

PROPHECY IN THE NEWS

AND OTHER POEMS

by

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BLOWFISH

she
floats above
the old hide-a-bed
on a string spiny stupid
goggly eyes tough-skinned the dried flesh
blown up to three times its flaccid size a souvenir
the preposterous porcupine fish
the puffer its cupid's-bow
mouth like Jean Harlow
in *Dinner*
at

Eight
her allure
such as could capture
only another blowfish
impressive to a male balloon filled
with liquid surprisingly strong in full distension
the bristles and translucent skin
like an exotic condom
or unwelcome crumb
in the craw
of

love
predator
or other danger
common over-the-counter
species or the most highly prized
delicacy of the most refined palate approached
by means of the thirty steps prescribed
by the honourable art
of *sashimi* short
slips of raw
flesh

fresh
from the live
tiger *fugu* laid
in reticulate design

diamond-shaped slices paper thin
like flowers or exquisite birds a crane let us say
for longevity its neck outstretched
its wings outspread soaring wide
on cobalt and blood
ceramic
sheen

on
the serving
dish fibreless white
gelatine the eye a dot
of hot pepper a delicate whiff
of the sea like oyster succulent and slick as silk
and of course instantly toxic if
the chef should miss the poison
in gland or organ
deadlier
than

an
equal dose
of cyanide yes
it's a terrible quick death
the brain remains clear while a torpor
seizes the extremities the limbs the tongue become
numb loss of speech rigid gasp for air
transfixion consummation
so why take the risk
you may ask
those

who
eat *fugu*
are stupid those who
don't eat *fugu* are stupid
note the odd dentition the parrot
beak once a chef lost his middle finger just the tip
to a severed tiger *fugu* head
it's a food for fantasies
the jaded gourmet's
ultimate
kiss

A FAURÉ REQUIEM

for Ruth

Ma chere Pénélope,

At this hotel beside the sea I work
at a steady pace, one page a day. In Köln
my ears behaved rather poorly: I could mark

the tempo, but in a certain range the tone
eluded me; still, I have not been galled
by the bifurcated sounds that caused me pain.

Singing I bear, but instruments are hell's
own torment. I compose with no piano,
as always, only testing the day's result

for my fingers' sake. *Der gross heilig Dom*
still beams at his reflection in the Rhine;
our *liebe Frau* still radiates her glow

within; but this new Theatre is a thing
in the German taste, splendid, heavy, thick.
Equestrian crowns in every square disdain

the earthbound rout that raised them; Frederick,
great Frederick, who once lorded over all,
is brought down by a sore throat. Wagner's music

saturates so like grease, another *spiel*
would bring on pimples like a teenaged boy's
yet at Beyreuth did not his *Parsifal*

so rise in the Empyrean of God's grace
our wit was silenced? We had nothing to say.
It was beyond dissension, beyond praise,

even beyond boredom. The other day
I endured *Ein deutsches Requiem* by Brahms:
it lulled me with a mute sobriety

until he introduced a vulgar waltz
and everything turned beer and sausages.

These Germans consume concerts just like meals,

one of the natural functions. We are less
than they in the *holde Kunst*, it's true,
but we have more refinement, less excess.

I only wish Pope Pius had been thorough
and banished diapason, fugue, and chord,
and limited our service to the pure

plainsong in unison, the soul of art
concealing her nakedness before the eyes
of a tolerant Almighty. Counterpoint

like Palestrina's, even, is luxurious,
a trend, a covert boast, a shy at fame--
and what have we come to since? Berlioz!

Three dozen brass, a gong, six kettledrums,
a *Requiem* to turn the embalmed dead
deaf, *ad majorem Dei gloriam*.

At least our Debussy remains discreet.
He speaks an outlandish dialect, like his fey
Mélisande, but he speaks it straight.

They fought him at the Conservatoire, but I
secured him; and when heads began to drop
they called me Robespierre. Yet he sniffs at my

efforts -- "master of charms" his backhand quip.
His work I admire -- but by an act of faith:
he cannot stroke a line without a slop

of wretched parallels, and, short of breath,
symmetrical phrases troop past two by two
like willing *boches*, obedient to the death.

He haunts the novel timbre like a new
frisson, emotion never touched before,
like fingers where they have no right to go:

the crowds recoil, but they return for more.
There's too much swooning, too much furtive glimpse
for honest art, too much false *pudeur*.

He speaks perfume, and suffers bowel cramps.
Libera me, my God, let there be clean lines
rinsed in the living water of your deeps,

sempre forte, if need be, unisons,
senza rubato, passionate and plain:
articulate gradation, not nuance.

To mirror ecstasy and mask the pain
is Art, which thus must be as sensual,
as voluptuous as Bach, who practised in

a blameless style, and caressed the inmost soul.
The problems do not smooth away with years.
Remember how in Vienna I went pale

viewing the Master's ear trumpets: my ears
would profit from them now. But my true place
is in that maze of cochlear interiors

where tones appear in neither time nor space.
Is music only a longing for the nil?
Last Sunday I was studying the face

of a choirboy singing that serene chorale
Alle Menschen müssen sterben. Inspired,
he glowed with thanksgiving. Did he grasp the full

force of it? I like to think he did.
Since I arrived at this hotel, my migraine
has flared -- from lack of sleep I think; my head

is giddy. I have not always been
an ideal friend, my love, with these long tours;
I am away too often and too long,

too caught up in my work; I want to be reassured
you've forgotten my petty jealousies, and recall
only my tenderness. In time you will hear,

when I am gone, I was not the gifted fellow
they said I was. Don't let it get you down,
it's just the world. I'm starting to distil

the concept of a string quartet, a design
pure like the Master's, but not grandiose,
not, not like that youthful fling of Claude's, a thing

of facile tunes and colours, nor the one Maurice
wrote as a student for me. I wish to shape
a wordless hymn of lowliness and peace,

a quartet for the chapel of the Pope.

My dear, I trust this message finds you well.
I shall return home presently--don't lose hope.
Give all my love to our Emmanuel.

(July 1991)

AFTER VESUVIUS

As a boy I was scared of volcanoes in my back yard.
A poor Mexican farmer in my library book
Noticed a funny depression in his field,
And a strange warmth . . . Next day, look--
They called it Paracutin. The book never told
What happened to the farmer. And--was it Martinique?--
Mount Pelée blew up and everyone was killed?
I knew the stories and studied the pictures hard.

