



STANLEY ALLEN KIESEL

The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner

THE COMPLETE 1968 COLLECTION AND RECOVERED EARLY POEMS

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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A CRITICAL READING EDITION

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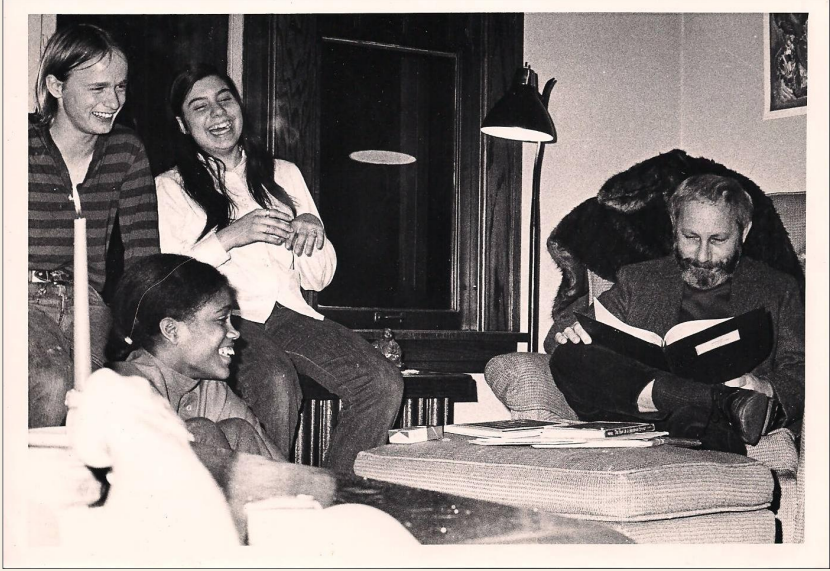
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ARCHIVAL IMAGES

Family, teaching, and the poet in the schools



Harry and Lila Kiesel, the poet's parents, in Los Angeles in 1924.



Stanley Kiesel reading with students during his years as a poet in the schools.

INTRODUCTION

The classroom as a testing ground for freedom

Stanley Allen Kiesel was a Los Angeles poet, playwright, teacher, and anarchic fabulist whose writing made the classroom a testing ground for freedom. Raised in Depression-era West Adams, encouraged by public-school teachers, and later drawn into Thomas McGrath's circle and the little magazine *Coastlines*, Kiesel spent seventeen years teaching kindergarten in Los Angeles before becoming a poet-in-residence in Minneapolis schools. His 1968 collection *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* is neither sentimental child portraiture nor neutral case history: its compact dramatic poems defend unruly consciousness while exposing the violence hidden inside family expectation, professional expertise, charity, and educational routine. This edition restores that book in full and precedes it with ten poems recovered from *Coastlines* and *Poetry Los Angeles*, including political satire, love poems, and experimental early work omitted from the 1968 volume.

Biography

Stanley Allen Kiesel was born in Los Angeles on July 16, 1925, to Harry and Lila Kiesel; California index material gives his mother's maiden name as Barasch. His own late autobiographical account remembered a poor and frequently unsettled childhood in West Adams during the Depression. His father searched for work and spent long days in produce markets, and when rent could not be paid the family sometimes moved at night. Kiesel attended Virginia Road School, Mount Vernon Junior High School, and Dorsey High School. He credited teachers including Ethel Burroughs, Vera Edwards, Martha Dill, Blanche Garrison, and Aunice Campbell Moore with recognizing his interest in writing and theater. A 1997 *Los Angeles Times* report on a Virginia Road reunion independently records the enduring importance he attached to Edwards. He also recalled winning a state Shakespeare-festival prize for a speech from *Richard III*.

At eighteen Kiesel registered for Selective Service while living at 3018 Chesapeake Avenue and working for the Los Angeles Furniture Company. An Army enlistment index records that he enlisted as a private in Los Angeles on September 16, 1943, service number 39710159; the surviving index does not establish his assignment, deployment, or discharge. By 1946 he was back in Los Angeles theater, appearing as the Ambassador in a Los Angeles City College production of J. B. Priestley's *Berkeley Square*. He later recalled going to New York for psychotherapy after becoming interested in Wilhelm Reich and being referred to psychiatrist A. Allen Cott. He lived cheaply, worked nights at Planters Peanuts in Times Square, and said that a manuscript of fables reached William Steig through another patient. A 1950 census index, not yet checked against the underlying image, places a Stanley Kiesel in New York working as a film technician at New York University.

Kiesel attended Los Angeles State College and studied with Thomas McGrath. Mel Weisburd's UCLA oral history places him in McGrath's class with Bert Meyers and Henri Coulette and among the writers who met at McGrath's home. Kiesel also joined the Incognoscenti, a workshop associated with Alvaro Cardona-Hine, Gene Frumkin, and Fred Franklyn. These circles connected him to a socially alert, anti-academic Los Angeles poetry culture. *Coastlines*, published from 1955 through 1964, printed fifteen identified Kiesel poems and at different moments listed him among its editors. The 1958 anthology *Poetry Los Angeles*, edited by James Boyer May, McGrath, and Peter Yates, printed five poems, one more than earlier local accounts had recognized. He also contributed unidentified work to the New Orleans journal *Climax: A Creative Review in the Jazz Spirit*. The Judson Crews Papers at the Harry Ransom Center preserve a Stanley Kiesel correspondence file.

Kiesel married Ruth Price in Los Angeles in 1955. Their daughters, Polly and Emily, later received the dedication of his first poetry book. He taught kindergarten in Los Angeles for seventeen years, beginning about 1954. Men were rare in early-childhood classrooms, and Kiesel remembered being treated as an institutional curiosity. His surviving 1970 newsletters describe a classroom organized around choice, painting, building, dramatic play, animals, books, and shared responsibility. He opposed rules that existed only for adult convenience and treated mistakes as part of learning. The same resistance to ranking and obedience shapes his poems, in which children become autonomous moral imaginations and adults become objects of unsparing

scrutiny.

Charles Scribner's Sons published *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* in New York in 1968. The title comes from Henry David Thoreau's journal entry of February 1857. Frederick Hammersley made the jacket art and David Lunn designed the jacket. The thirty-two poems are arranged in seven numbered sections and transform classroom observation through grotesque comparison, dramatic monologue, metaphysical conceit, and abrupt tonal shifts. Christopher Ricks discussed the collection in "Recent American Poetry," published in *The Massachusetts Review* in 1970. Nodin Press reissued the book in 1976, with catalog records crediting a foreword to Carl Rakosi. The poems retain period language about race, class, disability, gender, and institutional categories that requires historical attention but should not be silently modernized.

