

Collected Poems

Wally Parker

June 1994 – August 1999

©1999 Wally Parker

Aftermath

In the gazebo rain 'twas thrillin',
Warm and wet and wild and willin',
And afterward the penicillin;
Thank God there weren't any chillin.

Balkan Lament

The days once shone here clear and bright
And children sang the dancing fields
Alive with flowers and butterflies and dreams.

The old men gathered under trees and smoked
And talked of time when time was young;
The young folks plied their various trades
And love suffused the void.
Naught could such a world disturb
Save time, adrift among the ageless rock,
The constant turning of the clock.

Then one black night it struck the hour,
And bloody claws of chaos slashed the peace
Of hearth and memory and work
And childhood, childhood fled.

A shimmering crimson thundered in the sky,
Drenching the rubble, the ruin, the unmoving dead—
So we might timely, timely see
That life ends in ignominy,
And life is all there is.

Honest Men

O my son courageously go
Forth like Diogenes the Greek,
But there's one thing you should know:
Honest men do not speak.

Love Jazz

Jazz is bar music, whorehouse music, riverboat music.
Jazz is heat and sweat and labor and sorrow.
Jazz is tears and heartache and laughter and love.
Jazz is rhythms and riffs embedded in some big thing,
Like seduction or despair, or a myth like someday,
The unrequited life redeemed only by love.
You work hard for the man and he fires you,
You adore someone and she leaves you,
You try to be good but your evil twin Skippy keeps charging stuff on your Visa,
That's how life really is.
But love lifts you over all that,
And so does jazz.
For booze and camaraderie and loose women
And three-card monte are not love,
But jazz is their song.
The music lives as long as love,
And sometimes longer.

Mary Hwana

Mary Hwana was her name
She was wild and I was tame
She was free and I was caged
She kept laughing while I raged.
In her bosom I could find
The rich warm milk of a peaceful mind
The floating tapestries of the blind
The song of leaves in the autumn wind.
But always when the morning came
My situation was the same
My hunger gnawed at me like pain
And roaches skittered through my brain.

The Road

Every day and all night long it flows
Always there and gone and coming 'round the bend;
So does the road pass under me,
Beneath my feet, my wheels, my wings
And sometimes even my notice.
Gathered from trails and springs
Trickling down mountainsides like old prospectors wandering in
On trackless strands of ancient dreams,
Mile after mile after mile it winds
Through space and time, and here and there, and now and then,
Building a world of happenings
Known and unknown, mournings and rejoicings,
The stuff and hubbub of a life.

Their Crest Fallen

These, my brothers and sisters, my dear friends—
Poets, painters, peers, lovers, muses, and maniacs all,
These with whom I stood and lay abed,
These with whom I laughed and wept, drank and talked,
Who shared my life and me, when we were young,
These are gone.
Drugs and sin killed some of them
And some ineffable pain the rest.
All long years before their time,
Before the time of reflection, resignation, and regret.
For that,
Perhaps they got the better of it.

Then and Now

Ages and ages and ages ago,
Enemies swarmed at the edge of the land;
Danger was near if not yet at hand;
Warriors girded themselves for the fray;
Women and children kept out of the way.

The sun sets now in a sea of grief;
The night is long and full of dread;
The shark glides o'er the silent reef
Guarding the stillness of the dead.

Up Yous

Lookee here, boy, this here's a nice town.
 We don't care for the kind of person who
 When everyone else is iced down,
 Wants to get up you.
 Or who when we would say all's well
 And clean and fit,
 Dredges up sins from the bowels of hell
 And says, oh, lookee here—shit!
 You wanna seek a grail?
 Start a new sex, or save a whale.
 Better yet, sign up with Nike,
 Buy a girdle and pump yer bikey.
 (If you really have a thirst
 To act treasonable,
 Eat some Prozac first—
 It'll make you more reasonable.)
 'Course we believe in freedom of speech
 Providin' nobody's lisnin',
 But don't ridicule our poppinjays
 Nor muddle our children nor mock our ways.
 See, we're just plain folks here,
 Fancy nuthin', nuthin' queer.
 We don't want no uptown Armageddon;
 We just want to sit around and be leaden.
 (Or is that led-on?)
 No need to frown,
 Don't make no never mind to us'n,
 Jest put yer show on a bus'n
 Get outta town.

