Trinity Review 1964

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Published three times during the college year at Trinity College
Address: Box 460, Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut
Printed in U.S.A. by the Bond Press, Inc.
Volume XVIII June, 1964 Number 2
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A Defense of Bad Poetry

Karl Shapiro

I am going to start with a quotation from a poet who has been trying to learn how to write Bad Poetry. This is from a magazine called The Noble Savage; (the poet’s name is Louis Simpson): “A few years ago I was able to begin and finish a poem. I found that the poem was directed by certain external forces toward a certain end. But one day I found that the ideas were better expressed in prose. No, it was more than that. I found that I no longer wished to please . . . . I found myself wanting to write bad poems—poems that did not depend on stock responses. I wanted to write poems that would not please. For the last three years I have been learning to write this new kind of poem. The most important change is in the content (whether one writes “in form” or “out of form” is not an essential question . . . ) Instead of statements which reassure the reader by their familiarity, or shock him by their strangeness—instead of opinions, there are only images and reverberations. I can never finish these poems. I wrestle with them and leave off when I am exhausted. Frequently, all that remains is a handful of phrases.” This statement I find very appealing. It makes more sense to me as a writer than anything I have read about poetry in a long time, because I have been going through the same process myself for years.

When a poet says he wants to write bad poems, after he has succeeded in writing “good” ones, he is kicking over the traces. When he says that the change must come in content he is asking for a revolt against his own values, not only in literature but in everything else. He has come to doubt the value of accepted literary “contents” and of his own psychic contents. He is in full revolt; he is trying to break out.

I too find myself wanting to write Bad Poetry, poetry that will not please, poetry that will subvert the standards. The built-in inconvenience of the term “bad” doesn’t matter and in fact is a help. We who belong to this revolt feel an obligation to refute reputation itself, our own, whatever it is; to turn our backs on our successes in order to survive as artists. To the Serious World this looks like suicide as well as vandalism. And it may be.

The kindergarten term BAD carries a powerful charge of meaning on all levels on the Serious world. In religion it may mean the damned, in morality the illicit, and in esthetics the hopelessly inferior. Ordinarily when we say a poem is bad we mean at least that many things: it is wicked, it is contrary to right behavior, and it is sub-standard. But we who defend the Bad, question all that. We question the religious dichotomy of good and evil, the legal and ethical dichotomy of right and wrong, and the esthetic scale of valuation also. We are in the Void. However, we do not mean that there are no longer standards of judgment but only that standards are arbitrary. This is why we oppose tradition and consider ourselves the enemy of institutions.
Blasting away at institutions is old stuff for artists of all kinds. A generation ago we had the revolts of Bohemia, Greenwich Village, Bloomsbury, expatriatism to the Left Bank, and so on. A generation before that there was the Decadent upsurge in France and elsewhere. And a generation before that we had such famous smashers of institutions as Baudelaire on one side of the ocean and Walt Whitman and Thoreau on this side. It’s not to much of an exaggeration to say that every literary generation is a generation of revolt. The revolt is invariably against standards and rules and regulations which seem just about on the verge of being fixed. Consequently, many historians of literature regard this revolt of the generations as something natural and inevitable. They expect the young to kick over the traces, and they know that in good time the new revolt will slow down and take on set features of an institution, while it is being blasted at by the next generation. Beat poetry, it appears, is partly institutionalized already and preparing to defend itself against a new uprising. This anyhow is the common historical view of poetry and art and I hold it to be completely false. I have never been convinced that this battle of the generations explains anything of importance, or even deals with the facts. Yet we are so historically conditioned that we tend to see even poetry as a series of historical struggles, with gains, losses and casualties. To escape from this time-psychology once and for all seems to me one of the paramount tasks facing the artist. Rebelliousness may be one of the characteristics of poetry but it is not its aim. Our unfortunate tendency to think of the arts in negative terms, does in fact create negation in art: we have come to expect it. Art as protest always attracts the most attention, just as a plane crash is more attractive to a journalist than the unveiling of a masterpiece.