Kiesel also wrote plays. United States copyright catalogs document *Farrow* (1957), *The Family* (1964), and *The Twins* (1965); the latter two were registered under Nicolas Bengt, explicitly identified as his pseudonym. *The Ceiling* and *The Family* were produced by the Ensemble Company at the Carver-Carlile Theater in Hollywood in 1970. *The Ceiling*, which imagines microorganisms living within the dirt and cracks of a bathroom ceiling, was staged again by Minnesota Ensemble Theater at the Walker Art Center in 1975. The Walker archive also documents readings and a Poetry Coordinator file associated with Kiesel between 1972 and 1975.

By 1971 Kiesel was established in Minneapolis as a poet-in-residence in the public schools, a role he said he held for twelve years. Minnesota Public Radio recordings from 1974 and 1981 preserve his teaching practice and educational argument. He urged teachers to write beside students, separated invention from later correction, opposed standardized ranking, and insisted that poetry could concern any subject. His 1980 novel *The War Between the Pitiful Teachers and the Splendid Kids* converted those commitments into a grotesque school-revolt fantasy led by Skinny Malinky. *Skinny Malinky Leads the War for Kidness* followed in 1984. A third manuscript announced on his website has not been independently verified as published.

Kiesel continued writing late in life. His author site records four small poetry collections: *Prick the Balloon* (2013), *I Decline to Be Human* (2013), *Jump Ship* (2014), and *Songs with No Prospects* (2014). Only *Prick the Balloon*

has been securely confirmed through an independent bibliographic record, and copies of none of the four were available for the present edition. Later records place Kiesel in New Mexico, San Francisco, and finally Portland. He died in Portland on January 8, 2017, aged ninety-one, and was buried at Lone Fir Pioneer Cemetery. His work joins Los Angeles left-literary culture, early-childhood education, experimental theater, and comic fantasy around a single enduring problem: what institutions do to imagination, and how unruly language might resist them.

EDITORIAL NOTE AND SOURCES

Corpus, source control, and variant policy

This edition prints ten poems recovered from *Coastlines* and *Poetry Los Angeles*, followed by the complete thirty-two-poem text of *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (1968). The 1958 anthology contains five Kiesel poems, not four as an earlier inventory reported. “Gone” appears in both sources and is printed once.

Every reading text was checked against the original local scan. Purposeful stanza divisions, internal section numerals, italics, relative line indents, and spatial arrangements are retained. Narrow-page hanging wraps are rejoined when the wider page permits. Obvious OCR debris, exposed page furniture, and false word spaces are removed. Book and journal titles are italicized in editorial matter.

Several poems from the 1968 book first appeared in *Coastlines*. Where a periodical witness differs only in punctuation, wording, or lineation, the book version is printed once and the variation is recorded after the poem. The earlier “Tanya” was substantially retained as “Sonya”; the later text is printed with a variant note. Entirely separate early poems remain in their chronological section.

Kiesel’s author site names four late self-published poetry collections, but no complete copy was available for this edition. *Prick the Balloon* has an independent bibliographical record; details for *I Decline to Be Human*, *Jump Ship*, and *Songs with No Prospects* remain provisional. They are documented in the bibliography but are not reconstructed without textual witnesses.

EARLY POEMS

Little-magazine and anthology verse, 1955–1960

Crusoe

Shipwrecked and bare,
I came to this blonde island.
Here, in my twenty sixth year,
I wept.

With elaborate labor
I built from my body
An extension, a home.
I fly my shirt on the shore
And now am composed.

This island
Is full of blue weather,
And I work.

At first, nausea,
And derangement...
Now... nothing—
Yes, something,
A sense of the strenuous;
Out of my drenched sleep
A sense of composure...

Confidantes: a bird, a goat;
A dog,
Who found no species
To multiply his kind upon,
Grown old and crazy.

Publication. *Coastlines*, no. 2 (Summer 1955), p. 27.

Wisdom

Who has not commissioned love to paint a picture of himself?
Who has not, on his own green leaf, laid eggs of conviction
Hoping that hatched, they may nibble away his tact?
Who has not, behind the flowers of stealth grown hair on his cheek?
Or read rubber authors? Or beat his smile like a drum?

Or covered himself with chocolate-covered scorn.
Or dined upon subterfuge. Or clung to the branch of expectation with his sex
outstretched.

A face can walk on all fours;
Smiles are, in part, genitals, that one can expose without shame.
Even paragons pass water, and body has its vote.
The masochist lays tracks on his breast, the sadist...
No inducement exists that will not lift its skirt.
All, all devour love as one butters bread.
Faces are paths; each possibility makes its own bed.

Nina, Lulu, Darius, Chris; each in bed found a lunatic.
One betrayed her presence by a fussy step.
One's reluctance was a tooth she hid.
And one no sooner made his nipples stiff than he wanted them back.

Love's a paper-bound book; a mode of belief;
Both someone to sleep with and someone to shun;
Hoisting a yawn; the feint of an army whose general is gone.

Nina, Darius, Lulu and Chris,
Who were as young as their smile's weather was,
Their object's now grass. All morals are old. All faces are paths.

Publication. *Coastlines*, no. 2 (Summer 1955), pp. 28–29. Hanging continuations caused by the original narrow page are rejoined.

Enfant Terrible

He lived with a vanilla aunt
And his steel-blue uncle
In a roomful of brown convictions;
And at ten had such peach-colored hopes
That he had to tie a ribbon around intention
Lest he lean too far
And smash through the glass of advice.

To climb the fence of impulse
He'd need a tan mind;
And a pet hand
To tickle certainties.

Now it was June and on the khaki tides
He could hear booming, the salmon,
Crabby, with their hot blue loads...
The fourth dictum came: he would sweep
Down the plaid river and there,
With his polar cap on,
Waylay them!

On the toes of heroics,
He threw into the mind's bush
Whatever infants he could muster.
Eating from his boxlunch of love he grinned.
He had washed his face in caution long enough.

Soon they were upon him
And now he leans out his pole
And greets violation,
Masticates all glances...
Dismounting from deity
Blue as a razor...

And since, has broke all our beds;

And all our children can't unpocket him.

Publication. *Coastlines*, no. 2 (Summer 1955), pp. 29–30.

Gone

Hands, sweaty; bags, warm; spittle, drying.
The grilled screendoor gives way to the hound.
On the loose boards an exchange of time with the old dawdler
With the cracked eye-shade. For you and friend a glass of feeling;
And pocketing what he puts in your hand.
The tracks thrum. It rains; and you see a black puff
That floats down like an aria and off, far off,
Someone running; and then, like a warrant for your arrest:
The train.

The shoelace-come-loose and the trunk intrude at the last...
The witlessness of a blank reply easing the hands away.
Then the eye, barefooted, runs... flutters around the tall upraised arm,
Alights on the twig of a smile until the face,
Bolting glances like a food, swings away and is gone.

Publication. *Coastlines*, no. 5 (Summer 1956), p. 34; reprinted in *Poetry Los Angeles* (Villiers Publications, 1958).

For the Man from Mars

The Capitol was the armpit of the nation.
The elected man nothing but a noun.
Thieves were stock-piled. A child matured
In the presence of cockadoodling from the Left
Or decrepit whining from the Right.
Congress was a prevalence of phlegm.

