke a lot of cigarettes, forget
lunch, forget to be civil to
my girl, forget all the most
obvious & necessary processes

most days even all my strongarming
doesn't help me & I
give up, read, or
whine about it in my journal
& piss away the day
swimming / eating / sneering around in a coffeehouse

because
what is there to sing
now that I can't sing of
St Elizabeth how the breadcrusts
became roses to cover
her saintly lie?

what for, really, if I can't write
that St Francis Borgia died young &

pure as a tiger club?

Venice California is a very murky universe for
man-alone and no god around

III

These desperations
are not unique I
don't say that
I only make affidavit of their solidity

simply testify to the reality
of a certain kind of sullen rage
that grows out of having only such
trifles to work with as

the twentieth century
squirmings of two people in a bed

that mountains are big
that pain hurts
that friends die
—such things as these

& I tell you
all that keeps me at it is
that to form a living poem
of such flimsy material
to make it breathe & sing
under these conditions
is so preposterously difficult
that it is an undertaking
not unworthy of a man

The Poem Is a True & Rooted Cactus

after all the
mirages incident to
desert, these apparent
 lakes with such
 apparent water birds &
 whispering reeds
after all these
images
 that seduce in the

 far air
 & dry the tongue to black &
 kill

after these / but in the
geographic foreground
this true & rooted cactus
most real & tough
with thorns
rooted in the genuine dry
 having sucked deep
 & with its toughness held
 held

its thorns make blood
hands & lips
but cut into that
leather fruit
& the water is truly there
tasting green

Sketch of a Young Girl, from Memory

June was scarcely more than a child, still—not quite seventeen. And she had been Dick's wife for almost two years. So there was no way I could have known to be on my guard when, ten days after that rather innocent orgy, I wandered into Ellen's never locked backyard cottage and came upon them. . . . Ellen's cry of surprise and fear. Ellen trying, then to swim back up to the surface of her day. From where she lay splayed, amid teacups and tattered magazines, across the coffee table. And from wherever her mind had been. June's eyes, cautious and fully

alert, ready even to be amused. She did not budge, stayed kneeling there, just raised her head to gaze at me. Across her belly, long fresh welts where Ellen had clutched her and clawed her. (Ellen never understood June in the least; in the weeks that followed, she even came to fear her.) I want to write these things down, no matter that some of the true words are not permitted to me. But, you see, it was all there, gazing up at me from some secret place at the back of her eyes. She let me see it all. I cannot say what it was that she let me see: it is not permitted me to name that. . . . that appetite. But it lay so far beyond the supposed frontier of erotic abomination that simply by recognizing it in her eyes I became her accomplice. . . . I should have taken absolute possession of her that very day-

—or else I should have killed her. I knew it then as surely as I know it now. But I did neither. Yes, and June knew it also. Later that year she tried to persuade me. "Kill me, John," she had said. "Kill me before morning comes. You know, you have to do that—or else the other. And to kill me will be better." Gently, while she spoke, she had taken my hands from her cool silky buttocks; now she raised them to her throat. "Oh, do it now! Please, before daylight. I want you to!" "No," I had said. Slowly I withdrew my fingers from her throat, used them instead to spread her thighs. "I should do it, as you say, girl, but no. I will not kill you." (And so I permitted Dick to die—the choice was clearly

mine. Then in my madness I flung wide all the doors, one after another, until at last I opened the door which let me out of the cage. But in that, too, there was a sadness, for in stepping from that cage I locked two others inside it forever.) When dawn came we were still locked together in a fuck which seemed to have no temporal bound, nor any frontier to contain its ferocity.

Keening first my name and then her own, she would always begin to come again. She kept on naming our names while she was coming. Her lips were bruised, swollen,

flecked with drops of my semen; her lips wearily formed our

names while she came, transfixed and spasming on my cock. Each time I would not quite make her die—and she always came out one more time. And then it was full daylight, far too late for any one of us. That word which names what we were to one another, she and I, is not. . . permitted me. But always thereafter, even when we were alone together, we behaved as if we were nothing more than ardent lovers. My mind flinches, now, and veers off—as when the tongue, while probing deep in some spectacular cavity, flicks across bare nerve

*

“I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness; I saw your fathers as the firstripe in the figtree at her first time: but they went to Baalpeor, and separated themselves unto that shame; and their abominations were according as they loved.” Hosea 9:10

“It is because we are in Paradise that everything in this world hurts us. Outside of Paradise, nothing embarrasses because nothing matters.” the poetess Komachi

“The gay courtiers set out to sea

at Nigitazu: but how far away in time— who knows?”

from the Mannyoshu

Old Man Stravinsky Rehearsing with Orchestra

in memory of John Gifford

I

this
voice
so po
lite bene
volent & such
pa
tience
with these Los
Angeles mu
si
cians—be
comes (this
voice) the
archetype of sweet old
genius everyone's
papa Jungian wise old
man all of
that &

I can cite many who have acquired it (that
voice): Robt Frost Carl Sandburg Wm Williams Black
Jack Pershing Einstein even old Ez Pound &

hearing Stravinsky now so sweetly patient
working with his orchestra
No I sd No I
remember certain things / he is not
like that
& in my mind such very specific
matters as: Stravinsky the Evil Unscrupulous
Mephistophelian Mastermind who
every time Nijinsky tried to break with Diaghilev

somehow got the poor sod to climb back gloomily
into D's socratical bed / poor
Nijinsky he really wasn't that way didn't
dig all that suave & Arty cornholing he was getting
from the prick of that prick of a
secondrate impresario
Stravinsky-Svengali his schemes ruining Nijinsky's
married life just to suit his own devious
purposes heh! heh! heh! he sniggers like the
villain in some old villain flick

Stravinsky yes one of that bunch—mad
evil silly cloak-&-dagger Tsarist émigrés of
fifty years ago &
 now sounding for all
 the world like good old Papa Haydn
 rehearsing his toy symphony
 somewhere in lollypop land

2

!! does it truly happen that way
that you can be the crulest sonofa
bitch in the world then
lose it all with age?
lose yr
 nuts lose all yr
 evil all yr
 badass potential
 lose that fine buccaneer swagger
 that One False Move & I'll Blow Yr Brains Out!
lose it? & git old? lose all yr taste for
 raping teenagers insulting
 princes of the blood royal & just generally
 fucking with people
 out of pure evil joy
?? watching your diet instead

carrying that silverheaded ebony stick now
because you fucking well need it
to hold you upright on yr feeble & arthritic pins
& oh svveet Christ suffering
those horrible disciples they all
sit around yr gouty feet
so industriously copying down
those brainless afterdinner ruminations
(yr Tabletalk they call it

do you really have to
run out your string in toytown
sooo po
lite you
droll & foxy grampaw you!