Adrift

All day this day she drifted by,
 as a hungry hawk turned soaring circles in the pale blue sky,
 as a tiny frightened fawn, brown eyes agape with fear, burst bounding like an unsprung toy across the road,
 as I wrestled recalcitrant computers in my client's office and later while I washed my car,
 as she lay alone in her bedroom dreaming and thinking and scrawling verses in the log of her heart's adventures,
 as I waited for my lunchtime milkshake and sandwich and idly commented to the shopkeeper that this Monday seemed oddly like Friday,
 as a cat wriggled fitfully in the dusty gravel, scratching its back until suddenly it stopped, seeming puzzled to find itself there,
 as death whistled over the hapless hamlets of Bosnia and Congressmen dallied in king-sized estates of graven silicon reflected in oilpools and owned by pint-sized men with charts charting all their unhappiness,
 as the coffeepot embraced its warm cargo of dark liquor on the daylong stove,
 as we talked about not-mattering poems and publishers pandering to prideful poetasters, and broken bindings and fraying stitchery and shelves of books glued together like lost and now forever silent days,
 as the earth spun and hurtled down the long-frozen corridors of space on its empty journey from unheard shout to unspeakable whimper,
 as the coffers of charity turned dry to careless dust and prisons filled with the debris of dumb dissent and young girls fell in and through and out of love's porous embrace—water being no thicker now than it was for the Vestal virgins,
 as sunlight flickered lazily through the drying leaves and the wind wandered aimlessly, murmuring through the borques,
 as I talked and ate and listened at the writers' group, where dubious manuscripts swirled in a yellow smog of mostly disinterested criticism,
 as she chatted in a private virtual room with someone about something, telling me afterward that she was blue,
 as Antares slipped southward in the night blackness ahead of the light of the late waning moon,
 all day I felt her drifting by,
 until,
 as the lines between us faltered, flickering and dying, she, in response to my awkward anguish at the prospect of our imminent separation, sent words that echoed long into the midnight silence:
 "Perhaps it's just as well."
 Then she and the day slipped away.

Butterfly

As lissome as a lilting leaf aloft,
from nowhere she appears on summer's breeze,
afloat the zephyr's warm and endless seas
'neath flutt'ring sails of gold and velvet hue.
Upon a bract of crimson pimpernel
she lights to sip the nectar from its cup,
a drop of hope as weightless as herself,
then rises with a flick of sudden wings.

And in the darkness afterward,
as glist'ning glowworms dance among the trees
and paint their sylphan song upon the night,
with senses wrought anew I hear a hush,
the whisper of her lashes' downy ease
that draws conclusion's curtain o'er her day,
and dreams on silent gloried wing again
lift insubstantial beauty to the light.

Chameleon's Frog

The old beat poet conjured up
 stark images: of Alfred Stieglitz
 (glaring streetlights burning holes in wet black pavement)
 and Pablo Neruda
 (who can tear the peel away from an orange
 so compellingly that its sputter stings your eyes)
 and Basho's splashing frog--
 while we sat still in the stiff square room,
 at once bright and pallid in its sterile whiteness,
 baubled with pictures of other pictures,
 icons of Chopin and Verdi, music by Picasso and Renoir
 (though nobody knew who they were).

And the buildings outside are painted in mauve and teal and sun-bleached shades of gray,
 and bear on their flat roofs
 great vented iron boxes that squeeze ordinary air into something
 better for your shopping comfort and other diseases,
 and have false fronts--pride of western architecture--and balconies nobody sits on
 that overlook a nearby shop where the glory of dead indians
 is sold along with whatever is left of their heritage,
 and small tables for two, rumped and used, stand strewn on the sidewalk of abandoned
 dreams.

A freight train drew near and thundered by,
 hammering the earth and shocking the air as it passed,
 then suddenly the roaring noise was swept by silence down the rails and I saw that
 it had no caboose,
 like a great fleeing lizard, bit by some pursuing beast, had lost its tail.

Nothing seems quite real anymore, nothing we know, nothing we feel.
 Nowadays all is relative, rational and statistical--
 no beginnings, no endings, no in-betweens.
 No dim lights, no dark wood, no cigarette smoke, no hum of conversation,

no candles, no rude hiss of the espresso pot, no chess game in the corner,
 no neurotic artists burdened with existential angst,
 no young girls' eyes pellucid with adventurous optimism.
 In short, no mood.

After the poetry I discovered that a book by Whitney Otto,
 which my friend the judge had given me earlier in the day,
 contained in its brief prologue references to both Stieglitz and Neruda
 and even something about frogs (but no mention of Basho);
 and I recalled perusing a book of Setsuko Segawa,
 the wife of Roland Hanselman her publisher
 who brought one winter's day a heaping truckload of firewood
 in return for some long-forgotten favor.
 I didn't buy that book,
 but here in this book's prologue was her name.