The city was the senior fissure
But in the environs it was worse:
The towns were pimples; grudges were mayors;
Everywhere, men pregnant with blotters.
Streaked courts; armed sentiments;
All, all in thankless rapport.

And what of the World? Europe had a broken neck.
Flunkies scraped her monuments. Asia's thoughts boiled water.
Spain enlarged her oars. And on a bone of gratitude England chewed
And chewed. A plague of unfrocked calendars: Israel;
And France: a prostrate nickname whose little crutch was Paris.
South America: stench. Malicious sunsets in Japan.
And in the 'boot': rankled hearts serving wrinkled fruit.

In the year of nineteen fifty four
The world had a hump on its back.

There is no one man, gift-wrapped, we can run after for directions.
There is no one man who can give our pretexts a blood test.
There is no one man who can connect the wires of wisdom.
And not one who can sew up the holes in our doors.

Go sick a dog on love, deal out derangement's playing cards,
Play, play with the drastic winds of your well-groomed bombs
Masses, Whores, (when have you *not* been kept?) Presidents,
Arch-Pimps, and purveyors of deaths in small pieces;
Those of you with a fence round your genitals
And those of you with outspoken thighs, prurient and hard;

Celebrate your sore; manacle delight; oust honesty;
History at last has taken your temperature:
Shall strew you—with a high moral purpose—
In fractions over the breastworks of the earth.

Publication. *Poetry Los Angeles*, ed. James Boyer May, Thomas McGrath, and Peter Yates (Villiers Publications, 1958), p. 20.

On Friday and on Monday

Shine lemon moon
On the overt harp
Of her Friday foot,
And on the Sunday part,
The lowest part, because it's practised miles
Posting the loveliest rationales.

Shine lemon moon
On the rhetoric vehicle
That rode on the mailman;
For hours my hackle
Was raised, grazing in her letter.
Who's neutral? Not I from the treble
I hear, declaring, scribble, beloved, I'm better.

Sail lemon moon.
The exquisite news
Is postmarked Noon
In the Monday mail,
That her favorite shoes
Remain lost in my room.

Publication. *Poetry Los Angeles*, ed. James Boyer May, Thomas McGrath, and Peter Yates (Villiers Publications, 1958), p. 21.

A Sketch

Love was a polar pose, a starched
Pause, a way of being fed
Intravenously; masseurs took liberties;
The night was anybody's door.

At twenty, nation's ping-pong
Made him angry; in a rain of rites
He blasted world and wetnursed beard;
Sly, he'd raise a flag of mirth.

He found, to copulate
With printed matter would
Save him; and wrote. An age
Dismounted from its infancy.

Sending mouth airmail,
Listening to the weather purr,
He was, at last, able to sense
That the world had deserved him
And grew red-faced and hummed.

He grew tenderer
Wearing the night round his thighs.

Seventy, he sat in a smile's museum,
Pathetic, the only mature cloud
In the world. And died
Writing with a yawn's pencil, in a park,
Giving alms to the weather.

Publication. *Poetry Los Angeles*, ed. James Boyer May, Thomas McGrath, and Peter Yates (Villiers Publications, 1958), pp. 21–22.

At a Party

Comes in neighing, pitching his smile
Like a horseshoe through the room.

I'm here, he said, upholstered, and for sale;
And with that assertion misreads the entire posture of the evening.
He did the same last year while voyaging:
Would autograph his underwear and sell it underdecks.
But the ocean's not so simple as to bear him for no fee—he paid a toll:
In the cabin was a sergeant, who fisted him, I hear.
Since that time—I'd heard—he'll touch no possible till sure.
—Before, there wasn't a negative he wouldn't disarm, he was so confident.

I loathe him when he's in his war-canoe
Ballyhooing over rug and chair
Hello, hello; I wish he'd take that
Portable disposition of his away;
Or be a sentinel and guard his eyes,
And not be such a plaque hung up for any man to read.

It's the treble, not the bass of this disease that bothers me.
But then I've had too much to drink;
Better let grin, that old draft horse,
Pull my heavy rage out, giddeap, to that tennis court,
Whose balls possess more gender than that idiot can own.

Publication. *Poetry Los Angeles*, ed. James Boyer May, Thomas McGrath, and Peter Yates (Villiers Publications, 1958), p. 22.

Epithalamium

I

A bachelor is like an overtrained athlete;
Each year he injects a new girl into your ear
Until his affair undergoes surgery.
A well-meaning excerpt from your hard-up past
He is always on your branch without your permission.
He works, sees people, has phobias;
While his legend grows senile.

A man who's not wed to something better than himself
Or who does not work to serve the restraints and liberties of marriage
Lives on a diving board; becomes ungenerous and bare.
This discipline of his life grows no vertebrae.
He becomes a man always framed in someone else's doorway.

II

The insights we possess in ourselves work on commission:
What is eventful illuminates, but we neglect those household moments
That lie around us like hairpins in dust.
Nothing is harder to apprentice than experience.

Who, I asked, could trim my hair, my nails, my desire, better than myself?
My needs had always marched in single file behind me.
My life; risky bedding; penetrations made of wood; bottled women;
Yet marriage was looked upon as a license for submission, a brilliant impoverishment,
A land of serene squalor. A way of putting a sail on a steamship.
Fool! shouted self, search your pockets for someone worthy and you'll find no one;
This idea of rescuing Garbo is a pet you'd best get rid of.
Man, make a forced landing! And get off the stage!

It's true, we let ourselves be domesticated by our phantasies;
Often our desires bark at real love when it comes to scare it off.
(What a picket line our qualms produce!)
I swore out a warrant against being married;
I rented a boat and rowed far out on remorse, losing sight of all rational shores...
But I wed. Hoisted up on a mast was my agonized grin;
The priest saluted it with his baton.

III

Wit's telescope, salads of mercy or money, all the ovations in need of baths,
We have left these behind. The heroics that were plotted ahead, the corseted joys,
The tiny dribbling consents, the hands that ran after directions,
The submarines of motive that never emerged, gone.
We have made rags out of everything we have ever been.

What we have always wanted to be is put to proof.
Certainly we are in the direction of flow, residing in one another's body,
Like one number contained in another;
Our shy and separate powers become bold and cliff-like in a single motion.
When two people love, death has an upset stomach.

IV

It is my marriage which has given me a vision:
Our charities should be our own pet limbs.

When penetrance to the air hints of no spear,
When the cubes and squares of our sophisticated brains
Are interred with the last dead citizen-specimen,
Then shall we not turn strongly towards joy,
And do more than merely tour the likelihood of love?

Publication. *Coastlines*, nos. 14–15 (Spring 1960), pp. 69–70.