Papa Haydn rehearsing toy
symphonies in disneyland!
“Now chentlemen if you would chust
hold that B-
flet pleass a bit longer &
mek an old man happy oh thenk
you sooo much chentlemen pairfect”

is that how it will be?
that phony mellowness like a
rotten old cantelope?

3

I hope it needn't always be that way / let me
suggest a certain developmental
path which only seems to leave you so
utterly nutless

getting old means getting lucky sometimes
means sometimes you learn
& along with other sweeter acquisitions
you learn that nine
tenths of what goes down is

bullshit
that there's just no way to be with people & not
smear yr tongue with bullshit lies
that it doesn't help to fuck with people & anyway
once you know how it's no fun any more

& when you've learned
these things & like really
know them every minute
oh then its like a gear shifts inside
so that now you can
just git on with it, yr
work
you can be God all day now
spinning out new suns & feathery nebulae

doing yr
own
proper
work
thank goodness finally!
just stand there smiling
another old Haydn

polite & patient
patiently rehearsing yr
toys yr
symphonies
in disneyland

ABANDONED LATITUDES

The complete prose poem from 1983

Reset from Thomas's complete contribution to the collaborative volume published by Invisible City/Red Hill Press.

from Patagonia

“... these desultory chapters, which might be described as a record of what I did not do. . . .”

—W. H. Hudson, *Idle Days in Patagonia*

In Patagonia. An old house, deserted, its rooms choked with drifts of debris: broken chairs, stacks of mildewed books, old clothes and rat turds. Out in the dooryard weeds, a mattress, covered with ambiguous stains, leaks cotton batting. The wind is from the west and never stops.

When the days are warm enough, I choose a book at random from one of the many heaps and go out to lie on the mattress and read. In the west there are great snowy mountains, very picturesque. I rarely so much as glance at them. The wind never stops.

There is no temptation to hike into town. Town is three weeks away to the south. Would you walk that far just to be overcharged for a chilly room in a tin-roof hotel in Punta Arenas?

I had been telling my son Ezra how I loved Patagonia. How, all winter long, there was nothing to do but huddle in your blankets, drinking endless gourds of maté, listen to the wind howl overhead, and plan interesting ways of committing suicide. “Jesus!” I said. “How I love Patagonia!”

He had been growing visibly impatient. Finally he said, “Well, then, why don’t you just go, if you love it so much?”

“I’m in Patagonia,” I replied. He merely looked puzzled and irritated. We always disappoint one another thus, my son and I.

“The 7. day betweene the mouth of the Streights and the narrowest place thereof, wee tooke a Spaniard whose name was Hernando, who was there with 23 Spaniards more, which were all that remayned of foure hundred, which were left there three yeeres before in these streights of Magellan, all the rest being dead with famine. And the same day wee passed through the narrowest of the Streights, where the aforesayd Spaniard showed us the hull of a small Barke, which we judged to be a Barke called The John Thomas. . . .”

—Hakluyt’s *Voyages*

Only a hundred paces to the creek. No name to it, and I'm not about to give it one. The water flows swiftly most of the year, over big rocks, but you can't hear it, usually, until you are quite close: the wind, again. Steep banks—fossil oyster shells, many over a foot in diameter (Hatcher's oyster)—here and there the bones of animals (giant sloths? extinct camels?) poking out of the mud of the creek banks. Extinct penguins, some of them taller than a man.

There are supposed to be some graves up the creek, just around the bend on a little knoll on the near side. "Worth checking out. Really. The only really interesting things in the area, outside of fossils." A family plot, I suppose, containing the remains of former occupants of the house. Of course, I haven't "checked them out." I'm not here to visit points of local interest.

"Upon the highest part of the hills we found some burying places, which were heapes of stones, and not knowing what that meant, pulled the stones off from one of them, and under them found men's bones of 10 and 11 foote long. . . ."

—Willem Cornelison Schouten, 1615

The trash heap is in a little gully behind the house, on the way to the creek. On top of the heap, the skeleton of a small dog with patches of hide still clinging here and there. Grey-white fur with black spots. At the edge of the heap near the house, a man's brown lace-up knee boot. Run-over heel. He had very small feet. A slit at the side once accommodated a large bunion.

As a poet, upon my return (my daily, my hourly returns) from Patagonia, they would expect me to come bearing trophies. Poems. Well, fuck them and their expectations. Trophies. Anyway, what could I bring them? An old boot?

Poking in the trash heap. Seems he ate mostly bully beef, sardines, stuff like that. What did the dog eat? I haven't seen enough small animals around here to feed a dog, even a skillful hunter who (which? that? fuck it.) worked at it all day long. So what did he eat? Did he get his share of the canned beef? The two of them, sitting in the kitchen chomping away, wintertime maybe (August down here), two plates, one can, one fork, all the while this fucking wind?

"Twilight comes and brings an end to these useless researches; useless, I say, and I take great delight in saying it, for if there is anything one feels inclined to abhor in this placid land, it is the doctrine that all our investigations into nature are for some benefit, present or future, to the

human race."

—*W. H. Hudson, Idle Days in Patagonia*

I still have nearly two cases of wine. Cheap rosado I bought nearly three months ago in Carmen de Patagones. The one-liter bottles are green plastic, in the shape of penguins. The empties I fill with dirt (to keep the wind from tipping them over); then I stand them up outside the kitchen door on the lee side of the house. Not everyone has a steadily-growing gang of penguins in his back yard. I have faced them all toward the skewed, open kitchen doorway. When I am drunk enough (and the wind permits), I sit on the stoop and tell them penguin jokes. They don't laugh, of course, but then, penguin jokes are not funny.

December 31. My birthday. Spent the day down by the creek in the bushes, picking montilla berries, or what the English in Patagonia call "diddle-dee-dee."

The Yaghan, Fuegian Indians extinct since the nineteenth century, defined "monotony" as "an absence of male friends."

Books about Patagonia do not—cannot—have the traditional beginning, middle and end. They start at around page 350 and just peter out.

Patagonian autobiography, a model text: "I was born, but. . ."

In Patagonia, to practice meditation is to bake mudpies in a toy stove.

In Patagonia, "learning from one's mistakes" is much like eating those mudpies.

Not least among the advantages of a life in Patagonia ("the uttermost part of the earth") is the opportunity to die with some dignity. That is to say, there will be no doctors to interfere with me, and I shall be able to expire, in agony and perfect squalor, of some antique ailment conquered long since by medical science. The prospect, at least, amuses. Is this what I mean by "penguin joke"?