What once was foreground now is faded;
 where once there were events now there are only conditions;
 and trains have no cabooses.

Basho's ancient pond
 is a child's cardboard box.
 The frog leaps instinctively, desperately, but cannot escape;
 the sound of its heavy round body slapping high against the side,
 falling again to the dry bottom,
 legs akimbo.

Epilogue

No princess will kiss you this time, old frog,
 and Basho is dead. You have been captured by a child
 who has long since forgotten you. Your universe now
 is dark and small on all sides, everywhere the same. And leap
 though you will, hurling yourself against this incomprehensible darkness,
 there will be no happy splash.

Cindy Vine

Happy girl,
I'd like to fuck you silly,
insinuate myself into your soul,
praise and adore your auburn-robed cunt
'til your clit shoots stars like a roman candle,
then spend a long, languorous afternoon in bed
weaving obscure philosophical notions and
spinning the sinuous labyrinths of love,
and stroll the fragrant even's still
laughing aburst our being
here together.

Columbus

Five hundred years ago,
Give or take a few—
Nobody will miss them now—
Some captain from his jaunty ship
Set foot on foreign soil
Which he thought new, and we,
To whom it is now old,
Enshrine his memory,
Well, his name anyway, for
That is all we can remember.
And yet that was the least
Of it. The least of the ships,
The sickness, the hardtack; sour water,
Rotting vegetables, and hard
Beds bucking on hard seas;
The dread of endless sailing
In empty nights, unseen,
Suspended in a fog of absence,
Surrounded by nothing
But creaking wood and wet rope
And tar and foul men cursing
And dice and Christ and
The silent lookout looking
Out but into a fog that
Saw only his face staring
Back at him from some
Time and place,
Undifferent and unsame,
Unchanged, as if upon this sea,
Forever pressing forward, one
Might never get anywhere,
But merely sweat and bleed

One's miserable life into
The bobbing ship until at last
One's grimacing corpse might
Slip down to rest no wiser
And unprogressed from
Whence it came. While
Back ashore in memory's lee
There waited word the
Widows, and the skeptical priests,
Each hoping the other mistaken,
Living the days in measured step,
One after the other,
Hour by hour in the same fog,
Beyond all reference,
Until one day the water's edge
Bore ships and men
And news of something far away,
And small treasures on the eyes of corpses.
For a brief respite of time
An easy recumbency ensued until,
One ordinary day,
On a wind that bore
The alluring siren's song,
They sailed again away,
A hundred men, a ship or two,
Give or take a few,
To try the darkest secrets
Of the deep and endless sea—
In time nobody would miss them.

Conquest

It's dark out there,
Dark with unknowing
How far, how deep, how fright
With angry demons and ennui,
With tears and fears and
Self-recriminations we
Cannot but imagine. Only
One path leads to light,
And that's the journey
Through the night.

Daedalus

I loved a star.
It shone there like a jewel
In time-deep darkness of the sky,
Winking at me and calling,
Come, be with me;
And I would, and I yearned to be
In such a faroff shining place,
At peace draped motionless in space;
A fire-ice beauty calm and grace,
Beyond the world I'd ever see—
Adventure of a million years,
A billion miles or more
From this green-mirrored night;
And all my heart and soul and self,
Though placed in service to its glory,
Were as nothing to its story;
Earthbound I and words writ still upon the page,
Further than life apart from love
But borne in all the dreams we dream,
Our loving far and from afar
What near we know would heaven seem,
Those worlds that we shall never know,
No matter pined or keened
Nor wept and murmured o'er;
They sail in heaven's blackened vault
While we remain ashore.

echo of the fox

the challenging whoop of a cunning fox
tumbles through the frozen light,
a ghostly bark from a swirling fog
abob black memory's sea.
i put my fingers in my ears,
the tip of an index in each,
'cause i don't wanna hear it anymore—
i don't wanna reach,
i don't wanna,
i don't.
i yewsta touch, see, smell, and taste it,
joined hearts with it, commingled,
felt with my full body
when my body was fully felt.
but now when it rises, i
touch nothing
see nothing,
smell nothing,
taste nothing,
feel nothing.
i stopper myself against the noisy world,
and find
the fox within me,
laughing his silver laughs
on the hillsides of my dreams.

Exorcism

I know this
about love:
once gone,
it's gone.
Curiously like life,
unstoppable
when emergent,
emulsified
in detergent,
irretrievably
divergent.