As long as we abide by the concepts of good and bad, major and minor, great and not-great—these rules of thumb used in desperation by teachers as a framework for literary education—we perpetuate the literature of protest. These terms such as bad, evil, great are very powerful images that create realities. Winston Churchill once pointed to a place in Europe and said: there is an iron curtain across Europe. What a fine image, said the history-minded on both sides of the remark and they all proceeded to build one to specifications. We have evolved a value-system for the arts which is untenable. The revolt of the generations is proof of that. It is typical of this kind of thinking also that every revolt is eventually forgiven. If you skip a generation, going back to the Victorians, say, we begin to say not only that they weren’t so bad but even they were extremely good. Even old movies, which were known to be junk when they were first screened, are called classics two film generations later. Suppose we could free ourselves from conventional valuation in poetry or any art and assign a zero to the term Bad, as to the term Good. Suppose, in other words, we stopped looking at poetry esthetically, religiously, morally. Then, instead of these endless abstract generalizations or bigotted opinions about a poem or a painting, we would have nothing but the poem or the painting itself. We might be able to look at it with the honesty of a man from Mars, or with the sincerity of a child. Artists, by the way, are constantly dependent on the perceptions of children.
My point is that most of the art and literature of the world, if seen outside religious, moral and esthetic convention, habit, and prejudice would disintegrate into dust. For a tremendous quantity of what we call art and literature is little more than the projection of outworn values and neuroses of one kind or another.

The 20th century, which is a century when all our chickens have come home to roost, has been the first to question wholesale the validity of these values. We are the first people who placed the art of savages (so-called) on a par with learned and sophisticated art. We the first to take the creations of children seriously. We are the first to recognize the genius of the insane. We are the first to pay homage to the writings of the criminal and to works previously condemned for obscenity or what the lawbooks call sexual aberration. Ours are the first artists to visit the junkyard and there discover beauty. (This is quite a different thing from digging up the busted statuary of Greece.) We are the first to search the scientist's laboratory for new and unheard-of kinds of music and design. On these levels we have already left conventional Good and Bad behind. The true modern artist and poet knows that values will be assigned to his work, but he himself is not concerned with that. A poem may be value-creating, but that is an accident, an unfortunate accident, like the money-value attached to a painting. The artist knows that he cannot prevent this making and counterfeiting of value but he does his best to ignore it.

In his personal life, the modern artist's greatest job is to escape the Evaluators, these pawnbrokers and Shylocks of good and bad, major and minor, great and ungreat.

Curiously enough, the marketplace of esthetic value is the school, any school from grammar to university. The Evaluators are most prevalent in the graduate colleges of literature and history. I've written about this sociological phenomenon elsewhere and have earned myself the name of the Trojan Horse in the English Department, for it has struck me in many years of teaching that my colleagues who are English or History professors are the real esthetic tories of the university. Their fear and even hatred of science and technology, for instance, are attitudes I cannot share.

In practice, modern arts have freed themselves from religious dogma, moral fiat, and esthetic prejudice. But Theory follows hard behind, always on the poet's heels. The artist has a hard time escaping his Evaluators. Much of the time he uses up all his energy doing just that. A young writer I know who went to a writers' colony (or an asylum for the creative) told me that all the people who went there spent their first two weeks—you'd never guess what they spent two weeks doing.—Sleeping. Alone. Then one day they would wake up and assault the typewriter.

The one thing that is never granted the writer in this society is the one thing he needs, and the only thing: time to do his work. The moment he writes one successful poem or paints one successful picture, or writes one successful composition, he is finished. The Evaluators, curators, anthologists, etc. have got his number. Every kind of snare is loosed to capture the goose that laid the golden egg.
So the writer takes off to the northwoods, and if he can afford it he will erect an electrified fence around his hut that would kill an elk at a hundred yards.

Or he will hit the highway, literally or otherwise. I am speaking on a low level at the moment—the level of survival. Artists have a very low survival level. Money has nothing to do with it. To survive as an artist or craftsman or inventor, a person of imagination, whether scientist or artist, one needs only the respect of privacy. Respect for the possibility of success or failure. Nothing else. Rewards are fine, but meaningless, as every honest craftsman knows.

A man who wants to write Bad poetry, anti-theatre, the artist who decides upon anti-art, the composer like Charles Ives (to name an early example) who prefers cacophony to melody—these people are not only making technical experiments: they are barricading themselves and their work against the tried and accepted values of the past.