The reader is now invited to peruse the forty-first chapter of Moby Dick, "The Whiteness of the Whale." Then, after a period given over to appropriate reflection, he is to imagine that I have inserted at this place in the text a curious parody of Melville's chapter. Think of it as evincing a subtle and oddly unsettling virtuosity. Call it, of course, "The Greyness of Patagonia."

“Now, I inquire, what impressions must be made upon the inhabitant of the Argentine Republic by the simple act of fixing his eyes upon the horizon and seeing nothing?—for the deeper his gaze sinks into that shifting, hazy, undefined horizon, the further it withdraws from him, the more it fascinates and confuses him, and plunges him in contemplation and doubt. What is the end of that world which he vainly seeks to penetrate? He knows not! What is there beyond what he sees? The wilderness, danger, the savage, death! Here is poetry already; he who moves among such scenes is assailed by fantastic doubts and fears, by dreams which possess his waking hours.”

—Facundo: Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants; or, Civilization and Barbarism, by Domingo F. Sarmiento

Rosado all gone, and my regiment of penguins has reached its full complement. They have (after a spiritless debate) elected me their hetman or coronel. Now, unless I want to hike to Punta Arenas, it's maté, marijuana and cough medicine for me.

THE DANCE OF THE PENGUINS

they
don't
dance

Back in California there are several women, a pair of fifteen-year-old Chicana twins, and even a lad of twelve, who would be mightily surprised—mortified, even—to learn how often and in what eccentric combinations they had had sex with me on a lumpy mattress in the weeds outside a collapsing house in Patagonia. Perhaps, though, at night they hear the wind howling in their dreams of penguins?

April 30th. “Camerone.” Traditional holiday of the Foreign Legion. On this day in Mexico in 1863 a small Legion company, commanded by an elderly Spanish captain with a glass eye and a wooden arm, fought to the death at the Hacienda de Camerone to cover the retreat of French forces to Vera Cruz.

This morning, by way of celebration, I organized a little defeat for myself. Dug into my knapsack and found the unlabeled pill bottle I'd been saving. Seven shiny yellow tablets, old now and turning a mottled brown. Don't remember what they are. Were. Took them with my morning maté. Half an hour later I was sitting on the kitchen step, singing Legion songs to my demibrigade of penguins. “Tiens, voila du boudin. . . .” “Je ne regrette rien.” On and on, until

my voice broke and I withdrew into the house, weeping in a transport of self-pity. I felt the scissors of Atropos nibbling at my thread. My faculties were, as they say, under a cloud.

I was awakened late in the afternoon (in the front yard—what was I doing there?) by the sting of hail on my cheeks, lips, eyelids. The day's rain had turned into the first hailstorm of the year. Shivering, I rolled off the soaked mattress and crawled back to the house.

My copybook lay open on the kitchen table. I had been writing, it would appear, during the lost hours. Peered at the scrawled notes. Ah, shit, more prefaces. First page, just banalities:

Fragments of a work in progress. [illegible] of failure. Negative transcendence. Progress as cliché. Or as the oncologist might, each morning, gaze [into his?] shaving mirror and contemplate the “progress” of his own melanoma. (“The Man with the Flower in His Mouth,” but with a sly shift of emphasis.) Or progress as vegetable decay: the rotten tree stump that glows in the dark.

I lick my finger, turn the page. Just more of the same. But as old Father Guzman wrote in 1837 (I translate roughly from his elegant Latin): “Being in Patagonia without a reason . . . would imply a mental condition to which no one would confess.”

Most writers would regard Southern California as banishment enough. To live in Los Angeles, a minor poet of some local repute: surely this satisfies any interpretation of the Doctrine of Sufficient Disgrace. Well, for me, nothing has ever proved Sufficient. The Fatal Flaw, amigo.

I have cast my ballot with Plato's, albeit for different reasons. Scratched my own poor name on the ostraken. Voted myself right out of the Republic.

So. And there must be no stopping, at Harrar. Because—follow the argument where it leads, through a jumble of metaphor—because even in Harrar the Person from Porlock knocks every day, the perfect excuse.

I do get visitors now and then, as you will see, but never from Porlock. In Patagonia there are no excuses.

Notebook jottings—failed attempts to characterize this book for A Lady:

1. "Scenes of Provincial Life."
2. "Oblomov in Patagonia."
3. "Satyricon" = *satura* / *saturika* = "a potpourri or farrago of mixed subjects in a variety of styles" / "concerned with satyrs, i.e. lecherous, randy."
4. And/or "Zuihitsu"—that is to say, random jottings as a literary form. As Kenko put it, in the 14th century, "Leisurely I face my inkstone all day long, and without any particular object jot down the odds and ends that pass through my mind, with a curious feeling that I am not sane."

Reading, writing, self-pollution, drugs and sleep: these are the five great depravities of solitude. But from time to time, even for me, the taste for private squalor can lose its keenness of edge. About once a month The Great World calls. A little *pasear*, that's the ticket. So I button my fly, put on my boots, and sally forth into society.

East for eight miles on the dirt track which parallels the creek. The wind is at my back, raving, shoving me rudely along. South, then, on the highway, staggering sometimes, leaning to my right so as not to be blown clear off the road. But I soldier on. Two more miles of gravel, mud and potholes bring me to my nearest neighbor, Celedonio Ramos.

Celedonio Ramos. An Asturian, he says. He lives here with his hare-lipped daughter Escolastica. *Boliche Las Pulgas*, he calls his place. A *boliche* is a sort of barroom and country store. *Las pulgas* means "the fleas."

Harness on the walls. Dusty canned goods on a few dusty shelves. A drum of kerosene in a corner. The bar. Its shelf, behind, with bottles of Mendoza brandy, *rosado*, some sweet vermouth. Faded poster above the shelf: CINZANO—AMERICANO GANCIA. No customers. My neighbor and his fortyish daughter sit at the bar over a late lunch.

"Don Celedonio, how goes it? *Señorita Escolastica*?"

Celedonio extends his thick paw in the soft and furtive handshake of this region. Escolastica grants me a ghastly, split-faced simper, says something. It is a hopeless gobble, but interrogatory. My grin congeals and I look rather wildly to Celedonio for help.

“She says you look hungry. She invites you to join us at our repast. I also invite you. She says something else, which is lost. There are limits of comprehension even for me, her father. Come and sit with us. There is plenty.”