Fly Free

Fly free, my little russet bird,
Upon the restless wind fly free.
I'll miss your gentle anemie
And all your saucy, subtle ways.
Perhaps some sunny day each spring
When winter's a forgotten word
You'll light upon a nearby tree
And lift your voice again for me,
Recalling those few yesterdays
To sweet and sad remembering.

Garden fantasy

A memory drifted through the afternoon of my mind
and, tippy-toe, I followed it here,
beneath this ancient weeping willow tree,
upon a rippling sea of violet-blue and yellow flowers
fingering up from the black earth, in the slow peace
of summer's zephyr-raptured shade,
where it paused for a wink and smiled in me.
O, I was happy for that little rift in time
when the mourning mask of anguish o'er your absent face
for one brief imagining was lifted like a veil
and your lips pressed soft on mine.

Gettysburg

In the fields of Gettysburg,
One bright hot morning in July
A boy adorned in gray
Spotted another clad in blue,
And for three days thence
The horses whinnied and shied and fell,
The cannon roared, the muskets spat
The bayonet steel pierced hard-ridged bellies
And lead shattered bones and iron shards flew
And many boys' blood soaked the brown earth red
And green and gray and blue they rusted too
And all about were strewn the dying and the dead
Sighing and moaning, still and lost
In the wild-eyed commotion of war.
Today the shrubbery recaptures the land
And souvenir hunters look for patinated
Slugs in the dust, and maybe something
More, and four-color brochures say
Here, here on this spot, a thousand,
Nay, ten thousand men were laid to waste
In a withering hail of cannon grape and rifle fire,
Right here it was, on this rolling sweep of grass
Once rich with oats, or grazed by sheep, now bare of joy,
Where one day life was nothing and honor everything,
Where hatred, duty, flags and fear
Flared forth ferocious fury on the shuddering land.
And now, having forgotten all that can be of such things,
The warm air turns slowly in the endless silence,
Thick and redolent with fragrant honeysuckle.

goodbye, david

for a fallen warrior (Jan. 4, '54 - Feb. 12, '95)

goodbye now, david, and godspeed;
i pray your soul for nothing need.
you're on the journey we all dread;
i hope you've found its end instead
a heavenly green and happy place
where men unburdened rise to grace,
where men of tender mind are kings,
where men who once were boys return
to boyish joy and childlike bourn,
to simpler days and simpler things,
to days when boyish thoughts had wings,
to times when boyish hopes made sense,
before life's history leaped the fence
and placed itself athwart intents
and conjured up the sad laments,
the ceaseless frantic measurings
of all things past against the day,
as if in that consuméd way
the grief might simply disappear,
the grief that haunted every fear,
the angry grief that would not go,
that ripped your poor heart to and fro,
the loss of boyhood never known,
the manhood thrust upon a throne
where tara's kings beheld with joy
an emerald swath of sward,
a bit too heavy for a boy
to carry to his lord.

I cannot think about tomorrow

I cannot think about tomorrow,
Only today;
I cannot think about sorrow,
Only the play
Of a smile on your cheeks,
Hiding itself for an instant from your lips,
Dancing deep in your azure eyes,
Wriggling along your nose,
Humming softly in your throat,
Skipping across your tongue
Then bursting with mischievous glee
Upon your sweet mouth,
Raised up to me so I,
Blessed among men,
May with a kiss
Drink of the joy
That flowers in you.

Living Alone

I used to live alone, didn't I?
I lived alone, in a room with a hotplate, and a brass bed,
And read *Steppenwolf*.
With ten dollars, I hitchhiked to San Francisco
And one sunny afternoon in a park
A couple who'd heard me reading my poetry
At a coffeehouse in Pittsburgh
Discovered then fed and feted me for days.
I browsed in the City Lights bookstore,
Hung around the jazz clubs, howled in the black night,
Went to the beach at Big Sur to see Henry Miller,
Who was away, in Europe, with Anaïs Nin.
Later on I drove back across the country,
In a '34 Chevy with mechanical brakes, at 42 miles an hour.
Past the ticky-tacky tracts along the freeway
Pink and gold in the setting Sacramento sun,
Past the eerily shadowed cliffs and canyons
Of southern Wyoming under a full moon,
Past the endless rows of green Nebraska corn
And the crickets whose chirping charged the evening air,
Past the smiling farmer's daughter in the crimson Iowa sunset
Whose family served a repast twice fit for a king
And whose backyard grass was full of chiggers.
When I returned, my girlfriend Annie,
With whom I'd shared the brass bed once or twice,
Told me she'd been pregnant in my absence
But lost the baby in the toilet
At the end of her first trimester.
It was a boy.