I studied the kinds, understood all the causes,
I watched for the signs that I alone seemed to know,
Imagined how it would feel to be boiled in rock
Or carbonized like marshmallow, in the pyroclastic flow.
When it finally happened, I was all geared up
To ride the tectonic plates in collision, slow,
The seismic tremors, the first surge, the full eruption,
and then the aftershocking pulses.

And now, two skeletons, interlocked bone by bone,
Cling slackjawed in an agony of embrace,
The heart's dark chambers littered with ash and dust,
And calcined shards where there was once a face.
Some day they'll find us, dear, where we were lost,
And beg no pardon for having disturbed our peace;
They will question how flesh, consumed in fiery lust,
Could fix itself so fast in sharp, cold stone.

REVISITING ANTARCTICA

December 28th: I knew I'd be back. But when?
It wasn't like going back to my childhood home, so small,
Blown up in the mind like an indelible stain,
But big, bigger than memory in corrugated steel.

Out back by a snowed crevasse, where Noel died,
I breakfasted on chocolate, a can of beer,
One smallish penguin's egg, aboriginally fried
In rendered sealfat. There are no children here.

Debris everywhere, foil, tins, a pair of dice,
Orange peels and coffee grounds, a Charles Atlas ad
From a magazine, two dead soldiers, and, encased in ice,
A page from the Bible that I once believed,

But nothing of what I came for. How would it end,
This pilgrimage frigidier than a witch's ass
On Erebus?

Then, after twenty years, I found
My own footsteps hardened in the antarctic moss.

Retracing my steps behind a loaded sledge,
Alert for signs of an ancient cache, the shredded flags
Of a failed expedition, the ruins wedged
In a fissure, I began to hate even my straining dogs.

Into the Plateau of Inaccessibility, too far from any coast
For help, back into the terrible interior, a terrier
Shadow nattering at my heels,
my nose keen for their shrunken remains, I raced
Time, the dwindling pemmican, the lost means of making fire.

Particles of silver sun in the giddy atmosphere
Traced milky halos, until a gust put out the light--
Whiteout, white noise, my own blood roaring to my inner ear:
No contrast, no horizon, no compass point
Guy lines whining, nylon slapping in the winds

A crazy thought snapped:

I dived, kicked up my boots above my head,
And for one quivering moment bore
the whole world dizzy in my hands.

Then a downdraft struck, and I sunk into the snowdrift like lead.

INVISIBLE FRIEND

While at a business meeting forgotten
names, unwanted erections, nagging tunes
hobbling through budgets from hilltop copses
in memory ("boxes without topses"
darting like quicksilver flutes in *Falstaff* . . .
enchantment jimmied from dry reeds, shells, stuff
left over from the living given breath)
I hail the boy from the Möbius cleft
of my pudding brain: "Ave"--so he calls
with a twist--"*Ignore me at your peril*,"
sidestepping back through a wormhole in time.

This singularity, this thief, cheat, scam,
this being in the inkwell, sly giver
and taker of found money, Figaro
forever at your service, wears the cloak
of invisibility: Can you stalk
him with ultrasound? take candid photos
of no one in the belly of the whale?
Think, whenever you look in a mirror,
we're all vampires, because there's no one there.
Yet he returns a straight-in-the-eye look,
swearing on Bibles, "*I am not a crook*."

Among the moneyed angularities
and fashionable incorporated ties
of a budget conference, one craves a friend,
a memorable Puck, one who can stand
to share a joke, a raised eyebrow:
Interested, at a venture, in how
fast plunging temperatures will freeze an arse,
he lurks in crumbling columns of figures,
foresees the destined end.

One night I stood
at a crossroads--where the boardroom table
intersects the executive washroom--
and washed, well, someone's bundle down the flume.
There, in the flush, I saw the whole picture:
a dimpled cherub, ruby-lipped and fair,
his wings limp, tangled in the fishnets, drowned.

This is terminus, I thought, the unsound
buried with a stake through his broken heart--
When up he shot, shook like a spaniel, short
circuiting (nameless familiar) the dirty
joke, and safe in elevator squealed
"The way down is easy." Then he vanished,
Leaving to me the smell of dogs and dung.

I'd been, as I pulled on the metal prong,
One more pilgrim of the dangling phallus
on the wrong way to a ruined Emmaus,
not knowing how or what to call a prayer--

When a voice paged me through the filthy air:
"There is no certainty--not even here."

FORMAL ÉTUDES & REJUVENALIA

SOUVENIR DE MINNEAPOLIS

She was a boor, she cracked her knuckles, whirled
Fresh insults from her hips,
And from her lips strange language.
No, no poet she--
Whole lexicons of slang and sex, and me
A gentleman . . . Always on top of the world,
Sure from the start--
She stuffed herself with slices of my heart.

Solid as Russia, she swallowed armies, fought
By yielding where I marched
With earth to scorch to spare.
No, no soldier she--
She opened to my rapier gallantry
And closed again. Chasing that ghost of a chance,
Lost from the start,
I sunk in her my money and my heart.

(1966)

LA PRINCESSE JAUNE

She requires attention like gaudy porcelain.
Already she has forgotten the opera.
Examining her nails, long and frosted pink, she
Waits impatiently while I tip the taxi man.

Another, having retracted from the touch, might
Have spidered too soon and risked appearing greedy;
She, like a more ceremonious cannibal,
Will consume only the testicles and the brain.

AN ARROW'S SONG

Brown doe, gentle doe,
Came to the spring to drink:
A power recoiled from her quickened hoofs
And rippled in her flanks.

Pull back, hold back,
Taut, taut in the hand,
And when it heard the bowstring sing
The iron sang in the wound.

Low, low, the leaping
Noises curled away.
The arrow lay still and satisfied.
The wound wept bitterly.

NOCTURNE

Rose of my fate,
Scatter your fragrance in the path
Where we meet late,
And linger as we, compliant, lithe,
Sweetly draw one entangled breath.

Loosen your bright
Colours amid the evening gloom,
While we, who greet
Your gravid plenitude of bloom,
Plunge down into the depths of time.

Shed on the night
Your beauty unregarded, flame
Like angelic flight
Of words unknown, that we might seem
As if we shared a single dream.