The meal consists of boiled sheep’s head and soggy fried bread. Room is made for me and I belly up to the counter. Escolastica serves me with her own hand, heaping my plate with tidbits: morsels of cheek-meat, half a greyish tongue, thick cuts of bread.

We take our time. Don Celedonio pours the wine, waving away my pesos, but allows me to pay for postprandial drinks. We two men nurse our brandy: the day will be a long one. The lady snuffles a sweet vermouth, her face the face of a camel. And how do we while away our afternoon? As Don Celedonio puts it, we “listen to the trucks.”

Like the afternoon itself, the road stretches past the boliche: grey, dusty and traffickless. “Listening to the trucks.” There are no trucks, of course. Oh, sometimes we hear a truck; we know it surely is a truck, but it is the wind. Or the noise of gears changing, down, but that also is the wind. Sometimes the wind sounds like an unloaded truck banging over a timber bridge.

We look up the road, see a dust-devil, think it’s a truck. Or there are black specks that seem to be coming, closer, and we are certain at last that this is both a car and a truck. But the specks walk off sideways, and we realize they were sheep.

Finally, near sundown, when we no longer believe, comes a truck. Dusty old 2½-ton Dodge, painted park-bench green. It bumps slowly south along the track. Two beeps of the horn as it passes. On the door, in yellow paint: SOUTH SEA TRUCKING. On the tailgate, in orange: MAMA, LOOK AT ME NOW!!

The truck sways off, bound for Rio Gallegos and the Straits. The sob of its engine is swallowed up in the wind that sounds like trucks.

Door and window are both shut tight, but the air inside Las Pulgas is heavy with salty wind-blown grit. Several times during the afternoon, Escolastica excuses herself and crosses the room to dust her lithographs.

Highly-colored German prints, two of them, hanging on the wall opposite the bar. I remember having seen them in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia, and in one or two Mexican saloons.

“The Sleeping Hunters”: Three plump fellows, dressed in odd green uniforms, wearing gaiters and tiny Tyrolean hats with brushes of chamois hair stuck into them. The men are fast asleep beneath a tree with bluish-green foliage. They seem to be resting after a hearty meal: near them lie the remains of food and several empty bottles. A stag and two does sniff the shotguns which stand propped up against the tree-trunk, and rabbits help themselves to bread. This is a sort of masterpiece, and with an idea behind it—not to mention its technical virtues, its composition and super-imaginative coloring.

“Russian Winter”: An expanse of white snow, a sleigh being attacked by a pack of wolves, horses galloping madly, men shooting in every direction, two of the slaving beasts rolling over, staining the snow with bright red blood. This amazing picture projects an atmosphere of intense cold, and at the same time the spiritual sensation of heat.

From the bar, we watch her as she attacks the prints with brisk flicks of her feather duster.

“These works of art—they are her solace,” Don Celedonio remarks phlegmatically, then speaks no more about it. (Here in Patagonia, you see, the chronic lust for solace is taken for granted. Only the instruments of solace, or its palliatives, seem worthy of remark.)

Escolastica’s feather duster: it is one of those souvenir dusters from Comodoro Rivadavia, made of ostrich feathers (Darwin’s rhea) that had been shipped from Comodoro to Germany, there simply fastened to sticks, and then shipped back again.

Y al campo me iba solito,
mas matrero que el vanao,
como perro abandonao,
a buscar una tapera,
o en alguna biscachera
pasar la noche tirao.

*(And I'd go off all alone to the plains, / sneakier than a deer, / like a
stray dog, / to look for a ruined shack / to shelter in, or to pass the
night / stretched out in a viscacha-warren.)*

—stanza 1430, “*El Gaucho Martín Fierro*,” by José Hernández

Five whole days in Punta Arenas with Lili and Raquel, sisters, from Chiloé, Jehovah’s Witnesses. No actual fucking allowed, but they have some very odd ideas about what is allowed. Raquel, it seems, is in direct daily communication with the Paraclete, Who (Which?) is giving us (through her) secret sexual instruction. Esoteric doctrine it is, not to be passed on even to other Witnesses. The Time Is Not Yet Ripe, don’t you know?

Lili sneaks tracts into my duffel. One of them I have kept. I read it to my penguins often:

THE ONE AND ONLY FRIEND OF MAN

(the one who bears him no rancor)

True missionaries assume the authority and concentration of the Apostle Paul.

No sociology without salvation

No political economy without the Evangelist

No reform without redemption

No culture without conversion

No progress without forgiveness

No new social order without a new birth

No new organization without a New Creation

No democracy without the Divine Word

NO CIVILIZATION WITHOUT CHRIST

ARE WE READY TO DO WHAT OUR MASTER ORDERS (according to his express desires)

“... now I suck Raquel until she scream and shake all over and make pipi.” Which she did, and Raquel did most copiously. And the three of us later under the smelly blankets, listening to the wind, telling ghost stories. The girls tell me of Chiloé, sing (badly) Chilote songs, weep. Raquel sits on her heel, masturbating, while I sodomize Lili. Lili starts to come, speaks in tongues.

Later, Lili describes her colonic raptures as something very like a large bird that churns her tripes with great and softly-fluttering wings. Raquel assumes an

omniscient smirk. “Of course it is a bird,” she says. “It is a dove. La Paloma. The Holy Spirit, as is well known, frequently assumes that form. Matthew 3:16.”

Lili is suitably impressed. “Yes, surely,” she sighs. “A dove, with great wings. And a sharp beak. Let us pray.”

I bow my head and close my eyes out of respect for my darlings’ devotions, but I should tell you that I have grave doubts. I rather think it was a penguin.

Both Lili and Raquel have a bottomless appetite for ghost stories. By now I have told them all I recall, however imperfectly, from my childhood reading: Poe, Lovecraft, Algernon Blackwood, etc. Their particular favorite is “The Golden Arm,” told as Mark Twain said it should be told. Even more to their taste are my narrative renderings of American monster movies of the 1930s and 1940s.

Lili’s identification with the victims is sharp and immediate, and she sinks easily into a voluptuous trance of child-like dread. Raquel’s sympathies, as you might suppose, lie elsewhere. With each fresh atrocity “her nostrils flare and her proud eyes flash fire.”* At the end, when the mummy is twisting in agony, trapped in a bloom of fire, his tattered linen cerements ablaze, Raquel sits erect on the bed, her eyes tear-filled but still proud.

“He will return,” she whispers.

Lili, quaking, buried under the blankets, begins to moan at the prospect.

The talk turns to “real” mummies. I tell them that the museums of the world have rooms full of them. Lili peeps silently out at me, her eyes great pools of delighted horror.