In The Boughs

We studied birds—asked them questions—
Collected data in a book
So huge, our poor arms shook
As we lugged it about from field to field.
We climbed trees and talked back and forth
With birds concerning their relations:
How they would govern nations,
Given the chance, of course; and why they sang—
O, we never had to force things out of them—
They gossiped willingly and their answers were encouraging,
To say the least: they never ceased reminding us
That just to peck around a bit would give us wings,
And if we sat around in branches long enough
We could hatch tremendous things...
Well of course we took all this with a grain of salt;
After all, we knew what we were,
And that hatching was not a job to be done by us,
A boy and a girl with no feathers and too little fur
And hands and arms and running feet,
But we kept what they said under consideration
Because they had a way of making things sound sweet.
So we decided not to make fun.

We interviewed robins, sparrows and crows;
We found out things that nobody knows
Or has yet discovered about birds,
And we put it all down in the choicest of words,
The clearest of prose, including some rhyme
When we thought it was needed.
And we never, never once repeated
Material—there was so much to write about:
Their choice of trees, of fruit, of season;
And for each of these some subtle reason
Had to be worked out in our research,
While those lucky birds just sat on their perches
Watching us work! Well, we comforted ourselves
We would leave something for posterity...

We were sure we had covered hundreds of pages;

Our mothers and fathers considered us sages.
And so we were. The birds told us
That our prosperity lay just around the next tree-top,
And we believed them. We brought our book to class
And hopped around in grand prestige
Winning good grades. And teachers turned their faces
Inside out to smile at us;
It was like a parade or a holiday.
The book is here—it lies all day and all night in a drawer,
Alone, with nothing to help it live anymore.
Twenty-six pages...
It was a wonder we could have written so much.
And what remarkable illustrations—
In one, two birds are leaping over a fence
And the sun is shining with terrible power
On one lonely flower;
In another, a red robin sings in an orange cloud,
His wings are crooked
But he's not worried, he's having no trouble,
The other birds are not disturbed.
How can I say it...
The weather seems different for the birds that fly now...
The yellow bills and brown branches and noisy colored wings,
The tiny twig-feet and the trilling—
How shall I say it?—are gone.
That little girl and I, we were the birds in our book:
The mudlarks and sparrows, the pigeons and crows,
It was we who sat in the trees and pretended to fly.
That little girl—she sang with me
And flapped her hands on the sides of her dress
And lifting her arms, she flew away;
Sweet Pearl... the red robin.

Publication. *Coastlines*, nos. 14–15 (Spring 1960), pp. 71–72.

THE PEARL IS A HARDENED SINNER

Notes from Kindergarten | Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968

I

Marsha

To everything she has a hunchbacked response.
She looks like something spoiled in the darkroom;
She inhabits dresses rather than wears them.

Seven times today she washed her hands.
She embarrasses the blackboards.

Mother arrives, parachuting in from the society page.
Her soup kitchens, she proclaims, are at our disposal;
But the charity closest to her heart (she insists) is her pet child.

You alms-giver, there is nothing non-profit about you,
Your breasts are selfish with milk.
This child was a hobby of your bedclothes,
A little memorial to an expensive perfume.

—Go, go wash your hands, Marsha!
You little unaddressed envelope.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 11. An earlier text appeared in *Coastlines*, no. 12 (Spring 1959), pp. 15–17; the book revises lineation and punctuation.

Ronnie

The scale is erect and as prim as a spinster;
The eye-chart too, has a no-nonsense look about it.
Here, both doctor and nurse sit it out,
Both starched, and chewing unsweetened gum.

Enter: “the cardiac boy”:
There’s a rigid fist inside him
That knocks out the windows of rest,
Gives him the black eyes of an insomniac.

Ears, nose, throat;
Doctor squints at him like a bag of nails.

Helpless mother is a pincushion, mewing in our face;
Father: a shellacked cigar with punched-out eyes;

And the social worker is one of those intellectuals
Who sicks her knowledge on you like a dog.

Neglected, on relief since he was born,
He is the test tube of our school.
In a moment of reckless grace we let him in.
To thank us he flushed all our toilets.

Not a day passes that he does not ascend in that fiery balloon
To empty himself on our heads.

Our love is his receptacle.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), pp. 12–13.

Seven Children

David's eyes held his mind's reins so no thought stampeded.
Michael Dean gave his urine to secret agents and never washed his hands.
Virginia was alone among us all, the baggage car of her mother's care.
And Johanna was a sea that never conferred with anyone.

Where are you now, children? Rendered visible, I expect;
Wearing tight shoes, run over by a hundred trucks;
Terrifyingly suspect of planting aphids on your parents' roses.

Albert, you leaped off conversation's cliff and never did come back,
Whereas you, Lynn, were the overtrained athlete of your mother's tongue.
And John—I remember you too—whose feigned deafness
Was all you had your mother could not bathe;
Your private mafia was the pants you filled from day to day...

To the mass-produced adult all children look homemade.
And so they are, who have not yet learned to do anything on credit:
The world is whatever they pick up off the ground.
We, who swallow our duties like medicine
Our salutes are always on time.

April, fifty-six. Children, the future's good if you endure.
Do not shave off those sweet mustaches.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 14–15. First printed in *Coastlines*, no. 9 (Winter 1957–58), pp. 3–5; the book revises lineation and hyphenates the date.

Casey

The paintbrush leaps like a fishing pole
Landing Black, Orange, Green, goggle-eyed
And wriggling on paper. She works, wearing
Her mouth's tight shoes, her eyes sawing
Distances in half. The temper that makes her
A cannibal of the playyard, on paper emerges
Like a sound piece of non-fiction.

Not one jot of your gift do they guess:
Your mother, father, so buried in a snow
Of money and money-cares; her talent lies
In stocking up canned goods, and his, in
Breastfeeding his lawn. I've met them;
They look as if their pleasure has had a flat tire.

Tie a can to the world's tail, Casey, and take
This advice: art is presumption, so saddle it.
Intellect, before it became a cut flower
Belonged to a bush, trust insight
To be your body's best fisherman.
Your muscular tongue, untidy laughter,
Won't win you friends
But color will never disapprove of you.
Bite into the green certainty then spit
And never say thank you.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 16.

Danny

The first day, wheeled to my room
In a little red wagon. His tibia,
As well as his confidence, broken.

“Say hello to your teacher, Danny.”

The overblown head blinks its bald
Eyes. Mother, like a golfstick,
Has smacked his presence so hard
That he falls into the rough and is lost.

“We just came to be introduced.
The Doctor says Danny has to stay
At home for at least six weeks.”

The other mothers pretend not to listen,
Tact flapping in the wind like flags.
The room is now a leaking boat,
The women row, in juries, out.

And in six weeks he returns,
Lowering his unforgettable presence
Like an anchor into the rug.
He sits. The story, the dramatic play,
Pass over him like clouds. He sits.
When called upon, an expression
Crawls into his eyes as if he were
Suddenly afraid I was going to introduce
Him to himself in too large a dose.