Then fade in the light
Of every day. Thus may we have
A time to sate
The full unconsciousness of love
Until we bed down in one grave.

Toronto to Saigon, 1967:

FOR A BROTHER

whom I have never seen, or whom I've seen only once:
Then he was teasing the cat and tinkering with cars,
and now he surprises himself in wars,
a frivolous and minor war, though
he could not think so.

Nor could his brother, who stands to lose by it so much:
My sister's husband, even here in Canada, believes
in wars to preserve Vietnamese,
how should I say, integrity? No,
no one could think so.

My unknown brother, hugging the coast of danger,
eyeing the shallowing ocean, weighing energies
against ideals No, this must be
too false a fiction. What we have: cards,
some confident words,

News of a native wife, the bronze flatware with rosewood
handles in a dragon pattern sent back from Bangkok.
We have also TV and the press,
flickering atrocities, rumours
of drug-crazed soldiers,

Green officers shot by their own men in self-defense,
tampering with body counts (statistical ghouls),
the hushed up insane in army jails.
If those clams could sing, what would they sing?
Lord, Halleluiah!

(Ha ha!). Brother, you could make up a ballad about
Saint George, man on the move, terrible saviour of
the land of Chinks, the Sleeping Giant.
But think: George--had he not slain dragons--
wouldn't he have slain

Something else? You understand it all differently,
I suppose, and after all, the experience is
yours and not mine. So I look forward
to just one thing before you come home
victorious, winning:

A photo of Tom and his handsome new wife. They are enjoying a few hours' holiday, posing before some Pagoda of the Wondrous Hair, she smiling, he scowling, growling "Gr-r-r, The Paper Tiger."

CATULLUS TO THE DAFFODILS

"Jam ver egelidos . . ."

Now that the daffodils shake the chill
 Away, and spring grows warm,
Now that the temper of the sky,
 Equinox come to term,
 Slows, soothes,
 With a ssh-h-h-h of whispering mouths,
 Goodbye,
 Goodbye, Catullus. Wave
 It to the summering field and hill
 Of Koré, as you leave.

Off, off to the crowds, the loud-coloured tents,
 The fast cities of the East!
Mind and foot, impatient to try
 At last new novelties,
 Say, "Go,
 Catullus." So, for now,
 Goodbye,
 Sweet circle, my comrades, whom,
 Set out together long time since,
 The different ways bring home.

RESOLUTION

"Be not over much wicked"

--Ecclesiastes

Says Doctor Johnson, "His pieces are commonly short, such as one fit of resolution

would produce." He speaks of Rochester and knows, for this is the man (speaking) who launched *The Van-*

ity of Human Wishes with one hefty spasm of seventy

or more verses in a single day (Boswell), and had the rest--"all the rest"--of Juvenal

"in his head." Johnson, sober, aetat. thirty-eight, and Tetty, not, were removed for winter

to a little cottage at Hampstead. Before she died

and he became so obscenely fat. Resolution begets failure, Resolution chokes pride.

At Westminster, voices of the choir, sexless trebles and altos, mix with the organ sounds:

That instrument whose sustaining power passes human endurance, which suspires but an hour

Molto Lento, but whose capacity is Eternity.

THE GOD PROTEUS LUSTS FOR THE MOON

What? Unmoved? So do you take
my winds and waters sighs and tears
for nothing? My veins don't run
with water but with the hot
salt blood of earth. To no good.

Desire is motion. Motion
overcomes stillness as warmth
overcomes the cold, but you,
serene and chill, still hover
carelessly. I **AM** Desire.

All is flux, force, wave, chance, change,
all is ungovernable.
You whom I

Ah, *mein Schatz*, you are the moon
my belly bends towards, you
have mastered my tides, my love,
my distant dervish.

Tell me, did you mean
to plunge through all astronomy untouched?

(April 4, 1970)

THE LEATHER LADS

His sleep was often disturbed by recurrent dreams, one of which was well known to his family. In this dream, he was followed and taunted by a group of boys whom he tried to frighten away with a stick, but his blows were unavailing because the boys were made of leather. Sometimes when he came to the breakfast-table after a poor night he would say, "The leather lads have been at me again."

--R.L. Brett, George Crabbe

Out of the mudflats of a shallow sea
I rose, a little skilled,
Less taught. It seemed my work by God was willed,
And Burke, who paid the way. But now my brain
Is ear-wax stopped, grey Saturn gnaws my knee.
What can soothe me, when
The leather lads have been at me again?

How should I write how, when I coached to town,
The circus *juvenes*
All cursed Thersites' curse through wrinkled lips
That stained my collar, as with spittle, brown?
Their barks pursued me home across the lea
And farther, when
The leather lads came after me again.

They snarl into the countryside. My voice
Is broke, can no more sing
Of flaccid marriage bonds turned into tales,
Of the pale beneath a butterfly's crisp wing,
Of girls and fossils, bladderworts and men.
The song is done. The dance?
The leather lads have been at me again.

AMERICAN POEMS

BRADFORD OF PLYMOUTH PLANTATION

I. THE REFUSAL

But after he had resided in Holland about half a score years, he was one of those who bore a part in that hazardous and generous enterprise of removing into New England, with part of the English church at Leyden, when, at their first landing, his dearest consort accidentally falling overboard, was drowned in the harbour . . .

The rations were running low. You, mad
with false prophecy, foully profaned
the name of God; and though I, afraid,
made no unseasonable demand,
you would not have me; nor would you aid
at the birth of young Job, difficult
as it was, the poor babe born in blood,
and Mistress Hibbins' cries ringing out.

A general prayer rose up when all
Were greeted by the curious gull.
But still and resolute, you planned
A private end: your fancy scanned
A coastline of November trees
No different from the indifferent seas,
And chose the nearest way to embrace
A more familiar wilderness.

You didn't fall. Done with my child--or
the devil's--you battled the waters
both without and within; interior
mysteries exceeded our power
to master, hysterias so strong
we could not drown them in prayer or rum.
You didn't fall: you hurled yourself down,
down, and never even tried to swim.

In prayer we were wedded before God
and the Holland magistrate, and slept
in the common hold, close, one hundred
in number; there amid the stinks, rats,

stale water, the seventy-times-seven
discourtesies of the crew, we praised
our Father for mercies we were given.
The weather was fair, albeit cold.