She thought one night if we got married
Her parents would accept our being together,
But her mother, whose histrionics always
Left Annie covered with suppurating sores,
Screamed and fainted when she heard the news.
Her old boyfriends did stop shooting at her, though,
And calling her a hundred times a day,
So it wasn't entirely bad and at first it was pretty good.
All the while and soon again
She drank too much and you couldn't blame her,
But I grew careless of her oft-upwelling grief
And finally, provoked by my faithless meanderings,
She moved to Greenwich Village.
I remember carrying her steamer trunk, like Tenzig Norgay,
Up five flights of steep and narrow marble stairs
Into a dark, depressing suite of rooms.
In time she took up sailing, no doubt to ease her heart
Upon the black gliding water and the pressing breeze.
Then one spring day she nosed her tiny craft
Out into a fierce nor'easter gale arising on the sound,
A gossamer sacrifice to the graying gods of rage,
And set herself free.

Now and Then

Now and then I sense a memory of you,
I feel again the love you lifted
Up from the dark sediment of my forgotten heart,
Raised roiling through the leaden sea,
Shouted into the bright air and the sky above
In celebration of all life.
And you, this breath of you,
This half-glimpsed shade, sudden remembrance,
Scours my empty heart anew.
And the sea flows out from my eyes
And the cold air shrivels the sky
And wrinkled and dry
I am vacant and lost.
Memory shouts me skyward;
Absence flings me back again
Into the still water, down
Into the deep black silt, stirred
Slightly as I weep, down
Into the detritus of time
And the endless forgetting, down
Until I am once again alone
And you are once again gone.

Recession

How is it that we can recall
Each moment, well perhaps not all,
From time and miles away—
A day of walking in the rain,
A face, a whispered kiss,
A thing that was, when all
The threads of being crossed
Time's threshold and became,
So later we could think of this
And label it a name
And live in mind the moment o'er
A fading and obscure until,
Not once repeated evermore,
It softens
And is still?

Sand and Silk

Sand and silk, silver and cinnabar
spin in the sky-blue eyes,
separating body from soul.

And I know life is this
body business but
I know this in my mind, which
itself is beyond, in metaphor,
metalanguage, metabody,
a name for life, which knows
only that it is.

And my words that soar
and the things that bleed for them,
once so naturally one
are two now: sand and silk,
silver and cinnabar.

And I am afraid
of accompaniment,
of being alone,
of gatherings,
but mostly of separations—
body from soul,
words from things,
love from love,
earth from sky,
sand from silk,
silver from cinnabar.

The Rustic Bunting

One day whilst I was out a-hunting
I chanced to spy an Asian bunting.
Much admired I its effrontery,
Coming here from another country,
But I was troubled by other theses,
Such as that, being a foreign critter,
It couldn't set other birds' hearts a-twitter
And soon would become an endangered species.

Down would come my house, down would come yours;
Trees would be planted where once were boudoirs;
Pleas would go out to the yellow races
For fecund young buntings from faraway places
That we could transplant, to save from demise
A bird that had never been seen in our skies.
I listened to the bunting sing,
Watched it turn upon the wing,
Felt sorrow for the poor lost thing,
Then fit a pebble in my sling.

From a painting by Edward Hopper entitled
Eleven A.M., 1926

*“The loneliness thing is overdone,”
 said Edward Hopper about his work’s work
 on the souls of its respondents,
 but always his subjects are alone,
 even in their plurality, sharing
 a counter or a bed.
 Perhaps they are lonely, but
 surely they are alone,
 and the world in which the painter
 silences them echoes their solitude.*

Here is the girl, white and
 auburn-haired, pensive
 before the open window and its sill;
 beneath the picture,
 touched by the solemn light.
 Here are the shoes, the book, the lamp,
 the furniture, the hidden hallway beyond,
 and the other beyond, outside the window,
 where the world is
 impersonal, unknowing, inhospitable.
 Perhaps that’s why Hopper made
 the walls so thick.

Her cotton shift lies draped across the sofa;
 it’s a warm day already and not even noon.
 The curtains are uncharacteristically still.
 The wind seldom stirs in a hole in the ground.
 The afternoon will be torpid.

Alone, in 1926, without a job
 (for I’m sure Hopper’s subjects knew only weekdays),
 she has few options.
 She has been out today, looking for work.
 She is regrouping her forces,

reassessing her strategy.