“Danny.” The pupil jerks in his eye
Like a fish. “Danny.” His lips retract.

In the yard he walks—to no one—
Carrying himself like a heavy suitcase.
Or tilting his chin, he stands, staring
At the last boat of himself steaming out the harbor.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 17–18.

II

Gregg

Gregg, you cork, speck of a great saint,
I wish all your exits well.

The world's cold entertainment without you.
Never a detractor or an amuser,

But a solid occupant of the actual,
What you gave me never graced your mind.

Modesty was your grandfather.
If indeed, you were a child,

You were better than all the candy offered me,
Better than the apples, because Gregg,

You were the bite itself.

A child like you is a clearing,
The era's arable land;

Such a man that even your failures
Will find employment.

Gregg, there's no paper pleasure
Worth the thing you are.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 21. First printed in *Coastlines*, no. 9 (Winter 1957–58), pp. 3–5; the book substantially redistributes the lines while retaining the wording.

Kim

Horses and dogs call for caresses, not
You, Kim. You were a fact, you never took
Graft. I see you, nagging the gravel
With your feet... Did you keep the pebbles
In hopes that they would mother you?

Each kid rides his own range, makes
A snowball of our advice to
Throw at us. Eyes like a scissors,
This boy will always desert his
Teachers and everyone else, because
He's one of many making no covenant
With anyone, tete-a-tete only with his thumb.

No one ever found out who had made him.
For years we gave him old clothes and shots,
Airdropping down to him the powdered
Milk of our pity... Sometimes, knowledge is a
Suitcase we pack too late. Kim, you melted
Away out of sight, and we were left
With a file, an aging parenthesis
Clasping the souvenirs of our good intentions.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 22.

Reflection at Noon

The ill, rebelliously ill children, remind me
Of men out of work; and so they are: out of play.
They live their childhood under assumed names.
Tommy, whose glance was a stick, we never won;
And Mary Louise, whose very breathing seemed
Bandaged: lost to us; scores of kids hauling
Around their miseries in little jinrikshas.

How can we heal,
Becalmed on our blunders,
Measuring ourselves
With rulers,
Ejaculating our
Own abstinence?
Resolutions give us
Boils. Candor brings
On cramps. We castrate
Our bodies and give
Genitalia to our
Illusions. Is there
An absurdity we
Haven't made love to?

The reprehensible parent is everywhere:
In Washington, cleaning his chlorophyll bomb
(Parent as politician; politician as mortician);
As the Administrative Insecta of our public schools
Or one of those lumpen intellectuals in the Universities (poverty of tense and of
mode);
Serving in the diabetic church or among the sugarless police; as that hemorrhage of
our
Public lives, the Adman, selling us his well-boxed anal prowess; or as one of a dozen
hystericals
Thumping the boards for the glad war or the sad peace. All over the world, neurosis,
taking
Us into custody.

With a face like a doily,
Jane's mother looked as if

All her experiences had worn
Galoshes; her aim was not
To conceive but to stock-pile
Her children. And her husband—
His love was a hastily bought
Ticket, his good intentions
Always last in line.

We have dollars but none of us has sails.
We either suffer from engine failure,
Have forced landings, or become the branded
Animals of political cannibals. We devour
Our children then expect to regurgitate them whole.

We fathers are 'lower-case': the after-dinner
Speakers, the family matadors; AWOL with
Our poker hands, or off having affairs
With our new cars. We mothers are in 'caps':
The M.C.'s of our youngsters' bowels,
Charging hysterectomies to our credit cards;
The local piranha of the P.T.A.

With what are we rewarding ourselves: coarse
Durable uniforms and dislocated bones? The
Intellectually jobless? Brainless salvation?
Easily-ignited
Deductions and dead-drunk devotions? The
Piddling
Unriddled existence that always says, please?

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 23–25.

Della

Wearing a little false beard
Of ill-will and a toxic grin,
She rides hard the broomstick
Of her mother's defection.

With relish, relates such slivers
Of news as dogs being hit,
Babies breaking their legs,
Planes colliding with trains.
With her it's always Halloween.

How can we love her,
She can only be taken intravenously.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 26.

III

Teresa

So terrifying
Is her
Piety
That on
Her pronouncement
Of “grace”
The custard
Runs

She transforms
The class
Into a choir
Singing
Mary Had a Little Lamb

I find her
Bitten fingernails
All over the rug
In the shapes
Of little crosses

You can tell
How old she is
By counting the rings
Around her eyes

Sitting at the
Bottom
Of a wastebasket

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), p. 29.

Miss R.

Her bun, the spinster's monument,
Low on her neck.
Eyes: an unblinking brown,
But bare, like two worn slippers;
Nose: a long and porous objection
To the tyranny of an immodest mustache;
And a small and sensual mouth,
With not a trace on its lips
Of the lonely rooms it has devoured.

Her tall figure striding like a man's,
Raises a flag of gratitude
In each mother's eye,
Because she is the undisputed sovereign
Of their bully-boys,
So strong she rides them side-saddle.

The classroom proclaims her didactic prowess.
The children bear the stigmata
Of printed matter on their foreheads;
Their brains are black and blue
With homage to Dickens, Van Gogh,
And the brackish fragments of Melville.
Miss R.'s voice is always in italics
Even as she whispers her voice kicks.
Her large hands promise to knock children
Into the conscious salvation of Calculus-Made-Easy
And Idiomatic Russian.
When she is inspired distances are emptied
Of their horizons,
And she distributes roads.
For those children who have somewhere to go
She is their rucksack,
Overflowing with emergency provisions.

Once in a decade there comes a boy
Possessing the quality of being at
Right angles to the world;
In whose eyes plays the imperishable music

Of real ideas.
The day Ted first took his seat
She saw his mind soar up from its eyrie
Like an eagle, and succumbed.
Henceforth her dreams were Columbus-ridden
And she was robbed of rest.
He was bright but he needed leonine aims,
Her provocative regime for his irascible desires.
And the familiar ache burst in her bosom.

The hairy face of his father
Had frozen over, and the sentiment
His mother showed him
Seemed void of significance.
Family living was a dumb-show performance
Of rigid antics and unforgivable attentions.
He was like a bucket
Knocking against the sides of a well,
With no ready hand to pull him up.

And then the tall bony woman
Who looked like a female signor,
Chatting over a cup of dislike
With his mother, revealed to herself
She would train him for greatness.

Suddenly, the sunlight was all male,
And she basked in it.
Became as playful as a porpoise;
The active sweetness rose
From the games of the playyard
To permeate her pores,
And she laughed like a teen-age charlatan.

Her sense of faith was acute.
Arriving at seven,
She set up her room as a lover would.
Art prints, language records,
Materials of science, they each
Lay like relics of saints, open for homage;
All the skills of the past thirty years
Gathered as if at a convention.