My promises were kept; but when
The manna dried up in the sun,
The milk and honey of your breast
Turned sour from rolling east to west;
You thought it witchcraft, and despaired
The journey's end; but more. you feared
Him whose unseen, all-seeing eyes
Pursued into the wilderness.

But when there shall be no more sea
And former things have passed away,
Then, having dried up all my tears,
I'll find, amid the homely stars,
One bride like her I knew so young
To cherish God in holy song;
Then shall I let my spirit pray
This, my unwritten exequy.

In this blest dominion, granted us
by God's covenant grace, we shall thrive
practising none but godly commands
and manly virtues, with means to live
in peace and plenty; in this lush place
humbly I am trusted to dispense
rational statutes, advantageous
to commerce and pious government.

But hark, my pulse, like a soft drum,
Beats my approach, throbs like the womb
Made pregnant with a little seed
Scattered abroad in our sore need;
And God, who builded from such small
Beginnings, out of nothing, all

*Shall raise the healing serpent and the rest of his days were spent in the
service, and the temptations, of that American wilderness.*

II. THANKSGIVING

The place they had thoughts on was some of those vast and unpeopled countries of America, devoid of all civil habitations, where there are only savage and brutish men which range up and down, little otherwise than wild beasts. . . .

. . . but some of the elders declared a duty before God
to bring gospel to these men, long exiled but now found,
tribes not lost eternally but dispersed, a myriad
customs, tongues, the profaned hebrew they speak more broken
than the dutch, a noise that strikes the white man's ear with dread
deeper than cries of war--as to them the english tongue,
so Squanto relates--the last of his people that all died
in a plague, who when young, seized by a wicked trader,
was bound to be displayed like a wild brute, and having heard
some words of our speech, fled, though he desired to learn more
of the miracles God has performed through our sovrein Lord,
this same Squanto who then died in a like distemper
attended with a bleeding from the nose that he thought
marked his immortal soul taking flight from his poor flesh,
but first he struck a peace with Massasoit, and taught us
to plant seed corn with fish that would raise it from this soil
so rocky and barren, an emblem of his assured grace,
but given to him alone of all his nation, we
then witnessed the most pitiful spectacle in this place,
a grievous visitation on their community
of smallpox, which, though their pustulent sores first struck fear
in us for our own skins, we were moved with compassion
for their lamentations, this plague, not known to them before,
striking them as one body powerless to wait on
one another or to bury their dead, left them exposed
alive to hurt, dead to rot where they lay, some would crawl
on all fours to get a little water, dazed and lost,
and would perish where they fell, the rest within for want
of bedding and linen as they reclined on their hard mats,
pox breaking, mattering, skin cleaving to the bed
when they tossed and turned a whole side did flay off at once
they were left all gore blood to suffer the smart and sting
most miserable to behold, and perished like rotten sheep--
that we overcoming fear and repugnance brought food
and water, fanned them most gently in their feverish sleep,
kept them at nights warm with fire alive, buried them dead,
till from weariness, though I could not bring myself to touch,

I lay beside one who consumed me, dropped in a swoon
and dreamt of him a child, naked, sleek, without blemish,
 who wise in curious ways would trace Catamount to his den
or in long canoe test Leviathan on the broad sea,
 but, wakened by his groan, even as I knew his soul
lost in ignorance, could do nothing other than pray
 that he so near salvation be spared from flames of hell

These savages, some thousand strong before the pestilence,
 now reduced to fifty-one, after took our pities
to be a great kindness, and acknowledged our tenderness
 among themselves, and among the neighbouring peoples.

*. . . . but by the marvellous goodness and providence of God not one of the English was
in the least measure tainted by the disease, though they daily did these offices for them
for many weeks together.*

III. A REPORT FROM PLYMOUTH PLANTATION, SEPTEMBER 1642

There was a youth whose name was Thomas Granger, being about 16 or 17 years of age, who was this year detected of buggery, and indicted for the same, with a mare, a cow, two goats

" . . . with such business resolved, as I have related,
would swap a musket and mass of shot
for a shipload of furs--bear, beaver and fox.
But a tale I treasure to tell of this journey:
It seems a high priest and elder of the place
While nosing and prying and nastying about,
caught sight of a shapely lad, a manservant,
one Thomas, whose task was to tend the stock,
but he tended to lead them a livelier measure:
for the wanton, much forgone for want of a wench,
considering the vastity of the land a concealment,
unbraced his breeches and bugged a cow.
The patriarch saw him do it:
Useless was his denial;
Soon all the plantation knew it,
And bound him up for trial.

Being upon it examined and committed, in the end he not only confessed the fact with that beast at that time, but sundry times before . . .

To hear Saints howl and angels hiss
in cold sweat, I'd sooner set my heels for Scotland;
but the lusty lad said 'twas a little thing,
until he learned the Law of Moses
condemned the Chosen for adoring the calf,
a thing far smaller than the sodomizing of it.
The governor, his phys'ognomy grave and grim,
pecked with his forefinger each phrase he brought forth:
He should hold himself damned that was predestinate
to such horrible abuse, with the hand of unchastity
to have befouled himself and the freehold nation;
for their deadborn faith indeed devised
means to make him immortal sooner than he want:
Let him bid farewell to his sin-sowed flesh.
I marvel the perverse imp
ever hoped for mercy at bottom,
or pity from Captain Shrimp
for committing the sin of Sodom.

And accordingly he was cast by the jury and condemned . . .

That the forfeit be grievous at last he granted
but humbly he pleaded on his marrow for pardon:
Though he rated hanging, he was heavy with remorse
he cried, as he kneeled, the knot under his ear.
But the letter of Leviticus the governor levied--
the very Hebrew spoken by the Holy One to Moses
who transcribed it thus, the naked truth--
demanded blood of the sinner and the defiled beasts:
So they led the poor cattle, not only the cow
But two bull calves, two goats, a mare,
five grown sheep and a turkey, all to the shambles,
a great hole in the ground, where they hacked them so bloodily
full in the lad's face, who had been so friendly,
that he gasped with fright as the gory innocents
parted their heads, piteously groaning.
So the saints foreswore what might last a season,
who had stomachs so nice they could bear no sign
of taint in meat that would make a good supper.
Then the governor proceeded to the principal sport,
and not without sorrowing strung the rope
and more briskly than wished for hoisted the wag,
and left him no period to polish his prayers:
 For he could crack necks in the air
 As quick as a cook cracks eggs;
 He motioned the weightiest there
 To tug upon his legs.