The way I’m trying to use the word Bad is as a synonym for Good—so that the Bad poem, if it is Bad enough, will drive out “good” poetry. For example (I think Auden said this one time) the “poesy” poems in The New Yorker (poems written in country newspapers by hillbillies, etc.) are frequently better than the high-paid poems in the same magazine written by famous poets. There is a sense in which Joyce Kilmer’s Trees is better than The Waste Land because it is so truly bad—it is true to its badness, while The Waste Land is a poem in bad faith—really an essay and not a work of poetry. Well, what a man like Simpson is saying is that ‘good poetry’ has become so predictable that you might as well give it up and let the anthologist write it. Literature has become so literary that the literary work is almost bound to be born dead—and all the midwifery of criticism and pedagogy can’t bring it back to life.

Now that is exactly the pickle the poet is in today. He cannot write his poem without somebody immediately assigning it—either to a class or to a category. The poem must somehow escape the deep freeze of classification if it is to function. The poet tends to react in two ways in this situation where he knows his poem is going to be trapped—either he goes into a protest tantrum (even protesting against his own standards, since they have failed him into “success”) or he ditches the standards completely. In protest he becomes an anti-poet, a revolutionary, an avant-gardist; and in abdicating from standards altogether he becomes Bad.

So anti-poetry is not enough and is in fact grist for the mills of the Evaluators. Gerard Manley Hopkins makes the Oxford Book of English Verse, etc. The aim is to stay out of the anthology—any anthology, not because they don’t want you but because you are Bad. Hence the compulsion of the Bad poet to be “obscene” or nonsensical or Dadaist.

Anti-poetry is not really different from any poetry of Protest, and Protest poetry is nothing new. You might say Wilfred Owen was an anti-poet: when he put that little twist into rhyme he was not just making war-noises as a protest against war: he was also making war on rhyme. It was like saying: if you pretend to make harmonious sounds nowadays, you are lying. Cummings was an anti-poet, protesting against the forms of sentiment, whether in himself or in
versification. So were they all, the good poets of our century, anti-poets and protesters. Even Eliot protested once. But everyone knows that when protest becomes an end in itself it loses meaning. The trouble with Protest is that it’s only loyal Opposition. Simpson’s remark that the change must come in the content is right. Protest poetry is mostly a change in the externals. But what if Cummings—to take an example—instead of lampooning the forms so obsessively with such baroque elegance had broken out of the forms altogether, which psychologically he was trying so hard not to do. Protest poetry is a protest against form only. Auden’s old line about new styles of architecture pops into my head. Maybe that was the trouble with Marxism: that it was only a protest against a style of architecture. They got their new architecture, with the same kind of management running the building. But what if the Marxists had had a real revolution, in content. Anyhow, anti-poetry is always betraying us with its death-bed conversions and joining up as the loyal opposition. To my way of thinking, then, protest poetry and anti-poetry are the same thing, a battle against forms or habits without any real uprooting of the contents. In the long run anti-poetry only confirms the tradition, only gives new form to form itself.

I seem to be setting up a thesis that there are three kinds of poetry: formalistic poetry, the poetry of limited Yes; protest poetry; and Bad poetry, the poetry of No in various registers of thunder. But by Bad I mean Good. That is not very rational but I will try to clear it up. Presumably formalistic poetry has form as an end in itself. Protest poetry vandalistically tries to break up or sabotage the forms and sometimes the protest also becomes an end in itself. (Literary history is fascinated by this cobra-mongoose struggle and can’t take its eyes off it.) And then there is Bad poetry which Mr. Simpson and I want to write and which I will try to describe. We might just as well call it the poetry of the absurd, to get off the ambiguity of Bad.

First let me say something about modern formalistic poetry which is, as critics have been saying for a long time, a period piece. Our period.

Some people blame it on Iowa. Somebody coined the expression “cornbelt metaphysical” but one could just as accurately call it Bennington Metaphysical or the University of California conceit. Modern formalistic is a national school of poetry and the biggest, in my own mind I refer to it as the poetry of The New Yorker magazine. I wrote for that magazine for more than ten years and I know what I mean. It is a poetry that makes very definite assumptions about a status quo which reader, writers and advertisers for that magazine uneasily believe in. On a less interesting level most of the literary quarterlies believe in the same cloud-cuckoo-land of taste, values, and expertise. All these formalistic poems are glosses, not poems; they say something about a poem that never came into being, just as the cover paintings of The New Yorker magazine all seem to say—I wish I had become a painting but I didn’t want to go that far. In The New Yorker even a poem by Roethke or Elizabeth Bishop is not a real Roethke or Bishop. When I wrote for the magazine I knew exactly what little explosions I was supposed to set off in the reader’s solar plexus. When I finally abandoned this kind of writing—I have a whole book of New Yorker poems
which I've never published—the editor I worked with wrote and congratulated me. It was then that I recognized that I was no longer a "good poet."