There's something about the luxuriance of her hair,
 the assertive grace of her posture,
 the confident and comfortable clasp of her hands,
 the pride and curiosity reflected in her face,
 barely more to us than the tip of a nose,
 something that assures us she will prevail.

Stephen Dunn, in his poem *Impediment*,
 written about this painting,
 said the gloom outside this window is
 "obdurate."

But she,
 soft and pale and draped by
 her silken cowl of chestnut strands,
 is more obdurate still.

He thinks she's not yet dressed,
 I that she's not redressed,
 yet we agree:
 something stays her here.

He perceives a force out there,
 deployed against her will;
 I think it's solitude,
 gathering itself within her.

We are alone,
 and there are times we feel it keenly.
 It isn't then another heart we crave,
 although it may be also that,
 it is rather always ourselves.

From a painting by Edward Hopper entitled
Excursion into Philosophy, 1959

*Over brown earth trod
 Brown shoes, brown shirt, brown hair, brown eyes,
 A man of mud,
 Seeking God among
 The rectangles
 Of field, fenestra, floor and folio.
 Where am I? What is this?
 What can happen now but an endless
 Rectangular repetition of suffering?
 Philosophy
 Knows nothing of this.*

Beyond, outside the window,
 rectangle among rectangles,
 a breathless yellow light,
 relentless,
 scouring the endless plain,
 spilling across the red-painted floor,
 a yellow glare,
 reflected on the wall.

(In every reflection a green cast,
 in every shadow's edge a violet flame.
 Delacroix said this.)

She lies, red lingerie awry,
 her round red buttocks
 nakedly insensate
 in red-haired sleep,
 aloof and apart.

The book half-read
 is laid aside, beneath imaginary trees
 caught in yet another rectangular world,

their solace unseen, unfelt,
and like the despair
of dry and yellowed love
lost, lost among rectangles,
unfound in the dry and yellowed pages
of books of woven wisdom,
like the still, gaunt, unseeing stare,
unheard, unspeakable.

From a painting by Edward Hopper entitled
Moonlight Interior, 1921 – 23

Outside the wide-eyed open sash
 All the world's smooth-strutting geometry,
 Fateful but asleep, swathed in long shadows,
 Hidden from southing Selene in a starless sky,
 Makes no pretense to know or care
 Of life's complexities.

Slowly she savors the silent words
 Caressing her deliberate nakedness,
 Peeling from her toe the last
 Shred of pretending.
 Yet keeping still her
 Bracelet and spectacles,
 More charming than her nose,
 As much a part.
 She is no ingenue, but young,
 Rounded, but firm,
 With hair of russet silk that nestles and flows
 Affinitively upon her luminous skin.

The warm zephyr's balm
 Is felt but unappraised,
 Like the white marble sill and its milk glass jug,
 Full with flowery sweet ablution
 To chasten a lifeless world,
 While inside the room the brush strokes fly;
 Something emerges from the wall, where
 Something always is
 Watching.

She loves this book.
She presses her naked self upon it.
Even as she is a moth enrapt
In the mystical eye of the moon
And the mute nocturnal mind of sleep,
She flutters through corridors of time
Toward some other mythic eve,
Beyond the breeze-puffed chintz chiffon
Beyond cool marble's somber gloom
Beyond the evanescent glow,
To someplace make-believe,
Emergent from the dancing words,
A softly nuanced glen of dreams
Beyond what is and what it seems.

From a painting by Edward Hopper entitled
Nighthawks, 1942

“You’ll die from smoking those things.”
“I’ll die from not smoking ’em.”
“My last boyfriend made me quit.”
“What else did he give you?”
“What do you mean?”
“He isn’t here, is he?”
She blushes. “He left me.”
“What did he leave you?”
She whisks at his upper arm playfully
with her fingertips. “You, maybe,” she says,
blushing again.
He picks up the cigarette pack and flicks one up.
She takes it.
“Thanks,” she says as he lights it for her.
He shrugs. “I’ll be dead soon anyway.”

The Japanese cover the Pacific like stinging bees
 and threaten Australia,
 Prince and Valiant of the Empire.

Hitler with his preening minions, like Napoleon,
 whom he has vanquished, and all of Europe before him
 (all Victorians come what may),
 besieges Moscow and Tchaikovsky and Tolstoy,
 Leningrad and Dostoyevski,
 rumbles through the bestial Balkan belly
 like Beelzebub’s revenge,

Smashes down the bedroom doors of children
 in the shrill nightmarish madness
 of terrible screaming and blood
 that hatred calls home.