It being demanded of him how he came first to the knowledge and practice of such wickedness, he confessed he had long used it in old England, and this youth said he was taught it by another, by which it appears how one wicked person may affect many

The report of his neck in woods resounding
I flinched like the damned on the final day;
But the only piece discharged was the poor lad's,
and I fear he lacked leisure t'enjoy it.
To see the varlet so vilely abused
all my urine wept upward, my eyes awash
like Pissing Lane in London town--
for if we sacrifice youth for use of luxury
how can the lot of us hope to 'scape hanging,

and who would shame and who should blame
a lone lad, o'erflowing with love for God's creatures?
For Jove himself ravished gentle Europa
in shape of a valiant and virile bull,
and flesh is but grass and grass is but fodder,
and who can keep from the work of creation?

Bring the boy where we brew sublime beer by the barrel,
he'd have tawny beauties wrapped in soft beaver,
fair samples of flesh such as e'er slicked with bear's grease,
and dwell like our first parents in the pristine garden.
Why flee one commonweal built on corruption
to another conspiracy of power and pride?
These Separatist worthies would storm the heavens
like the giants that held almighty Jove in contempt,
neglecting the cause and command of our Maker:
"Who seeks to save his soul shall lose it."
But we who have leisure and drink without limit,
and promise of pleasure and plunder aplenty,
do condemn the severe and comfort the careless
and broaden the blessings and the bounds of abundance.

All joys and griefs in life--
their continuance so uncertain--
Let's finish them off with a laugh.
Yours faithfully, Thomas Morton"

Finding so many godly disposed persons willing to come into these parts, some began to make a trade of it, and hired ships to that end, caring not who the persons were, so they had money to pay them. And thus, by one means or another, in twenty years' time it is a question whether the greater part may not become the worsen.

**A VISION OF JOHN WOOLMAN
(1762)**

". . . and as I opened my eyes I saw a light in my chamber, at the apparent distance of five feet, about nine inches in diameter, of a clear, easy brightness, and near its centre most radiant. As I lay looking upon it without any surprise, words were spoken to my inward ear, which filled my whole inward man. They were not the effect of thought, nor any conclusion in relation to the appearance, but as the language of the Holy One spoken in my mind."

"John Woolman is dead." But I was once
John Woolman. Fevered, yet in my flesh
and alive, I wondered, but told not
what the angel said, and, carried off
to suffocating mines where the poor
were quarrying treasures for the rich,
I heard them blaspheme a cruel king--
"Christ, a cruel king." My tongue was dry.

I am crucified, I said, and yet
I live. Every sort of luxury
hath some affinity with evil.
Where custom was to sell on credit,
I found it good for me to advise
the poor, who were deep in debt, to take
only such goods as were most useful.
Should I turn evil to a profit?

So many vices and corruptions
I saw increased by the trade in slaves
in our Southern provinces, a gloom
hung over the land. A love of ease
and wealth is become a way of life,
and men, content with weak arguments,
sleep within their souls; dull, they embrace
a darkness of imagination.

I heard, "Go discourse with the heathen,
gather their councils and their people
together." Having for many years
felt love for the natives of this land

who were once the owners of this land
where we now dwell, and who for trifles
assigned their inheritance to us--
while visiting some Friends who owned slaves,

I met with a little band settled
on the banks of the Susquehanna,
in a village called Weehaloosing.
That I might understand the spirit
wherein they live, I asked that I have
instruction in their way of living:
They have often given way to force;
Their style of clothing is much altered;

The wild beasts are not so plentiful
as they were, for the English hunters
have increased in number, and English
settlement has spread, and the people
often, for the sake of gain, induce
the natives to waste their skins and furs
for liquor, which tends to their ruin
and their families'. My will was rent,

as the danger rose up before me:
*I had a prospect of the English
along the coast for nine hundred miles
where I travelled; and their advantage,
and the affliction of the natives--
the negroes too in many places--
lay open for me to see: my heart
filled with heav'nly love toward all mankind:*

*May we give no just cause of offense,
citizens, I pray, to the gentiles
who do not profess our religion,
whether they be blacks from Africa,
or the natives of this continent.
May our prosperous, convenient state
heed the wisdom of our Creator,
who hath an equal regard for all.*

*Yet luxury and covetousness,
and the oppressions attending them,
have sown the seeds of desolation
in this continent, and we, positioned
along the coast, must labour to check
the growth of these seeds, that they should not
ripen to the ruin of our land
and our posterity. A thin path*

grown over with bushes and with trees
lying across it extends from Penn
to Weehaloosing, a rough journey
of mountain swamps and rocky outcrops
where rattlesnakes abound. I gave thanks
for enlarged patience and sympathy
with my fellows. Thus lying abroad
in the wilderness, beholding stars

shining upon me as on our first
parents when they fled into exile
from the garden, I was brought to know
how the Almighty provided things
for their outward living, though they had
disobeyed, and showed them how to care
for their rational felicity.
O bountiful Creator, we trust

as there is faithful continuance
of thine arm from one generation to another,
the peaceable kingdom will extend
from sea to sea, to the ends of earth;
and as I behold the pure waters
streaming forth from out the throne of God,
my inward spirit is drawn to seek
after that blameless habitation.

(June 20, 1991)

This poem has appeared in *Fiddlehead Review*.