Modern formalistic is in fact Literature, with all the pretentions of that establishment and the life expectancy which surrounds anything that can afford the best doctors and lawyers. It is the poetry of the American age. Metaphysical it isn't, yet this poetry is so loaded with literary assumptions that it bears a shallow relationship to the school of poetry that goes under that name. A true metaphysical poetry, would on the contrary, be absurd: the cultural contents would have long since dissolved: the values implicit in mythological quotation, for instance, would no longer be present. The absurd artist ideally can say Leda and the Swan without even knowing that there were or were not such characters. Any poem by the same name would seem to him an artefact of the Serious World, hence inconsequential.

The best example of absurd or "Bad" poetry in America today is the poetry of William Carlos Williams. But in order to talk about this kind of poetry I will have to talk about other arts. (As Williams always did.) And in order to propagandize for this kind of art I will have to employ the services of Albert Camus, especially as he deals with the absurd in his early book The Myth of Sisyphus. I am not taking a philosophical position. I have no knowledge of philosophy, and I am even given to understand that Camus departed from his original thesis in The Myth of Sisyphus. That is not my concern. It is what he says about the absurd that I understand—in blinding flashes—and that illuminates my own feelings and prejudices about poetry.

Very briefly Sisyphus is the absurd hero. "His scorn for the gods, his hatred for death, and passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing," Camus says. For various acts of disobedience to the gods, Sisyphus is condemned to push an enormous boulder up a mountain, only to see it roll back again when he reaches the top. Camus follows him down the hill: that is the moment of glory before Sisyphus must begin to push the rock skyward again. But it is at that moment of awareness when the victim feels his powerlessness and his fate that he is most grief-stricken and most joyous. As Camus puts it: "one does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness . . . . One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

Camus wrote this book during what he called the European Disaster and on one level it was a powerful diatribe against tyranny. Philosophically it was a treatise on suicide: it answers in the affirmative the question is life worth living. I find this work even more valid today than in 1942 when it was written. Today we are all facing the Void, all in revolt against the gods, passionately clinging to life while we are aware that life is meaningless. Or rather—whatever meaning it has is given by us. And in poetry this means that the gods of value are dead. All values are equal. Consequently we can talk about Bad poetry and strive for it, either on the level of Protest or on the existential level of questioning value out of existence. Nietzsche of course is an absurd hero. So is Céline who helped invent the anti-hero. So is Henry Miller. We'll stop there for the moment.
Not the best living but the most living is one way of putting the absurd. Value judgments are discarded in favor of factual judgments. Metaphor has to go; the symbol has to go; myth itself has to go, except myth “with no other depth than that of human suffering, and like it, inexhaustible. Not the divine fable that amuses and blinds, but the terrestrial face, gesture, and drama in which are summed up a difficult wisdom and an ephemeral passion.” Modern poetics is basically a theology: for the use of a mythology descended from religion, whether it comes from Homer or the Bible Golden Bough, will revert to a religion. A secular myth like Usura can become a quasi-religious symbol in no time. An absurd poetic on the other hand would prefer quantity to quality, a difficult wisdom and the ephemeral passion, rather than the one undying immortal passion, for God or for a member of the opposite sex. Camus singles out Don Giovanni as an example of the absurd hero.