At eight, he entered: the books
Opened their mouths and sang.
They looked at Cezanne,
Dug deep into Emily's iron-hearted fancies,
And undermined the school
With the Red Army Chorus.
He breathed with awe,
As if he'd been let in a mansion.
Though her lessons were dressed
In stern clothes, what she concealed
Wore a big hat, and he saw it,
And grew larger.

But at nine, when the others trouped in,
She changed;
It was like his visa had given out;
He seemed to stop breathing,
Only her eyes inhaled,
And he lost his footing;
Stumbled against the hardness in her
And fell, and was not helped up.

She was compelled to be harsh,
So much giving weakened her
—Until the next day,
When with her seven o'clock key,
She opened herself up again.

For weeks and months she spoon-fed him
The genius of the past,
Pounded as on an anvil
Shoeing his sensibility;
And feeding him, she nourished herself.

Now at night there was no longer time
For her old violin,
Stashed in its case near her antique fur,
Nor for solitaire,
Or the television she drank from
Like a bottle;
Engrossed as she was,

Proofreading her passion;
Transmuting its higher mathematics.

Her mood was unmistakable
And gossip spread like branches
Down a stream;
The men guffawed, the women shook their heads.
She became the inmate of every joke,
The resident of whispers,
The denizen of that jungle
We all, at one time, go headhunting in.

But the boy grew;
His once clumsy mind learned to dance,
But like those ethereal puffs of grace
That display at firsthand
A sizable calf,
His thinking was tough.

What Miss R. made him feel
Was that he was an heir to an estate,
And that the crucial part
Of his inheritance was himself.

He thought of her
As some divine giantess of nonidentity,
In the boughs of an enormous tree
Handing him apples,
Which somehow grew arms and cradled him.

He could intuit
That she was someone
A drowning man might grasp
To save himself, and being saved, discard;
And with unconscious cruelty
He grew more tender than he should,
And in her friendless room at night
The violin shuddered with misgivings.

Memories of other boys
Sighed through her like the wind:
Harvey, in thirty-four;
Dennis, in forty-six; and Ralph,

Irrepressible Ralph,
Whose grin had rolled under a wheel in...
She did not want to remember.

That this relationship
Was a tinderbox in which she would be
Reduced to ashes—as in the past—
She knew, but turned her back;
There was the present and her task.

Old age yawned at her from the mirror;
Impending retirement
Burned like a coal in her bosom.
Children had always stolen from her;
They sensed her devotion
And pressed it into service.
Now, at the end of her career,
She felt defrauded.

The workpapers she took home to correct
Stared at her like blueprints of deception.
The boy would graduate
And she would pocket—what?
A soft goodbye?
The visitations that would gutter
Like a candle—and then go out?

But the intrepid hope
That she had been part of someone
Sustained her.

And so the semester closed.
And when the last farewell
Escaped her door
She emptied desk and cleaned her blackboard
And robbed the vases of their flowers;
Martial law ruled her eye.

That night
There were solemn lakes in the sky.
Listening, the old violin
Heard the black clouds roll and break.
The spouts began to beat their drums...

And from the lawns
The cloud burst brought the gophers up
And escorted them brusquely down the gutters.

And if—or when—
The old maid launched her misery,
Who might know?
No one had ever heard.

Over the soiled rags of the sky
Sailed the tuneless flotilla of the rain.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 31–37.

Belinda

This five year old burglar
Has stolen me out of myself.
Without socks and in an
Emaciated dress, she
Titters and warbles and
Whistles and pokes the
Sun in the ribs.

This culturally-deprived
Mexican child dances
Upon nothing. Fortunately,
Joy has no need of soap
Or water—nor a ribbon
In its hair (children
Are its ribbons), it needs
Only the indestructible
Assent. And Belinda,
Little cicada, sings
Without any operatic
Ambitions. Life would
Not be worthwhile
If one could not throw
Snowballs at the Mona Lisa.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 38.

IV

Among the Tracts

Here, on all fours among their thoughts,
Play the children. One rolls a ball;
One, in the paddy wagon of his brother's arms,
Scowls; one leaves her urine on the lawn
For dogs to sniff; one, with crowds of ailments
Perched on his eyebrows, sucks his thumb, listens to it purr.

A treasury of the poorly-made litter the walks:
Games, toys and trikes; by evening forgotten,
Sluffed off on the grass by children
Who have been bailed out of every concern
Whose only terror is orthodontia
Or that their television might suddenly drop dead.

And while they sleep, what kind Brownies
Repark their rusting bikes, pick up their talking dolls,
Collect their guns, the rubber darts
Of their law-abiding bull's-eyes?

—What is this great runny nose of houses?
These streets, with their stenciled addresses on the curbs,
Baby-sit the kids, never allow them to forget
Behind what card they are filed at bedtime.

The lawn is laid out like an antimacassar
To hide the dirty ground;
And on the roof, the TV repairman
Stands like the Statue of Liberty.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 41–42.

Joan

It is because she has already
Volunteered her consent
That this child
Delights in refusals.

A hornless rhinoceros,
She wants me to wince
When I pat her on the head.
Behind my back, a scowl
Falls out of the open pages
Of her face, like a superfluous
Bookmark.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 43.

Gregory

Your foster mother's dead, goodbye, Gregory;
It's Christmas and you belong to the State.

For what are you looking so sad-eyed?
They have a tree there for you,
Trained staff and a fake Santa.

If horses had portfolios they would study you.
If books had lips they would probably bite you.
A monstrous little future is pasted on your forehead.

The matron, who brings you the last day, is a cheerleader,
But her affection is full of artificial preservatives;
The natural goodness is gone.
There remains only myself, a stage direction of this fraudulent school
Which, like a bank, closes at three.

Au revoir, Gregory, looking like a blank between teeth.
—Why the sobs?
I was only guaranteed for one year;
Read the fine print in your contract.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 44. In *Coastlines*, no. 12 (Spring 1959), "sad-eyed" reads "mournful" and "I was only guaranteed" reads "You were only guaranteed"; the book text is used here.

Parent Conference

Belligerent paint (emotionally disturbed) pours Jimmy on its hands;
Attention-getting sand (it has a low I.Q.) rubs Jimmy in its hair;
Pitiful clay (obviously retarded) chews Jimmy in its mouth;
Nothing, no, there is nothing that isn't found wanting
(With the exception of Jimmy) by Surrealist mother.

Has there ever existed a boy so downright handy
At flooding sinks? Or such a crackshot where
Collisions are concerned? Or with such a gift for amnesia?
This little beachcomber of the sandbox,
This bizarre little gourmet of his nose,
I can visualize him now, signing Bills
With one shoe off and one shoe on;
Blowing his straw paper at the French Ambassador;
Spilling his milk at the Summit.

The Republicans will most assuredly get him.

Yet, this Phi Beta Kappa of mishaps,
What a purveyor of joy: packs a grin like a gun;
A humor that says: experience is no palace;
Perfection can only be made from chemicals
And we are all naturalized citizens of someone else's conceptions...
Well, if the Presidency is never his—
Or anything else—what matter?
The world will treat our casualty lightly
And forgive the breakage.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 45–46.