“Rooms filled with momias, you say?” marvels Raquel. “To be approached and seen? You yourself have been in such a room?”

I assure her that I have.

“How fine a thing that must have been! I yearn to go there one day!”

Lili is not so sure. Being a Jehovah’s Witness, she lives in constant daily expectation of the end of the world. Well, she challenges, what if one were in

such a place at The Great Moment? What if the General Resurrection occurred even as one stood among those solemn corpses turned into a sight for sightseers?

“They would stand up, you see, and stagger about. I would go mad with my terror!” And she pops under the blankets again.

Raquel caresses her gently.

“Do not be afraid,” she soothes. “Such a thing would not happen. I, your sister, have been promised two days’ special warning of the Second Coming.”

No doubt she has. She always seems to know, even before I do, when I am about to come.

E. P. Roe, What Can She Do?, p. 157.*

The privy is out of sight of the house, past the trash heap in a natural hollow. It is of wooden planks buttressed on three sides by heaped stones. It has been left well-supplied with stacks of sanitary literature.

There are the usual illustrated magazines from Buenos Aires. Eva Perón’s smooth and smiling face appears on most of their covers. Today I read a most interesting and instructive account of the death of a famous singer and composer of tangos, cut off at the peak of his career in a fiery plane crash somewhere up in the Gran Chaco. There is a fine catalog of saddlery, which I hope to save. I know most of the pictures by heart, as well as the prices of spurs, whips, lassos, and many other items in the long list.

Scrawled on the inside of the privy door with a thick blunt pencil that dug deeply into the wood: “Nobiembre 7 de 1935 dejó de existir Metet por mano de Segundo.” (“On the 7th of November, 1935, Metet ceased to exist, by the hand of Segundo.”)

Eva Perón, in Argentine folk tradition, has long ranked with Cleopatra as one of the great fellatrices in world history. So naturally, from time to time, sitting in the privy, I have stroked my penis while pondering Eva’s bland sly face on a warped and faded magazine page. But it has never worked for me. On the contrary, the idea of entrusting my member to that mouth, to those historic lips, has always left me uneasy and limp.

No. For me, fame and skill don't seem to work. I prefer my two little missionaries from Chiloé. They are so inept, each in her own fashion, that they never fail to charm and arouse me.

Lili is all shivering urgency and sweet confusion. She moans and mumbles, chokes and murmurs. Her greed makes her clumsy: at the end she will be coughing and snuffling in frustration, with semen running from her nostrils, dripping from her chin into her cupped and trembling palm.

Raquel, on the other hand, is all technique. Perhaps another personal revelation from Him: I've never asked. She assumes an expression of quiet and mysterious competence, clasps my member in a fashion that suggests the handgrip of some obscure secret society, and commences to nibble. From beginning to end, she does it all wrong, with an almost patronizing confidence and serenity. The air is thick with pathos, naïveté. She is so . . . quaint. She so utterly misses the point that I never fail to grow excited. She munches and sucks until the first spurt of semen has filled her mouth; then she prefers to sit back and pump my staff with her fist, gazing triumphantly at the glistening sperm as it trickles down over her knuckles. Eva simply isn't in the running.

"After the mule comes nothing." It is obvious that Gauguin was never in Patagonia.

"Oh, Herbert, let's go," Marjorie exclaimed.

Without waiting for an answer, she pirouetted about the room singing: "We're going to Patagonia! We're going to Patagonia!"

I suggested that she read the "enclosure" with its strange South American heading. . . .

—from El Jimmy, Outlaw of Patagonia, by Herbert Childs

Punta Arenas. A cold black late afternoon in July. The wind roars outside. Hail drums on the tin roof. In my hotel room, Lili, Raquel and I crouch on straight chairs in a semi-circle around the muttering oil stove. I wear my long johns, an old Argentine military overcoat, and three of the hotel's musty blankets. The girls are naked under heavy, greasy wool ponchos. The air in the room smells of kerosene, dirty wool, armpits and recent sex. Are we happy? Plenty of codeine and maté, and the stove works, so the question never presents itself.

Desultory conversation. The maté gourd passes from hand to hand. Raquel is the cebador (the maker, or server, of maté). She brews it, spits out the bitter first gourdful, then brews the second and passes it to the left to me. I drink it and pass back the gourd. The third brew goes to Lili, and so on. When the water no longer foams, Raquel dumps out the yerba and starts again. It is Lili's task to clean the bombilla when it clogs.

The codeine has made me garrulous, and I have been trying to explain why I no longer write poems.

"Oh, they still come to me," I say. "Sometimes they drop into my head perfect and complete. Good poems, too." (I am lollygagging, as I have said.) "But then when it comes to writing them down, a part of me says 'NO!' And I don't. And that refusal, caras, brings with it a pleasure far sharper than anything I've felt when merely writing."

Raquel grins, but Lili looks angry and perplexed. "¡Pucha!" she says at last. "¡Embromador! For shit sure you lying us now!"

"No, it's true. I don't understand it, but the pleasure is there. I've told other poets, and they doubt me, too."

She frowns and shrugs under her poncho.

"But I, I understand," says Raquel.

"Do you?"

"Oh, yes. And I will do you the parable of it. You will see."

Dropping to her knees beside me, she pushes blankets and overcoat aside and fishes my penis out of my underwear. It promptly shrivels in the cold. She glares at it sternly.

"Listen!" she commands. "You must be the hard thing for my parable. So . . ." (shaking a schoolmistressy finger at it) "be hard!"

I laugh, but once again her idiotic self-assurance wins out: to my amazement, up it stands—and bobs in polite attention.

"Now, Sister," she says, gesturing to Lili. "Come down here. Make a pussy with your fist. Do with it what pussies do."

While Lili jerks me off, Raquel fetches one of my boots from beside the bed. She unlaces it and ties the lace around the base of my cock in a loose overhand knot.

“Do not stop, Sister, until I tell you.”

Lili nods, puzzled but obedient. Raquel fixes her gaze on my scrotum. Sooner than I would have supposed, Lili’s fingers accomplish their task and I start to come. My scrotum contracts.

“Now!” hisses Raquel. “No poems!”

She pulls the knotted shoelace tight. My urethra collapses. I come, flopping like a caught fish. For a moment, I black out. . . .

When my vision clears, Lili is still chafing my penis—which is still stiff and growing purple.

“Okay, Sister, now you stop.”

Lili shows us her trembling hand. No semen. And none on my cock.

“¡Ay!” she breathes. “¡Pero es un crimen!” (“Oh, but that is a crime!”)