He says about Don Giovanni (he is speaking of the one who is the 20th century favorite, Mozart and Da Ponte’s Don) that as seducers go, Don Giovanni is an ordinary one. Or rather, the difference between him and the ordinary seducer is that Don Giovanni is conscious, and that is why he is absurd. That is what makes him different from, say, a goat. Don Giovanni has no use for the gods, he worships life, and he laughs at the Stone Guest, the symbol of Death who leaves the graveyard to come to dinner and to drag Don Giovanni through the opera-house floor into the flames of hell. This ending, of course, is for the clergy and the usherettes. Above all, Don Giovanni does not believe in the profound meaning of things; he has no scale of values, unless it be that a fat girl is more comfortable in the winter than a skinny one. The absurd poet, like the Don, has no sense of unity. He doesn’t try to put his life back together again every ten minutes. The “form” of his life will take care of itself. In the libretto it isn’t Don Giovanni who keeps the little black book with all the phone numbers in it; it is the pious and rascally valet Leporello who hypocritically impresses the ladies with this document. Don Giovanni multiplies what he cannot unify: to him nature is bountiful with women. He probably doesn’t even know the little black book exists.

The clue to the marvelous and beloved absurdity of Don Giovanni is quantity as against the ideal, Maud Gonne for instance, who was Yeats’ ideal. The ideal love belongs to the Serious World, which is to say the phony world, the world in bad faith. Imagine how much famous literature would go by the board if we were to apply the criteria of absurdity instead of that of value, permanence, universality, and immortality. Practically all of it.

One of the great absurd artists of our time, a quantivist if there ever was one, is Picasso. I know that his popularity is held against him and that in some quarters he is regarded as an interior decorator for motels—Ezra Pound dismisses him as a financial genius—but I find him absurd in the best sense. I see no reason to valuate him—this man who has been in flight from values all his life. Picasso is very chaplinesque, a great clown; he has lived a vast succession of presents, which is more than we can of most artists. I like to believe, that his dealers are Leporellos who keep his little black account books. And it is a foregone conclusion that he will have a state funeral—the one thing that will make
him turn over in his grave—and that Malraux will pronounce the benediction (and say that he was not really a Communist or a millionaire) and that De Gaulle will salute this Spanish peasant when they press the button—in the name of France.

Picasso is typical of the plight of the poet today: hopping around like a flea to escape being caught and ticketed. Just like Chaplin hopping to Switzerland with his nestegg—another millionaire Communist. But with Picasso it is the esthetic Evaluators, not the Bureau of Internal Revenue, that is on his trail. And there’s no way to outwit them except by reinventing the present over and over, in a million different disguises. The absurd genius is a practical joker, the man who laughs. Chaplin is funnier than his movies and probably knows it. And the difference between Céline and Henry Miller is laughter. The laughter of Don Giovanni is not that of the villain twirling his mustaches, an interpretation made available for fathers; it is pure golden laughter, absolute quantitative delight. Like Picasso plates. Or William Carlos Williams’ scribbly poems.

The example of Louis-Ferdinand Céline is still with us as the novelist of the absurd anti-hero. Journey to the End of Night is still one of the bitterest, most absurd books of the age. It is the Bad Novel (like the Bad Poem I mentioned) par excellence. Céline was one of the first French novelists to use the language of the street as a narrative vehicle. That was absurd enough. The tale proper is a parody of the romantic voyage with the hero stripped of every vestige of heroism. Bardamu spends his whole life escaping: from the Western Front in the First World War, from an insane asylum, from a jungle outpost in Africa, from a galley which takes him to America as a galley-slave, and from the production line of the Ford Motor Company. Every institution of modern life, beginning with war and colonialism and coming down to smaller personal institutions like love and murder, is denounced brutally. The point is that one is left nothing of the values: one is left only with this anti-hero, this Sisyphus without joy. The book is a merciless comedy of ourselves with not a single second of relief that I can remember. Céline has to go back and destroy the conventions of Beauty, as Rimbaud must, as all anti-poets have to. “One night I seated Beauty on my knees. And I found her bitter. And I cursed her.”

There was a phase in modern poetry which is still going on in fits and starts, called the anti-poetic, but this was naive: looking for the least “poetic” object and making it the center of attention. This is a step in the right direction but it is a baby step. The Céline way, the Rimbaud way was a bigger step: wiping the whole scale of values off the slate. Even that is also poetry vis-a-vis something. A bigger step in the game is taken, I think in the theatre of the absurd or in abstract expressionism.