Sonya

Her black bangs are better for her than any cereal;
Exquisitely frame the independent votes of her eyes.
Teacher must climb a stepladder to her answer
And only then to find a horse of delicious anticipation.
Sonya, your tongue frequents a grassy meadow.
Unique child, this ball's a superfluity;
You laugh in your throat as you throw it to me.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 47. An earlier text titled "Tanya" appeared in *Coastlines*, no. 9 (Winter 1957–58), p. 4; apart from the child's name and lineation, the texts agree.

V

Sisters

Laura: homely, silent; tattooed by her mother's
High voice lying in ambush for her;
Anne: a trophy of intercourse, pretty,
With large audible eyes and a backyard
Teeming with personnel. One: eaten into
By moths, the other: a chocolate-covered son.

Anne could scramble up that greased pole
Of her father's criterion like a monkey,
Whereas Laura failed over and over,
Could not even chin herself on the bar
Of a simple command. Full of the pins
Of good sense, both children were the able
Manikins of their parents' mania for
Self-sufficiency; large economy-size packages
Of reading and writing; two little drudges
In the forced-labor camp of their father's workbooks.

Eventually, Anne was double-promoted
While Laura was borne on the back of a siren
Past my room, past the horizon.
She died—unlike anything she had done in life—
With ease.

And all that remained were her A.B.C.'s,
Meandering like a painful train of crippled ants
Across her notebook.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 51.

Sammy

From an old coffee can,
A quarantined cricket
Is playing a concerto.
Large symphonic works,
In the shape of blades of grass,
Issue from a shoebox.

Stones and stamps and cat's eye marbles;
Sammy dreams, adrift,
In a sea of assemblage.
A lonely boy in a crowd of bottlecaps.

The children who relate only to animals
Or the inanimate,
They haul up their compliance
And cast off.

They do not speak—or if they do,
Their conversations are cross-eyed.
Anxiety is a mosquito
And they are full of bites.

It is you, Sammy,
In the jar with the clamped-down lid,
Wrestling with quiet.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 52.

Bob and Lance

Bob, toothless and shy, his eyes
Stringing a needle; Lance, listening
To no one but his friend's impaired
Speech. Arms entwined, they'd hike
Through every response, riding the
Rails of their own jokes.

The world's an old horror movie,
Boys, where you'll pay for every
Inch to be yourself. The ne'er-do-wells
Who pray on credit, the jinglers
Who don inhibition's cap and bells,
The anteaters whose offers have pimples
On them, in times to come will all
Be your teachers. Learn from them.

Recall this affection when you are
Old and most humane. And be proud.
It was love that made you good.
And as for brotherhood, tell Man,
Bob and Lance, what he must do:
Be his own highest bidder.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 53. *The Coastlines*, no. 12 (Spring 1959), text reads "eyes threading a needle" and uses a more expansive lineation.

Perry

His mouth: cloth;
Speech sewn
to the top
of his voice.

That inflexible jaw
And self-made exit
Made me lonely;
it said:
a grin
is a way
of escape;
I am
my own
Punch and Judy.

Perry,
Child of rags and wood,
You grasped my puppet's
Hand so hard
It pinched me
Into insight:
"I love and
will abuse
each child
who is
my caricature."

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 54.

The Divine Average

There was Mark, whose vision weighed a ton,
Becalmed on his two buck teeth;
And David of the right-angled ears;
And Judy, whose love for me announced
To all other children Standing Room Only;
And Bill, polite retcher, baritone of the
Wastebasket. Dressed in tongue-tied perfection:
Peggy, and Greta, a whiner, with a voice like
A forceps. Fifty-odd Lindas and eighty-one
Bobs; wet pants and hiccoughs;
Hundreds of miles of slightly crossed eyes.

These children will hitch a ride with anything
I say, burglarizing my words, my looks, my laugh,
Even my pretense at being stern... And that is
Just. Because in a sense, they are wet-nursing
Their future history. They have names,
They are in the custody of their nature.

They shall vote, give homage to and vase
Their opinions, yes and chase indiscretion
With hounds; because they are in sequence.

Salud, all my Bobs and Davids, Kathys
And Lindas, you are that extensible filament
Wound upon the firmament. Demand nothing
But your own direction; thread the deity.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 55–56. In *Coastlines*, no. 12 (Spring 1959), Bill is the “soloist” rather than the “baritone” of the wastebasket; the book also revises lineation and punctuation.

VI

Doris

Eyes filled with underweight
Expressions, and a pin in her voice,
Discovered her in my class
One day, stuck, like a piece of
Gum, to the bottom of my shoe.

She, one of too many children
I know, so politely mangled it
Makes me mournful to teach;
Sexless, glassy, a tuneless little
Sample for the kodak (“say cheese”),
Retiring more and more into her
Skin eruptions. Today, sent to me
In a peacock dress, she will not
Paint but remains crouched in
A corner, crushed, like a pack animal,
Beneath a mother’s ribbon.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), p. 59; reprinted in *Studio One*, vol. 7, no. 2 (Spring 1976), p. 62.

Larry

This pampered darling of his lunch pail
(His sandwiches need a truss),
Is the matinee idol
Of every hippopotamus.
Whales have crushes on him.
One look at him and basketballs
Lose their illusions.

What happens to the childhood
He pretends to play with?
Is it stored up for the winter,
For the long adult sleep?
Above his shadow, his thoughts fly South,
Where the girls he is afraid of talk to him,
And the boys proffer rides on their bikes...

What will become of him
In a world lighter-than-air?

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 60.

One Family

Diana, eleven, is the oldest; she dances
While all the time her mind is knitting;
Behind her face is a measure; she looks at you
And her eyes are writing like pencils.

Harry's wide open; no part of him that isn't let for rent.
For the promulgation of laughter
He has established a princely grin.
Yet, hovering over his lips, like a tiny moth,
Is the solemnity of an unseen mustache
That bristles like Moses to make seas open.

Cecilia is the kind of child who could barrel down Niagara
In round numbers. Her head is full of setting hens.
In that concise and sober suitcase she carries off to camp
There is nothing that hasn't been sworn into office.
Her puppets are all in their right minds.

Richard's logic has a hairy chest
And he bares it. He has no need of a teacher,
His questions water their own lawn.
Wherever his thoughts travel to, God only knows,
But they go on foot.

Here are parents who are not concerned over the digestibility of their opinions;
Whose home is without those toileted virtues
That have become so crucial to our culture,
Those certificated permissions to breathe in and breathe out.

These humans have vertebrae.
They possess the viscera of individuality.
Their lives have not been quarantined by television.
Nor do they fly their credit cards on Lincoln's Birthday.

You look upon them gravely sewing buttons on
Their identity and you know that because of them
A spirit exists in the world that is vertical.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 61–62.