PROPHECY IN THE NEWS

for an American relative

Having just received my first *Prophecy in the News*,
the Reverend J.R. Church, Editor, a vital
organ of Oklahoma City,
Oklahoma, I survey wondrous
discourse from across

the border: Yes, I **had** forgotten the prophet Nahum,
who cried, "The chariots shall rage in the streets, they shall
jostle each other on the broad mile":
"Think of it next time you have to buck
the rush hour traffic

on our modern freeways" "Will Psalm 91 be fulfilled
in 1991?" "We have no axe to grind, we write
strictly from a prophetic standpoint:
The book of Revelation declares
a Roman Empire

will rise and shackle the world with a single currency."
"Send your hundred dollar gift and you'll receive these two books
by J. Dwight Pentecost." It's the work
of Wendy, *l'enfant terrible*, this tight
feeling in my gut:

Wendy, the pert, the pettish, the perverse, declining
to play the violin, declining to be feminine.
Her father (my brother) when he left
the Air Force Band was afraid to fly:
Being musicians

and expendable, they were shipped in the shakiest crates
in the army. So Wendy ran away to join the WACs,
trained for combat in the paratroops,
and ended up as an instructor
of demolition,

peering into the entrails, the electric brains and explosive
guts of bombs, mapping old playgrounds into new minefields,
setting or unsetting the death clocks.
Whoever could have predicted you
would have gone pious?

--except that you'd do it in the most colourful way,
sending prophetic tabloids to every last living one
of your relatives for Christmas: "Saddam
Hussein, boss of Iraq--the Bible
calls it Babylon"

For God now seems to be gathering in His Elect
from all parts of the land--probably the greatest part
of persons that shall ever be saved
will be lifted in a little time
to their proper home,

to a newer world: the other continent hath slain
Christ, and from age to age hath shed the vocal blood of saints:
God has therefore reserved the honour
of the New Temple for the daughter--
this great land of ours--

and her late glorious victory in Iraq, Kuwait,
will redeem the unnumbered hundreds dead in Panama,
open slaughter in Cambodia,
secret slaughter in Bali, Java,
Timor, Sumatra

(buried by the Press), El Salvador, Nicaragua,
Grenada, Libya ("to the shores of Tripoli"),
Allende, his poet, his people,
blood sacrifice, they say, to Ma Baal:
On Mount Carmel, oil

burning black soot from the fat of uncountable corpses
cleanses the bowels of the earth, divine purgative
of the wellheads of unholy lands.
And Wendy, there you are, or would be,
in the thick of it,

but that you're home, resting, recovering from malignancy
of the thyroid and wrestling, apparently, with your soul.
(May the God you worship make you well.)
Some Jews, it says here, hail Elijah,
Some the Messiah,

in the in-gathering of exiles; but would Mister Bush
want to enact the role of Gog (which is pronounced "Jawj"
as in George)? I thank you for the news,
yes--but I think I should rather have
received *Prophecy*

in the Nude, the Reverend Church flaunting his doubtless
formidable genitals under the sign of the peace,
beside his charming wife, crying out
in a loud voice, Make Love Not War, Make
Love while you can, Make

Love while you still can!" His vital organ has somehow
touched me over this great distance, stirring a desire
for new heaven and new world order
on earth: so may this Jeremiah
from Oklahoma

write it on their uncircumcised hearts: no malignancy.
And if we may suppose that this glorious work of God
begins in America, perhaps
it brings hope that the dawn will prepare
the day that will cure

our malignancy.

(February-June 1991)

FIRST NATIONS

"America having begun the creation of the twentieth century in the sixties of the nineteenth century is now the oldest country in the world." --Gertrude Stein (1933)

His backyard was habitat to local myths:

The Mae West his dad brought back, unbuoyant, limp,
Hung from a spike in his garage, the spent cartridge casings,
Rust-specked souvenir bayonets . . .

He taught me Betty Grable's legs, he taught me football,
He taught me like the paratroops to yell

"Geronimo"

In boy soprano, from the catalpa stump, over Okinawa or Bataan,
Pretending to be killed or to kill.

That other kid from across the tracks,

Johnny Eaglefeather--dark, "a half Indian" he said--

Yelled "Geronimo" too, when he played at Albert Smith's,

Swigging long drinks from an empty flask,

Pretending to be good and dead when we'd pretend to shoot.

But another playmate bit the dust: he wasn't allowed to come--

"Too far from home," he said.

And the little negro boy on the front porch was "cute"

But I shouldn't have him over here again.

The swing in that back yard, secure in its concrete moorings and iron chains, flew high above the garden fence.

"Tiger of the Human Race,"

Geronimo--

"The worst Indian that ever lived," said General Miles,

"Over a million dollars to capture him"--

Discovered his market value late:

A small fortune in personal appearances,

A brisk business signing autographs, selling bows and arrows,

He enacted "The Last Buffalo Hunt" from moving automobiles,

(Nineteen-O-Five, there being no buffalo in the deep Southwest).

"The old gentleman commands a pretty high price,"

Said Pawnee Bill

To the star of his Historic Wild West Show,

Backed up by an A-Rab, a Cossack, a Bushman, and a Jap.

The old man would wake up groaning for white babies that he'd killed,

In revenge for a mother and a wife

And three children, knifed

(The kids--the soldiers said--"because nits make lice").

He spent his last days gardening in the prisonyard at Fort Sill.

O to be a pilgrim, to be a cowboy, you too can be president some day,

All you need is self-reliance, a bit of seed capital, and a birthplace in the U.S.A.:

Tell it to Geronimo,
Whose treason, to patrol the homelands of his Apache tribes.
"One nation under God" said Ike,
But when God's police are taking bribes?
Mr Reagan believed that smog is caused by trees,
Mr Carter held Brezhnev to his word,
Mr Bush, in undisgrace, now leaves town in a rusted Ford
Fuelled by the distilled infancy of Iraq,
Behind him, methane flares, the rustdead cities of the plains,
And changes in the atmosphere from "volcanic dust":
The crook, the gull, the senile, and the thug,
Shall I compare them, these last five great white chiefs, with the first?
Bad actors all, inadequately rehearsed,
Unable to simulate simple trust
Or pathos.

I've made my peace, my separate--though white--flight into Canada,
But thinking back the other day, I wondered,
Is Albert Smith still with us?
So disciplined, so learned in the accidents of his father's war (inheritance
Every twenty years from father's father to son's son),
The chutes that failed, grenades ruptured, green officers found mysteriously slain:
He's a career man now, in Guantánamo or Panama,
Pushing buttons, bennies and bumf--
Or did he meet his new Supreme Commander in some Tet scrimmage in the sky?
Plunging his defoliant chopper over the Mekong, to test its buoyancy, what did he cry
If not "Geronimo"?
His name inscribed in the black granite
With the rest who took their bit parts in that play.