In recent years American-type painting, as one art critic calls it, or abstract expressionism or action painting, has become the dominant painting in the world. It is the first time American art has taken the lead over European painting—or so I’ve read. I would call abstract or non-objective art absurd: one can almost turn back the clock a few years and hear people like de Kooning or Rothko or Pollack saying: I want to paint bad paintings, paintings that do
not please. I suppose that the idealization of the object was the point of opposition: the death of allegory (though it survives in surrealism), of representation of things or figures for the sake of representing, but especially the abandonment of symbols and symbolic objects—all these were moves away from the secure world. One need no longer fall on his knees before a picture, whether the Madonna or her opposite, the Mona Lisa.

I relate the nonsensical, the hilarious, and the obscene as three qualities of the absurd. Non-objective painting, is the Serious World tells us, certainly nonsensical. It puts the trained artist in the same category as the child artist and the primitive if not the chimpanzee. It explores the moment of the present instead of trying to manipulate the present toward the future, the ideal. To sit on top of a ladder and drip paint becomes as valid a skill as the finest calligraphy. Speed is a factor of this kind of art. We have seen Japanese artists who do abstract brush paintings of written characters: how fast they attack the paper with the brush has much to do with the success of the painting. Chance has much to do with it. The absurd, without becoming mystical reintroduces the element of chance into art: the printer’s error, the spot of paint from nowhere, the worm holes in the wood, the old poster peeling off a wall—we have discovered the scrapheap and found it good. It is Jabberwocky but even without the story and the moral.

So with the objet trouvé. If you pick up an object in the woods or on the beach and put it down in a certain place in your house it is to that extent an absurd work. I don’t mean seashells: those are readymades, like the urinal Marcel Duchamp tried to enter in an art show. The real objet trouvé has something wrong with it, like the crack in the liberty Bell. Only it has no patriotic or other sentimental associations. It is valueless except as it contradicts value.

Take compressed automobiles. Some artist has thought of mashing up cars in a hydraulic press, not to melt down for more cars but for the sake of mashing and mounting. It is neither a social criticism, poetry of protest, nor mashing for mashing’s sake, formalism. It is absurd. In looking at a compressed Pontiac we must not think of General Motors and the horrors of industrialism: on the other hand, we need not forget that this is a car, though mashed. It is something like the stage direction given in one of the absurd plays: “The actor kisses or does not kiss Miss Jones.”

To out out on a limb, a little further, and give you the outlines of an absurd poem, this is going to be a Bad poem in the absurd sense, although it is probably also a lousy poem. There’s no question about it. What I am doing here is to take three advertising slogans which are now dead, that is obsolete; they are objets trouvés. They are tied together by one line which happens to describe the pen I was holding when I wrote the poem. A critic would give this quatrain a bad reading if he remembered the ads too well: he would be associating and reacting. Instead, he the reader should merely be conscious that three of the lines were once ads; he is not too sure what they are trying to sell even though the objects are or are not mentioned. Then the old dead ads are joined by a fourth made-up line. Here is skeleton of an Absurd Poem.
Hicock Belt Buckle and Beltogram;  
Eversharp Pen and Pencil Set;  
This smooth gold reminds me of my Bar Mitzvah;  
Ask the man who owns one.

It's a collage, and it would be all right with me for the reader to say it is a recollection of the 1920's. But I am not going to do an explication de texte on this quatrain. Besides, every piece of nonsense is a Rorshach Test. But I guess it would be better to call it a Mashed Poem. A great deal has been written about nonsense and I have nothing to add except that in a work of art the artist is conscious of the nonsense. A lunatic on the other hand is not. The art of the asylum has a great deal to tell us but it must always stop short of telling us it is art. Child art however is conscious. Even though a child does not know the meaning of words he is using them consciously for the fun of it. I am speaking of poetry. I subscribe to the hey-nonny-nonny school of poetics. This the child knows: all language is hey-nonny-nonny. Every poet spends a lifetime battling against the encroachment of meaning. Someone is always coming up and explaining that he knows the meaning of hey-nonny-nonny. For a simple definition, language is poetry in the absence of dictionaries. By this definition, every good line of poetry is absurd.