Postgraduate

From the foxholes of status I pursue my degree,
This prescription-for-glasses learning.
My small strummers and drummers
Know more than these hairless memorials
Sucking at their stale anthologies' pieces of candy.

These profs are no match for the octopus-armed devotion,
The vision openly-prayed-for, of my children,
Who are better teachers and are never drunk on submission.

Kindergarten by day, at dusk, the University;
From the delirious surplus to the prissy donation.
The professors recline in the easy chairs of their
Minds, cavalierly distributing their ideas
Like so many urine specimens to impoverished
Lab technicians. The air is ponderous with
Their overly-masticated words and dessicated
Thoughts. The hours spent with them drag
Like barnacled anchors along a sea bottom.

How can anyone find the scent here among
These morticians and confidence-men? There
Is a diploma here for everything—except thought.

Principles, Curriculum, and Developmental Methods;
Psychological and Sociological Foundations;
Elementary Arts and Secondary Crafts;
Speech Problems and Human Geography;
The History of Aural Rehabilitation
For the Prematurely Blind—everything for
The training teacher but his subject:
The child.

There is little use in prostrating ourselves before textbooks,
We are the texts. What has Education to do with these
Anthills; with these hewers of wood and drawers of water? Mouths open and close,
We are infected only by our professor's colds.

To trim possibilities, that is the goal, and in so doing,
To become the parochial masseurs of insipid certainties. It is a contest

Of contradiction so let us ignore it. Better let us sail out
Toward the freakish environs where the answers are slim,
Where nothing lies under the Christmas tree but
Ourselves. There we can put to proof the power
Of being men and women in a joyful context; moving from the tame room
Into the membership of the air; marrying ourselves
Off, so to speak, to the earth. For we must remember
That institutions, by nature, tend to be murderous:
Say to us: come out with your hands up
—And there we stand, on the cross hair. At least
If we must close up our youth within these four
Walls we call seats of learning, let us cast out
The cigarette-burned lecterns and bring in kids
To teach them; educationally ‘pack in’; not go off
On safari with our library cards to shoot game
We’ll never eat. All these *Advanced Studies, Seminars, and Graduate Projects*
Are just a way of goading bulls to squander themselves on red flags.—Enough!

Teachers of tomorrow,
You far-reaching, super-excellent
Short order cooks for the common denominator,
Lift up the world’s dress and look!

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968), pp. 63–65.

VII

During the Summer

As lovely as a drop
Of water, friendly
As ink, a Sunflower,
With the sweetness
Of the bees in her eyes.

This morning, with a bit
Of bread, she sustained
A sparrow, and gave
The horses and cows
Her fingertips, and the
Puppy her thumb to lick.

I pass her on the
Road, a little soloist
Of the fields, escorting
The seasons on their
Enthusiastic rounds;
Her glance, as round
As a wheel; her
Forehead full of ships.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 69.

Billy

Looking like a
Chewed stubby pencil

With stick mouth
And Out To Lunch eyes

Since father expects
Only disasters

He gives him one daily
As a gift

Her smile reads
Keep Off the Grass

:No passport
To mother

In class
Sits in fist

Forging his
Signature

To every
Lost penny

And this is
His
Story:

Wetting
And

Awaiting
Arrest

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 70–71.

Jamie

Snowman of mirth, small hired hand, erase the board
But do not ever erase that infectious scribble on your face.

It is not important to discover what you celebrate,
The single and lovely animal within you that cavorts to make me happy,
The joy in you, Jamie, is a certificate of birth for everyone.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 72. First printed in *Coastlines*, no. 12 (Spring 1959), pp. 15–17; the wording is unchanged apart from lineation.

Joey

Ink, jam, chocolate, what does not pay you its respects?
There is not a grain of sand which has not been invited into your shoes.
Was a comb ever elected to run through your hair?

Pinching, pulling, prancing, puling,
The whole day is prickled with you.
That small cluster of flexible parts
Which is you, Joey,
Avalanches down on everyone's goodwill.

Funds are dolefully paid out to keep you clean,
To punctuate your warm palms with pennies,
But vengeful and mucid, you spill and shriek,
And welt the water glasses with your greasy thumbs
And buy up even more land with your homeless anger.

If this entire school despises you
It is because, poor child,
Your wrath engenders fluids:
You bring on all these old maids' periods.

Lord help us who can do nothing here
But aid and abet you like a crime—
Grafters all of us! (Pity is a
Minor and shall never gain the vote.)

God grant long life to your rages, Joey;
Our bruises belong to you if nothing else.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 73. The *Coastlines*, no. 9 (Winter 1957–58), text includes the additional line "Go, go be a paper on a Social Worker's desk" and revises the parenthetical passage; the book text is used here.

Kindergarten Teacher

Her intentions are to see that Blue
Is never painted next to Green,
And that the sexes use separate toilets.
Governed by the laws of washbasins, the
Children become little domestics
Of her hysteria.

Her spirit is like a wilderness;
Her face has no water hole. Every
Sham can burp her, any psychopath can
Have her for dessert. If she does love
Something she makes a meal out of it.
A few gray hairs
Are the extent of her ideas.

Today, while the boys and girls
Rest upon their backs, she plans
Her summer trip. Tickets
Take her nowhere.

She belongs to that all-powerful,
International body: The Association
For the Advancement of the Idea
That Intractable Children
Be Given Off As Vapor.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 74.

Thoughts at Dismissal

Down the rapids of three o'clock
The kids shoot home; forgotten,
A miraculous painting reels down
The street. Children do not need
You, you Sunday Sheriffs of the Lord,
They keep a pew in the weather;
The sun is their hat.

To teach—what does it mean?
It means to rise entire; to be
A birthmark; to be surrounded
By shoelaces and vegetarian
Lovemaking; to produce, from a
Milk-mustachioed Beethoven,
An unmistakable thumbprint on music.

Nothing these children say ever
Asks for wages. Their aspirations
Run around on bare feet. Their
Secrets all have diarrhea. And
These have been my ABC's:
Not to laugh as if I were running
For an office; not to be a stickler
Because certainty jilts us; not to
Have a baton or be a cold rifleman.

And as for smugness—when I behave
As if I'd been born in a manger,
The children all carry ear trumpets.

Lord, first, spare the children
From their parents; from the fools
As well as the pedantic maniacs;
One, bestowing lucrative devotion,
The other, bedridden with ethical
Discouragements.

Second, save them
From their teachers; the swamp-like
Ones, full of submerged refusals,

As well as those busy extending mangy
Invitations, the belligerent virgins.

Third, defend them from their governments;
The decrepit daydreams, the armed
Insistences, the clubfooted concessions
Of politicians.

Lastly, Lord, protect
Them from the war between the rich and
The poor; from a world in heat;
From round-shouldered Science standing at attention
Before the bemedaled cripple in the grandstand.

Publication. *The Pearl Is a Hardened Sinner: Notes from Kindergarten* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), pp. 75–76.

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