I see it on American TV:
In the name of self-expression,
One bankrupt automotive executive makes a second depression
In concrete with a limp thump on Wall Street,
While Mohawks swinging on orange-steel girders, hunting and gathering their rivets ninety storeys
high, observe
Columbus Day,
Nineteen-Ninety-Two, perched there like eagles, with the vision of eagles in time,
Five hundred years to the east, and to the west
A new millenium.

(October 1992)

CANADIAN POEMS

THE DAY THAT THE LORD HATH MADE

Your beams inform the awaiting blooms, invisible
conjurer in the complaisant desert air:
you are your own light and its object both,
both window and the scene now seen within
and beyond, a far horizon touching the sight,
looping to the edge of light and then returning, turning

*Unsteady Smith
smashes a glass on the bathroom floor
slashes his feet on the quicksilver
splinters*

Lost in a barren but seductive country,
you lash against it as an enemy,
the only savant in a wilderness
of virgins, the only lord among lepers

*Smith blinks his eyes
strokes his thighs
until his nerve cries
for paradise
or just ease
from pain
and to do it
again*

Since, as you press toward the gathering oasis
it turns to vapour, shimmering, and since
the sheen of water on the sands, nearing,
becomes exhalation breathing return
of manna to the sky, and since the dry
loaf is only a stone, you curse:

as when
a king among his concubines, displeased,
cries for his venison and violins

*Unsatisfied Smith
nudges crumbs from his
teeth nibbles skin from his
throbbing quicks*

Unsafe, in regal poverty of possession,
you call for some compassionate priest or jester,
whoever

*Cheated Smith
stabs at his brain mars
his flesh tears his accounts
falls upon thorns--
he bleeds in numbers, how
O how he bleeds*

whatever glib and besequined other
will do the act to greatest applause, touch
without hurting, touch
without touching, running
real swords
through an empty box--you being
elsewhere

*Smith kicks the clods
against the bricks
with this result:
the clods stay whole
while Smith chips
both bricks and ankle*

The desert magus opens the box:
Behold the man
is, you
are
there

*Sullen Smith
sucks on his vinegar and sponge
in a purple sulk
a blueblack stare:
It isn't fair, it
isn't fair, it isn't
fair*

The trick had always worked before:
Before, my body marked its place,
Poised were the pricks against my face
And I was in a different

where

The hurt had happened to the air.
But that was in another vision
In which I knew that no magician
Could alter banker, thief, or whore.
Leaving this (now
shocked by nakedness) garden
in grave disrepair,
I knew it would not do to dig for pardon,
or, the front door being locked, to smash the window.

That's why I cried "It isn't fair."

ARMORACIA RUSTICANA

root the root
invasive the root
predatory root
vegetable eating vegetable root
without rot clandestine underground
root whose least mummyskin bits resprout
the royal prick the licensed fool court
jester joker in the pack bloodsport
to the barren ordeal to the bland
beefeaters given a sporting hand
when the quick draculabite bites back
the thrust the dirty parry the hack
damnation law's and prophets' doom
diabolus in musica the unplanned
dissonances drove the hapsburgs down
fumes wafted in the atmosphere
etching acid mustard gas
secret weapon of the hun
in salinated vinegar
fetus in formaldehyde
more mystery of mysteries
than sundried fish seaweed
in hongkong groceries
diced or thinly sliced
and lightly sautéed
a street drug mainlined
ingested inhaled
mucous skin impaled
the nose sinuses
inflamed teeth scaled
power to penetrate
the ear canals and
ears perforate
ulcers rupture
the appendix
pinch the colon
excoriate
the flagellant
asp with arsenic
with cyanide
caustic lye
hellebore
cobrabite
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BARBARA'S TUTU

on her birthday

a fantasy of flying
in her own private whirlwind
singing, skipping
at the age of three
a monkey with wings
my daughter was Dorothy
skipping and singing
and dancing *con brio*
in her red checkered dress
with the apron, her trio
of invisible friends
and Toto the poodle
unwilling in arms
skipping, singing
fonna fonna,
fonna fonna,
fonna the yellow brick
road, advancing
through years without fears
of the wicked witch
through the horrible forest
of lions and tigers and bears--
Age nine, Hallowe'en,
her flight could be seen
among the gaggle
of ghosts and witches
and wiggly zombies
and giggly ghouls,
on All Saints' Eve
a butterfly!--monarch
in cardboard wings
orange and black
with black leotards
a black felt cap
and pipecleaner feelers
skipping, dancing
all ankles and heels

a flittering sleeve
awhirl through a night
of tricking and treating
and chocolate eating

and now the tinkling
rehearsal piano
the strains and the stretching
no longer a child
a pure Parmigiano
en pointe in her tutu
as swanlike she wheels
with her disciplined *pliés*
and lithe *demi-bras*
a severe Nefertiti
grand jetée, pirouetting
her steel self-possession
whatever the new
metamorphosis, Barbara,
twirled sixteen times
around the sun,
still flying

SOME SWANS

"S is a most easie, and gentle Letter, and softly hisseth against the teeth in the prolotion."

--Ben Jonson

Unruffled, while the children

reach at them through the iron fence,
this one is called Criseyde,
and Prince Troilus over there
preserves a social distance,
never undignified, a
"stoon of sikernesse." For,

notice, two swans seldom touch.

Old woman in a black dress
sees neither them nor the boys
running wild. She stands assured
in her private silliness,
though uncertain where she is.
What does she hear? The two birds--

each circles around the other.

Cold shadow across the stars.
Snow fills the circumpolar
spaces. A grandmother, called
like a little child, pleasures
in her quick ride through the air.
For they learn to love the cold

whom the northward swan will bless.

BLACK HOLE

An egocentre of gravity no light could escape--
Radio his only conversation, news every hour on the hour
Beaming in, he sulked in his chair, sucking, sucking on his pipe
In post-Presbyterian gloom. We left him room for air.

A hero once, he hauled a couple, unconscious, from the fourth
Floor of a burning hotel--the day my father was born--
And made the front page. He never mentioned it. Was it worth
While to marry, he must have wondered, or was it better to burn?

My father, guilty of chronic sickness in his youth and very thin,
Was given a fiddle to play, which he did very well:
He rose through the ranks of the orchestra to become assistant principal second violin.
Both of his brothers died of alcohol.