The absurdity of the obscene works the same way: you remove the meaning, usually "moral," and you are left with the word out of context. Minus its moral contents you put it back into action. It begins to make a new kind of sense. This is what Henry Miller is all about: he has changed the content of the novel by ignoring the morality of social forms. He remembers what it means to have had those words be obscene, and they retain a kind of vestigial obscenity, but he has moved the words a big step away from their activity. The dirty words, or slogans, or ads, have lost their radio activity; they are still but yet are no longer dirty words: the author's reorientation or disillusionment has changed all that. Lawrence was trying to do the same thing but rather quaintly, making the dirty word pretty as a dialect. Not so with Joyce: to Joyce the dirty word was a dirty word and that was that. Joyce was still stuck with the contents of the Dublin mentality.

One wonders whether our judges who have lately been so liberal about so-called obscene books are not wiser than the authors themselves: for in saying that a work is not evil even though it contains elements of the obscene, they are making a transvaluation. They have left the moral question behind and have conceded the change in moral contents. No matter how much malarky the court hides behind in suggesting that such works of art are healthy for the body politic, it seems to me that they are really admitting the devaluation of moral standards—to the point at which the obscene is on the verge of becoming the polite. Which is absurd.

Not to linger over this commonplace subject, I don't want to leave it without making the usual distinction between the obscene, which is absurd, and the pornographic, which is not. I would say that de Sade is obscene and absurd, for one thing because he was such a 'bad' writer. Baudelaire seems to me
pornographic, as he does to Sartre. He is an onanist. The Earl of Rochester would seem to be a pornographer on the basis of his deathbed conversion: a true Rabelasian or Don Giovanni cannot be saved: they have to come and get him. And yet if one takes the side of the absurd he cannot moralize about pornography either. Sooner or later even the pornographic must enter the realm of the absurd. But it will first have to lose its propagandistic tone.

As for hilarity, that speaks for itself. Hilarity is related to nonsense and is a second cousin of the obscene. There is a point at which the most solemn moment decides to become the most ridiculous. Possibly the reason for ritual is that ritual prevents this from happening. Anybody caught laughing during the Star-Spangled banner just before the football game is certain to be hustled out of the stands more dead than alive. Yet nothing could be funnier than this particular ritual. I won’t offend anybody by listing more solemn occasions, though folklore and literature and old wives’ tales are full of assaults on church ritual and funerals. So is drama itself. The classical separation of tragedy and comedy was finally overcome by the Elizabethans who were considered by certain critics as savages for that reason. Hamlet after all is as absurd as you can get: he makes no sense whatever and that is precisely his charm. Though possibly he is more of a protest character than an absurd. But the last scene of the play is definitely hilarious; and it might have been written by Red Skelton.

Poetry should be zany. It should not only frolic, as Camus says: it should cavort, stumble, trip, fall flat on its face, get up, slither, fly, soar, dazzle, gloom, and lash out. But it has a fatal tendency to sulk and be melancholy or to be pompous and asinine. The dreariness and pomposity of Paradise Lost is compensated for only by Milton’s zaniness of language. Whitman is saved after all by his sense of the comic, his sense of the absurdity of America. His failings are too well known to mention but there is no question that he one day said to himself: I want to write Bad poetry, etc. And he did and we are all thankful for that.

Poetry always has a lot to learn—it is a backward art. It learns from modern painting, from music, jazz and electronic music, from the anti-novel of the anti-heroic, from the picaresque and the primitive, from the theatre of the absurd. It learns from the popular and the corrupt arts. The popular arts, say television, have a brutalizing quality which frustrate people to the point of absurdity, even though the net effect is to make people who watch it homicidal. The sadism of popular art can be materia poetica also. Instead of writing poems which say loftily I hate television the poet can write about the lines on the screen or what the tv mechanic calls “snow.” I saw a good Bad poem recently by a Beat poet which absurdly described the beauty of a B59 bomber. It was a big step away from the poetry of Strontium 90, which is poetry (of the Serious World).