Raquel is smiling. “Not a crime,” she says. “A parable.”

Carefully she loosens the knot. Freed, my cock droops and the semen pours slowly into her cupped palm. I stare, bemused. After a solemn interval, she raises her hand, first to Lili’s lips and then to her own, and her “parable” is finished.

She is crazy, my Raquel, mad as a hatter. No argument there. That is why I am unnerved to find that she understands me so well.

And so we sit, late into the night. Maté and codeine and more maté, while the wind raves outside. “The uttermost part of the earth.”

In the morning, the maid comes into my room at a most awkward moment. She is horrified by what she sees. We have been . . . well, no matter. The speechless girl stands staring and crossing herself. Raquel leaps up. She is clad only in my black vest and her hair is all snakes. Brandishing her big bible, she drives the maid from the room, then shouts abuse at her in twittering Chilean as she flees down the hall.

The little concierge avoids my eyes while asking me to leave.

“You understand, sir. We are men of the world, you and I, but I cannot afford the scandal of it. And the maid: she is from the nuns, you see. The orphanage. She is still not herself.”

We listen, he and I. She is sobbing hysterically behind the office door.

“It’s all right,” I say. “I understand.”

“And those girls, sir. They are . . . evangelistas? Missionaries? How can this be?”

“Well . . .”

“You will, of course, take them with you.”

Not enough money for another hotel, so we spend the day shivering on street corners. I panhandle, with little success. For a while, Lili and Raquel pass out tracts. Then they produce tambourines (“RECUERDO DE PUERTO MONTT” painted on the skins) and sing hymns. The wind whips their thin voices away, and the vapor-clouds of their breath.

By mid-afternoon there is sleet again and it is pitch dark, just little pools of light under the street lamps. We huddle together in a doorway, count our money, plan our last evening in Punta Arenas.

Four blocks at a clumsy run, leaning into the wind, sleet stinging our faces, to the Turkish bath. Valdivia 999, corner of O’Higgins. For two pesos I am given soap, towel and a cardboard comb—they the same, I suppose, on the ladies’ side. We meet afterwards in the vestibule and cut out running again. We’ll sit in the town cinema until closing time.

“The Cervantes theatre,” says the South American Handbook, “is so ornate it is worth buying a cinema ticket to see it; the films shown are old.”

Tonight: “The Cid,” Charlton Heston and Sophia Loren, dubbed in Spanish. Old, yes, but popular here. It has been playing for thirteen weeks. Lili and Raquel tell me they have already seen it twenty-eight times.

And the Handbook has not lied about the theatre itself. It is an infected improvisation on a theme of Piranesi, built by a demented pastry chef.

The girls are licking ice cream cones. Bought them in the lobby. Tiny things and very narrow, topped with little dollops of something magenta. Vile-looking. I tell them that in 1928 my father invented the double-header. This is hard to say in Spanish.

Lili is shocked. "With two heads? Such a deformity!"

"A capricho," Raquel explains. "For the Day of the Dead. Something macabro to terrify the children."

"No, no," I revise. "A cone, like these, but with two cups at the top. Side by side, to hold more ice cream."

Lili still looks puzzled, so Raquel explains once more.

"Claro, sister. Like all barbarians, Yanquis are very greedy. They must have two of all things."

I try again to clear things up, but Lili shushes me.

"He comes!" she whispers.

And Charlton Heston's head fills the screen. Squinty little eyes, skewed blade of a nose, a tight-fitting hood of plastic chain mail.

"He comes!" She points him out to me, cone in her fist like a broken scepter. Her other hand disappears under her skirt. In the dimness, I catch Raquel's eye. She shrugs, smiles indulgently.

"I always wait for Señora Loren. You must wait with me. By then I am finished to eat this cone of one head and I shall pollute me and you also. You will see how it will be better."

Who am I to question her? She's watching the film for the twenty-ninth time, so she's the expert.

In the lobby, two complete shows later, we are all three haggard and sleepy. Yawns, muted farewells. (The girls will sleep in some sort of hospice, non-Witnesses not admitted.) Raquel pats my cheek; Lili tucks a tract into my overcoat pocket.

Okay. North along the coast tomorrow, but tonight it's the Salvation Army for me. Calle Bella Vista 377. For 50¢ U.S., they let you sleep on the floor at the

back of the hall.

But the floor is too cold, the hail on the tin roof too loud. I spend most of the long austral night in the lavatory, reading old copies of the Magellan Times. English-language paper, mostly sheep prices and shipping news. When I look up to stare at my reflection in the mirror over the sinks, I see cloud shapes and flickering flames.

Fifty-three degrees south latitude and sinking.

My penguins have a favorite story. It really has no name, but they call it “Riding North in Other People’s Cars.” I must tell it to them at least once a week, and it goes like this:

“Punta Arenas, Rio Verde, San Gregorio, Punta Delgada. . . .”

“Next comes the border!” cry the penguins.

“Right, next comes the border. And then?”

“Monte Aymond!”

“Yes! And then?”

“Rio Gallegos! A hundred and fifty miles!”

“Coy Aike, Puerto Coig, Cañadon de las Vacas, Monte Leon. . . .”

“Comandante Luis Piedrabuena!” Many squawks and cheers.

“Santa Cruz, Rio Chico, San Julian, El Salado, La Porteña . . . ah, Tellier?”

“No, no! Puerto Deseado!” (They know that I know, but they love to correct me.)

“Oh, right. Puerto Deseado, then Tellier. Then Antonio de Biedma, Cerro Blanco. Las Martinetas, Jaramillo, FitzRoy, Pico . . . ah, Pico . . .”

“Pico Truncado!”

“Of course. Truncado. Cañadon Seco. . . .”

“Getting close!” they cry, interrupting me, always at this point.

“Caleta Olivia.”

“Closer!”

“Holdich!” I’m yelling, now. And we end it all together.

“CO-MO-DO-RO RI-VA-DA-VI-AAAAAA!”

Much cheering and general hilarity.

Back here in Los Angeles, if I am depressed, I can always raise my spirits by muttering to myself, “Comodoro Rivadavia!” At night I can whisper, “Comodoro Rivadavia!” and fall swiftly to sleep and always dream of penguins.

“Yet, in passing over these scenes, without one bright object near, an ill-defined but strong sense of pleasure is vividly excited.”

—Charles Darwin, The Voyage of the Beagle

(to be continued)

PERIODICAL POEMS

Two poems recovered from magazine witnesses

Tonight

Tonight I can hear the waves breaking out on the rocks,
and here on the couch beside me
this puppy breathing, dreaming;
now and then a car passes by . . .
hard to believe that once I drove thirty miles
to hear a baroque concert.