For my grandfather cursed coons, kikes, queers, micks, commies, women and himself--
But mostly his sister Belle, who lived across the street.
When my brother, away four years at Juilliard, came home with a wife,
He muttered "*Is your woman a Roman?*" still staring at his feet.

One summer, to please him, I ravaged a recalcitrant stump in hope of reward,
Grubbed that stump with my bare hands till it was level with the earth:
He pulled from his overalls a fistful of loose silver, and dared
Me to take how much I thought I was worth.

As kids we'd beg him to show us his glass eye
Or stick out his false teeth. But vowing evils
On his children's children even to the *n*th generation, sly
Bastard, he left two conflicting wills.

"You're getting more and more like him every day,"
You keep telling me, dear. And I know, it's true.
His signature, hotly inscribed on my brain in DNA,
Condemned at conception some portion of my soul,

And now as time unravels, I seem to be failing, falling--
The farther away in time, the stronger the pull:
Backwards I whoosh, helpless, into the appalling
Blackness of his undisinherited hell.

MUD BATH

The drab attendant parks, with a little laugh,
A naked carcass flat out on the slab--
Mine (*What a joke--a slug, a side of beef!*)--
Packs it in steaming muck,
And goes out for a coffee break. (*This flab
Won't move. . . .*) He checks the clock
And gives the modest sheet a playful poke.

My mind is blank. How odd one can't recall
The pain, the corruption of the crumbling bone,
The nerves inflamed. A taste of Tylenol
Sours in my gorge and dies.
The entrails gone, my empty mummy's brain
Wanders, wakes in a daze,
And waits to be extracted through my nose.

I'm going to become greenware! Encased in clay,
I'm pottery fashioned from the primal slime.
I'm ready for the kiln--Wheel me away!
Blind in the burning flesh,
My eyes are glazing over the last time.
Let the empty vessel smash
To smithereens, and chuck it in the trash.

"Time's up, time's up!" chirps the cherubic drab,
Hands me a robe, bids me rise up and wash:
These old bones stir with effort from the slab,
And, standing in my skin,
I half regret the wonder as I watch,
With an hourglass swirl, the fine
Last grains of muck swish down the shower drain.

JOHN, IN MEMORIAM

In hospital reading the headlines, a resigned civilian, I look on
At the bloody entertainment: Do I
feel pain enough (numb
with morphine) to qualify as human?
Do I have pain enough to become
a celebrity?

Can I sell the rights
to my kidney stone? Stop. There's bad news
about Uncle John (I haven't seen him in years,
not since my father's funeral) who has slipped, I hear,
into a coma. He'll never come out.
Courtly and slight

a septuagenarian bachelor with a trimmed moustache
and slender, feminine hands, he lived there
alone in Iowa.
An artist once, he designed booklets and brochures for the local college.
Reverence for his oils was a family
piety he did not share.

Where is that photo
of the family nose in silhouette on the field at dawn--
John, being decorated for courage?
What does the army do
with an artist? It dropped him alone behind enemy lines where he drew
ordnance maps for the Allied invasion of Anzio.

Soldiering through Italy, he spied
the seventeenth-century bronze doors of a basilica in *bas relief* blown
into the town square;
he packed them into wooden crates with care,
sent them back home. When the war was over, he quietly
returned them to the town.

Pain, pain is so damned
absorbing, nothing else is, while it lasts.
the stinging stinging urgency of a ballooning bladder in post-op
(catheter broken, urethra bleeding, raw)
forces me to confront the manifest
fact of human waste. . . .

Wracked with dysentery,
John stayed in camp that morning his company made first
contact with the wasted inmates of Belsen
Something happened with John a year ago:
disconsolate over something none of us understood,
he withdrew,

he took up walking with a cane, and then he began to fade.
The basset pup he bought for company
ate his hearing aid.
Once in Paris on a three-day pass he bought pictures, prints. . . .
He spent his last cent --
one a prized Kandinsky for a carton of cigarettes. . . .

He ended up with hundreds, for a song,
because he knew what to possess,
preserve, and pass along.
Franz Marc and the *Blaue Reiter* were his passion,
each item catalogued in his bequest
to two museums.

Pain is real, pain is terrible, pain is
finite. So
are the pictures he laboured to preserve:
insubstantial things
made to be blown to shreds, like Monte Cassino.
(The rubble made even better sites for German guns).

Now that my penile pain is yesterday's news,
I lie in bed, scan
As I Lay Dying for next week's class, and resolve
to send the nursing staff one dozen long-stemmed yellow roses.
Headlines shriek of Japan
in crisis, Arab scapegoats wandering eyeless

armless and legless
in Gaza, the voluntary mutual disemboweling of Bosnia,
where "freedom" means freedom to murder thy neighbour
and thy neighbour's kin.
But now I can once more take pleasure
inhabiting my own skin,

I study a watercolour in our family room,
the landscape he did as an exercise,
he said, at Boot Camp.
When? After rifle practise and mock hand-to-hand?
Its arcs and solemn shades, transfigured through his educated eyes,
are an achievement
of gentleness.

But you see, Richard, maybe I became your first cure
That night we carried Christmas to the dependents of Dow and Exxon.
So let these words be a memorial to what you said so innocently to me then,
Words to be carved and weathered on the gravestones of the million brain cells blotted
 out by every ounce of alcohol,
For this writing too will fade,
Whether preserved on marble, or on parchment or papyrus,
Acid paper, dulling celluloid, acetate-bleeding vinyl:
Entire Alexandrias may vanish with the malfunction of a silicon chip,
But will not erase the credible graces of daily living among family and friends.
You will be a good doctor, Richard.
And I, having made my will, remake my will
To will, summoning a newborn self-reliance:
I shall take my routine walks with a good cheer
And, when the text leaves nothing further to be said, and the music ends,
I'll go where I have to go,
And leave my body to science.

LADY PHILOSOPHY'S SONG

after Boethius

Stars beyond the thunderhead
burn, as usual, benign.
Waves, glass-green in the sunshine,
wallow and blacken in wind,
subject to storms and buffeted.

Runoff from the mountaintop
gathers in rivulets, clear,
fleeting at first, but after,
torrents flooding down in rage
against tons of granite rock.

Clarity of mind: Cast out
fear and self-pity, give up
hope and the desire for hope.
A joy breaks, and present time
fades in the superior light.