Everyone works in America. Everyone
 who’s not out there, out there

beyond this simple empty night,
shivering with fear and fever in the jungles of Borneo
or numb in icy sleet off Vladivostok.
Everyone works.

On the way home from eight hours' taxi dancing
or rivet-chasing
and a half hour for supper
that doesn't count toward your time,
or from a long day at the newspaper,
setting lead slugs backward in wooden trays,
and trying not to
lose a line, or an ending,
And having no one waiting at home,
not even a cat,
you stop at the corner cafe for coffee
where at half past two in the darkness of a summer's eve,
the quiet night lulled by the dull thunder of factories
that never sleep,

The counterman will greet you,
the coffee will be hot and maybe
someone you can talk to will be there
or show up in your cup.

You could get lucky.
Anyway, it passes the time,
and somebody knows
you're still alive.

On the Info Highway

I met her on the info highway;
She said her way could be my way:
All I had to do was spank her,
Call her ugly and not thank her.
She in turn would whack my willy,
Boff me 'til I turned to jelly,
Melt my screen with glyphic moaning,
Grinding, grimacing and groaning.
She asked but that I abuse her,
Slap her silly and accuse her,
Call her rotten, weak and evil,
Daughter of the very Devil.
If I vividly thus beat her,
She would lavish on my peter
More affection in an hour
Than I give him in the shower.
Sucking, fucking, slippery friction
If I smacked her with conviction,
Took my hairbrush to her fanny
After pulling down her jammies.
She would take me to nirvana,
Play the keys on my piana,
Type sweet nothings to my eyes,
Transport me to paradise;
Lift her skirt and bare her pussy,
Act just like a brazen hussy,
Right there on the info highway,
She said her way could be my way.

New World *Hors D'Oeuvre*

The order of the world is new,
 So they've been telling me, and you
 Believe it, do you not,
 That war once cold is peace now, hot
 And hazy ingenue of Camelot?

A new day dawns upon this earth,
 Respecting every people's worth,
 Excepting for a few:
 The muslim, catholic and jew,
 And those undower'd like me and you.

New opportunities arise
 For us to reach out o'er the skies,
 For dreams we all possess;
 For freedom, life and happiness,
 The new world's gift—or is it just a prize?

That's it, you know, it's not for all;
 The orderers will have a ball,
 But for the orderees
 There will be echoes in the breeze
 That blows through Arthur's long-abandoned hall.

Puma

If you could train a cougar
 To take no game but deer,
 To gently call its cubs away
 When humans come too near,
 Well, folks could maybe tolerate
 A lion in their trees:
 It won't eat foliage, flowers or fruit,
 And doesn't roam in threes.

But mountain lion's a lonely life;
 There's game for just a few;
 It takes a lot of rabbits
 To see the winter through.
 The cougar's hungry in the wild
 And hungry in the hills;
 The cougar ranges far and wide
 For necessary kills.
 Three hundred pounds of shadowy speed,
 It strikes from where it can:
 A gopher, squirrel, snake or grouse,
 A cat chick sheep pig horse cow llama dog, or man.

No, you can't train a cougar
 To be a pussycat;
 The cougar's far too smart and strong
 And free for that.
 So set a trap or tree the beast
 And take it to the wild,
 Where it can live its life in peace
 Unharmd by errant child.

Àte

*(it rhymes with weighty, or naughty,
depending on how you ape the A)*

Àte—named after the Greek goddess—was a dog,
 Gray as fog, trimmed in black, sleek, lithe and strong,
 A shepherdess with husky breadth and voice.
 Àte lived with a maid in the cornstalk hills,
 Pranced in the morning dew, ears proud, tail askew,
 Wagged once with baleful eyes beside the hearth.
 Àte, abundant with young *esprit*, ran in her
 Long violet evenings among a coterie
 Of domestic pretenders to the carefree call of the wild.
 And one night, later than usual, her dearest friend,
 Napoleon, a saluki, and she like Assyrian wolves fell
 Among the dithering sheep, and slew many.
 The shepherd shot Napoleon, but Àte ran away.
 Napoleon died. And Àte's rôle was known.
 The red queen of justice declared a sentence of death.
 For a dog there's nothing more fun than killing sheep.
 Apparently they die of fright if you say "boeuf" to them.
 It's a hypothalamic thrill. The consummate canine experience.
 A grief-struck maid performed the final rite at home.
 She dug and wept, aimed and fired. And stilled the earth again.