I look around the room:
empty beer bottle, my jacket,
two old letters,
dust thick on the lampshade . . .
last week I wanted new khaki pants
but my girl bought me a pair
so I can't think of anything I want just now.
Next month maybe a bottle of ink.

Once I had a fine watch but I lost it
I think it was a Bulova;
wife and a daughter in Houston, Texas,
another wife and two more children in Baltimore,
I'll never see them again;
can't seem to hold on to anything.

I hear the waves breaking on the rocks.
Weeks turn into months
and next year I'll be thirty.
Getting poorer every year . . .
someday I'll be as poor as those rocks!

First published in Genesis West 1, no. 2 (Winter 1962–63).

Wide Eyed Dream

I want to see you
with your evening gloves
the color of high noon
 in Merida
pulling the last hair
from the lonely
 orthodontist.

 You're immune
to his injections
unmoved by his threatening
 lighthouse.

I want to see you
serving an icy blanket
 in a cocktail glass
confounding Berlin's sharpest
 undertaker
and his date
the one time blazing
 Salome

 from down at the dance school
whose skin will become cat fur
and blow away
in your dry ocean breath.

I want to see you.

First published in Bombay Gin 4 (Summer-Fall 1977).

THE GHOSTS OF VENICE WEST

Poems from the 1994 collaboration with Philomene Long

A Philosopher's Memories of a Venice Apartment

That was one bad and
buggy place, Snorky.
Cockroaches all over
the house and into everything.

Kid, what would
you do if just after
the first fine mouthful of morning coffee, you realized
that you had swallowed
a half-grown roach?

I'll tell you what
I did. It wasn't
easy, but I convinced
myself that I had
swallowed not a cockroach
but a small brown moth.
That idea I could
live with.

I haven't always lived
in splendor, as I do now
at the Ellison, Snorky,
but I have always been
master of my mind.

The House of a Poet

*"It is difficult to believe / that in the house of a poet / there may be
anything of wisdom / even in dreams . . ." —Quevedo, "El sueño de las
calaveras" (1607)*

In one of his novels
Faulkner made a mistake.
First he said a house was stone,
then later in the story
he said it was wood.
And this is important because
the house burns down.

No, how say
it is important! Stone, wood,
world, words: the fact is,
the fact is, the house
burns down. It burns down.
The house burns down.

Nona

In the twenties, I am told, this was a
not unfashionable beach address. Great
names are supposed to have stopped here in those
early days. Clara Bow, W. C.
Fields, Fatty Arbuckle, they say. Great names.
Perhaps. But they left very little of
themselves.

The ghosts in our apartment don't
cause much trouble. They're too feeble, perhaps.
A glass will shatter in the cupboard; now
and again the bedside reading lamp spits
a few sparks; one hears the occasional
spiteful whisper in our dark and empty
living room.

Or maybe they are busy
with their own affairs, pale sneaks plotting and
creeping about, committing horrible
ghostly crimes among themselves, leaving them
little time to tamper with the silly
substantial likes of us. But . . . ah, yes, but.

There is Nona. Our Nona. She is the
gentle, persistent, barely audible
scraping sound we hear most evenings in the
south corner there by the window. We have
a chair in that spot, but I am sure she
doesn't use it. She sits in her own small
ghostly chair. She makes her own tiny rasp
of noise in the crepuscular light, then
pauses and begins again.

We puzzled
for months before identifying it.
Nona . . . writes. She, too, is a poet. The
tiny busy rustle is Nona's pen
slipping across the paper, inditing
line after line of genteel verse.

I think
of her as a maiden, but elderly,
faintly Bohemian in dress, with brown,
sensible shoes and her mother's coral
earrings. Her pen is a black Waterman,
the ink is green, her script Spencerian.
The poems rhyme, I am sure, and they aren't
great, but they are getting better.

Being
morning writers, we aren't disturbed by her
labors. We try not to disturb Nona,
either. We write well here: she's brought us luck.
I hope we bring her luck as well, for she
adorns our evenings—so sweet and joyous
is the tiny sound of writing poems.

12.IV.88

Write This Poem Every Day

Sad worried ghosts, fumbling
for each other, we are
unteachable. It is a tease.
Solid objects, real people:

these are the stuff
of myth and legend, a mere
infection of uncontrolled
detail. Just she and I and
nothing else. Leave the world
alone.

My Fate

It happens all the fucking time, Snorky.
I'll bet, even when I arrive in Heaven—
you know, after all the introductions,
and we're standing around sipping greasy chablis
and gloomily munching the cute hors d'oeuvres—
I'll bet, kid, even then somebody,
probably Jesus, will take me aside
and ask in an eager, whiny undertone,
"So, tell Me, is it true what I hear?
Did you really know Charles Bukowski?"

POSTSCRIPT

"That's awful!" said Philomene.
"Maybe so," I replied, "but
I'll bet they like it Up There.
You watch: we'll arrive and
Jesus, first thing, He'll say,
'Hey, I know you! You wrote
that poem about Me and Bukowski!
Him and Me, in the same poem,
and funny, too! It knocked Me out!'"
Talk about your frigid silences, kid.

The Ghosts of the Poets

*“Wild Kidney”—improbable English translation for an entrée,
printed on a restaurant menu in Kota Baru*

“In case you wondered,”
said the dead professor they had
summoned up with their ouija board,
“in case you wondered, we don’t die.
We go to the galaxy in Andromeda.”
And he described it, one tedious letter at a time:
Andromeda, a place of immense
and unrelievable serenity;
a bland and sexless, suffocating place
with not a single wild kidney.
I don’t believe it.

Like Shelley, Stuart Perkoff was cremated.
I picture his stubby hands curling into fists.
The blackened body bends into
a sort of boxer’s crouch.
Stuart’s head: beard gone in a puff
at the first blast of flame;
eyes bubbling that had once, perhaps,
seen into me; skull
fragile as an auk’s egg, crumbling;
flaming bits of cerebellar tissue;
ash of synapses across which had once
flashed poetry, some rather fine poetry.
Smoke. White smoke rising.

But Stuart dead! And the rest!
I don’t believe it, won’t have it,
not for a moment. If he, or if even
the poor and indifferent poets,
are always floating away to Andromeda,
what is left remarkable here
beneath the visiting moon?

So against all logic I say
the alphabetic professor lies.

They are here.

I say the ghosts of the poets
squat in doleful rows on telephone wires.

They crowd the fence rails, weigh down
the branches of the trees. Glumly,
they grub for pennies in the dirty sand
high up at the heads of half-lost rivers.

Some flicker like sad fireflies,
flashing dimly only when we blink.

But they are here.

They are sad, sadder perhaps than when they lived,
but not in Andromeda. Damn ouija and the truth.

They are here.

Do you know what I mean?

Even the barrel of my pen
is full of the ghosts of uncouth poets.

In case you wondered,
they are the wild kidney. They are
the bitter crackling sound I hear
when Philomene brushes her hair.

In case you wondered,
they are the small transparent parasols
all of us stroll beneath.

GREAT ZEN MASTERS & OTHER HOLY FOOLS

Late and posthumously published Zen poems

Great Zen Master

went looking for the great Zen master
—a sick junkie told me, try the Safeway
I think he works down there

at the Safeway the manager was very busy
cashing paychecks etcetera
but he took the time to tell me
you must mean Jimmy Bananas we used to call him
he don't work here no more since about two weeks
but you ask Swenson that guy over there stamping cans
Swenson knows where he lives
you ask Swenson

so I asked Swenson who said
yeah he lives in the Ocean Spray Hotel
is he in trouble or something?

the lady at the hotel
didn't know anybody by that name
never knew any great Zen masters at all
if it came to that

coming out of the hotel pretty discouraged
ran into the junkie again and he said
you still looking for that cat man?
I just saw him—he's down on the beach by those rocks

of course when I got down to the beach
there was nobody there
just a dog chasing seagulls
just a dog and me standing on wet sand and feeling foolish
and the surf booming over those rocks

Dogen-Zenji: Last Words to His Successor

My confession? Zazen
was never easy. Never.

Preaching sucked away
the rest of my life.
At first I lied from conviction,
then from a love of poetry,
finally from compassion.
Never comfortable. Not once.

Surely by now even you
are sick of the sound of my voice.
I am. So accept tonight
my Dharma-transmission
(which I know you hotly desire)
and enough. Have the monks
bury me deep. I want to be
well out of this world
of misery and mouse dreams.

Maezumi: The Way, the Way, the Way

We were chatting. This was nine years ago,
rambling talk about harmony, about plum blossoms,
about his arrival in this country as a young man.

“How was the flight?” I asked.

“Oh, I didn’t fly. I came by ship.”

“Hell of a long trip, by sea,” I said. “What was it like?”

He laughed. “I don’t know. I was drunk all the way.”

Yes, yes, yes . . . and according to the camel drivers,
Daruma snoozed, coming over the mountains.

Yes, yes, yes . . . and (Philomene can tell you)

“Maezumi always placed the incense stick
dead center in the bowl of sand: dead center
and absolutely straight up, all the way.”

White Petal Transmission

Every day teaching
ten thousand truths, one Dharma.
Then, one day dying:
softly, so softly they fall,
ten thousand white plum blossoms.

John Thomas / Philomene Long

Anne Seisen Fletcher, Sensei

Tiny autumn fly.

The great Dharma Transmission

now, through you, wings on.

The Lords of Nothingness: The Last of Trapalanda

All night, all day, all night again,
the lords of nothingness float brooding across this,
our paralyzed, prostrate, stagnant world.

To the touch, the lords of nothingness
have a quasi-human texture,
but with coarse, metaphorical embellishments
and a value equivalent to one's own cadaver.

The lords of nothingness:
they push hard against the future with their scaly backs
and are fiercely cruel to objects.

The lords of nothingness:
pursuant to their instructions,
let us climb deep into the wide-mouth final cave,
kneel in the bat-droppings,
and pray.

Meditation (Or So Say)

The caves are deep, all entrances concealed. Great vaulted galleries lie far below. Long, thin, down-hanging spears of selenite (or so say) glisten on the enormous ceilings. Unseeable. Known. Everywhere. On the huge stones of the floor, invisibly sparkly needles grow, singing silently. Mirabilite (or so say). From crystal filaments, thin as human hair, water drips in this absolute dark like tiniest chimes, forever, into still black lake after lake after lake.

The caverns are deep—deep and blind (or so say)—and they know. Great hidden meditation (or so say), the entrance far back in the neck of this narrow unmapped canyon.

“Welcome. Yes. Come in.”

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TEXTUAL NOTE

Sources, lineation, and unresolved losses

The reset text of *Epopoeia* and the *Decay of Satire* was keyed from the inherited text-based production witness and collated against the complete Red Hill Press copy held in the research archive. The scan governs wording, stanza division, indentation, section numbering, and the unusual horizontal placement of phrases. Narrow physical wraps are rejoined; true syntactic and visual breaks remain.

The surviving Red Hill scan is cropped at the outer or gutter edge on several pages. The obvious completions “mountain,” “testifiers,” “any,” “about being Passionate,” “real hard,” “after death,” and “reckless experimentation” have been restored. In “Pastiche: Whipping a Dead Horse,” the surviving letter stubs and the identifiable Capone quotation secure the local reading “tell him to take / his Jewish nose / outa my / Catholic ass!,” and “With me, / grand opera is / the berries.” Other lost wording in that poem and in “All Your Daddy’s People Were from Kansas and Oklahoma” remains marked [...]. The subsection whose numeral is lost is headed simply “Ways of Getting It” rather than supplied conjecturally.

Dialect and comic imitation are not normalized. Thus the intentionally exaggerated Pound passage in “The Squirrels,” nonstandard capitalization, ampersands, slashes, Thomas’s abrupt tonal changes, and the tract’s printed “progress” in from Patagonia remain. Clear transcription damage such as “yo ur,” “Jill easy,” “sleddhammer,” “Orang,” “reconnaissance,” and “cemetary” has been corrected by reference to the scan and context.

The complete prose poem from Patagonia is reset from Thomas’s contribution to *Abandoned Latitudes* (1983). Its paragraph sequence, inset quotations, brief lineated passages, and printed ending “(to be continued)” are retained; that ending is part of the work and does not make this edition an excerpt. “Tonight” is reset from *Genesis West*; “Wide Eyed Dream” from *Bombay Gin*. The late sections follow the individual authorship labels in the collaborative books. “White Petal Transmission” retains its joint credit to John Thomas and Philomene Long. “The Last Frontier,” reprinted in the *Zen* volume, appears only once, in its 1976 setting.

Book titles in editorial matter are set in italics and title case. Poem titles follow their source capitalization, including the lowercase opening of from Patagonia. All pages, including the cover reverse and archival pages, use the series cream stock color; the cover restores the former full-color surreal image with the bald figure and invented text, newly cropped for the series design.