Try Poetry

Must it have rhythm? May it have rhyme?
Ought it be quotable, some of the time?
Shall it not stray from its metrical beat?
Double its accent? Dangle its feet?

Mightn't one slip a pronuncial sequence
Oft'ner than once into proximal lines?
Or will the tongue that such melody frequents
Tangle itself in those sinuous vines?

Poetry's brewers ferment and distill
The essence of being divine and profane;
Writers write verses however they will,
Which readers delight in, decry or disdain.

When is it poetry? When is it prose?
Nobody, nobody, nobody knows.

Night by the Moor

It was near Winter Solstice
And all through the hut
The wind blew the snowflakes
That covered the mutt.

The tube socks were hung
By the stovepipe with care,
In hopes that they'd dry out
Before their next wear.

The children were snoring
All wrapped in their panes
While visions of aliens
Chirped through their brains.

Mama in her tent dress,
And I in my tears,
Had just nodded off
After too many beers.

When out in the yard
There arose such a ruckus
I thought a tornado
Was going to upsuck us.

Aroused from my torpor
I clomped to the door;
I flung it wide open
And fell to the floor.

The wind was a-howling,
And icy and loud,
But into the darkness
I peered from my shroud.

And what to my unfocused
Eyes did appear
But a clunky old pickup
With only one gear.

Then down from its cabin
There stepped a wee elf,
All dressed in red vinyl,
Much-pleased with himself.

He had red suspenders
To hold up his pants,
And little red booties
That helped him to dance.

His one eye was glassy
The other did twitch,
And I knew from his swagger
It must be Saint Niche.

"I'll come through the door,
If you don't mind," he said.
"Damn stovepipes are dirty,
And I'm about dead."

"Well, who the hell are ya?"
I asked in reply;
"And don't wake the wife up
Unless you can fly."

"The Big Guy is busy,"
He said to explain.
"You wouldn't believe
How the packages rain

“On some of these people
With money to burn,
And credit their dreams
Haven’t power to earn.

“But never mind that,
I’m a substitute Santa;
I cover the poor folks
From Maine to Atlanta.”

So I let him inside
With his muddy red suit
And his ruddy red cheeks
And his sack full of loot.

And as he stood warming
Himself by the stove,
He surveyed our diggings
And took off a glove.

With practiced precision
He took from his bag
Some brightly wrapped boxes
With ribbons and swag.

And these he stacked artful
Beneath our small tree;
A few were for Mama,
A few were for me.

“But what about Timmy,
And Johnny?” I cried.
“And what about Esther,
And Susie, and Clyde?”

“Well, substitute Santas
Have one rule we rue:
That gifts for the children
Means no gifts for you.”

He looked at me queerly
To see what I’d say.
“You must make your mind up;
I haven’t all day.

“The Santa list finds them
All wanting a lot:
For Timmy’s a forger,
And Johnny grows pot,

“And Esther’s a hooker,
And Susie’s a thief,
And Clyde masturbates
In his crib for relief.”

“Our poor offspring are not,”
I said, “angels of course,
But I don’t see what business
That could be of yours.

“They’ve bad genes and no jeans
But nevertheless,
It seems they’re deserving
Of Santa’s largesse.

“My Johnny’s green thumb
Helps to ease my glaucoma,
And Tim’s handiwork
Has appeared in the MOMA.

“My Susie swiped hair dye
 For Mama’s old wig,
 And Esther puts out
 To get slop for the pig.

“Of Clyde’s little habit
 I cannot complain;
 It saves us from having
 To burp him again.

“So if you don’t mind,
 If it’s *quo* for your *quids*,
 Take back these gifts
 And leave some for the kids.”

“All righty,” he shrugged
 As he picked up the presents;
 “I swear if I weren’t one
 I’d never get peasants.”

For Timmy a graver,
 For Johnny a bong,
 For Esther a black book
 Of Erica Jong.

For Susie a bottle
 Of auburn noblesse,
 For baby a hanky
 For times of distress.

These gifts he did dole out
 While sucking his Dutch,
 As if even this stuff
 Was overly much.

Then sticking his pinky
 Inside of his nose,
 He skipped out the door
 On the tips of his toes.

He started his truck
 With a belch and a cough
 And beeped on his horn
 ’Til I bade him be off.

“On Amex! On Diners,
 Discover and VISA!
 On MasterCard drawn on
 The Last Bank of Pisa!”

He urged forth his ponies
 With obvious glee.
 He’d left not a cowpie
 For Mama or me.

And at last he did shout
 As he slipped out of view:
 “Hey, if you’ve got no money,
 It’s *No más* for you.”