The absurd poet does not attempt to unify; he is content with multiplicity. The very number of poets in this country today should be a comfort to everybody. Instead of an elite we have a populace of the creative. We will leave the relative quality of the poets to those who make it their business to candle poems. I read in a recent interview with Ezra Pound that he didn’t have time to read new poetry but that he had appointed a representative to pick out a few new things
to show him now and then. A kind of IBM machine of an adviser. In the long
critical career of T. S. Eliot there aren’t more than two or three contemporary
poets who are ever mentioned. Both of these Major lights would contend that
there is entirely too much poetry in the 20th century and that there just isn’t
that much room at the top of the obelisk. They get around the problem by dis-
qualifying all the competitors on various grounds or by pretending to ignore
their existence, like Pound, who probably stopped reading poetry with fresh ink
somewhere around 1910. But now the quantity increases and with it—or, as I
would say, because of it, the quality. It’s as simple as arithmetic: the more the
merrier. For the minute one says the word quality he is setting up standards and
that is what we must not do. That’s jumping the gun. Standards will be per-
ceived all too soon: it’s the works that matter. And each generation will pick its
own works from the past for its own reasons, absurd reasons, and not because
some Dr. Johnson has flourished a cane.

There is one final thing I want to mention in connection with absurd poetry,
this poetry which I can only adumbrate and not define. In fact, it must remain
indefinable, not because of any ecclesiastical mystery but because of the nature
of change. Art is constantly and erratically moving toward a state in which it
will cease to exist. That is, man may someday be so happy that he will not even
need music, so conscious that only children will write great poetry. But for
the time being poetry is flowing in the direction of prose, instead of away from it,
as it has done for so long. We have seen this all through the 20th century (and
earlier) and have been afraid of it. We should not be afraid of it. We are
gradually losing the line of demarcation between prose and poetry, and we are
almost at the point of asking perhaps for the last time: what is prose? what is
poetry? And are almost at the point of answering: there isn’t any. The contents
of poetry have already become “contaminated” with the nonsensical, the hilar-
ious, the obscene. This is as it should be. It happens that prose for centuries
has moved closer and closer to the conditions of human life and poetry farther
and farther away. Now it appears that poetry is also flowing in the direction of
human experience and away from the ideal. Or so we hope.
Rooms and Chambers

After She Had Finished Her Playing

Peter Hollenbeck

I do not think, after she had finished
Her playing, that we thought
The time and silence then anything to think on;
Dull as prophets, we stood and shed ashes,
Stumbling from our worshipping onto the knives of gods.
Age from the mind a crippled image summons:
Mirrors wherein with pins of sacrificial gold
Were seized our ties like dolls.
We made an adequacy our discipline.

I do not think, nor shall I call
Back the song time at his cold pleasure takes,
But I remember her hands leaping into the sudden speech
Of the friend who does not understand—
Not saint’s high griefs that make
us guilty of our gaiety,
For there are those in blessed company,
And there is loneliness that is not loneliness,
That age should bring all the world to likeness
And lose the faces of recognizance.

I did not think that when her music was gone
Into the gathering likeness time folds on old hands
And those hours when unaccustomed idols alter the mind,
How in her hands the peace that is remembering
And the peace that is dismissing were held as one.
Pale sacrifices, the incense of linen left
in sunlight,
Weigh me, and why should I so lately be concerned
With whether the keys were ivory or pine?
They do not forget dull idols who recall knives.

I shall not ring like Ahab’s dogs her bloodless knell,
Such by time is the praise of time,
Forgotten idols are forever dumb,
But I remember the piano how it stood
In the sunlit room
After the music was gone.
Spring Lightning

Peter Hollenbeck

I heard the land
Struck dumb as I slept by my hand
Through the voices of the portals of the sea;
And the shadows that the hours persuade
Were pressed no more upon my sight,
But fell like coins of fire away.
Time in his dark breath began to fall,
And over all the country land
By nightfold and the setting hand
So fell the heavy light of all.

Twilight harkened to the morn:
The clouds were quick with chords;
I charged my mortal arks of breath
Unto the sentence of the flood.

And in the woods the shadows move
Not in bondage as before they had
But shaken with the print of doom
Upon their forehead.

And now the stones that one by one
I threw by memory into the lake
Conceive their sources; with the coming rain
The surface of all recollection breaks.

An orb about each halo spreads,
Shimmering I watch the pale pools growing,
The feathers of my lids clamp cold,
And now the quick wings fold.

I heard from the land I do not know
Voices I have never seen,
And I deny the land I know
Where I have been afraid to have so even been.

And the words across my rumoured lips are sand
Glassed over by a final tide;
The swaying waters halt in shock,
The constellations spell a rune.
The gay bunnies on the falling lawn
Hop softly as the moss across the stone;
The mournful seizure of an old perfume;
And this is all there is of all there was.

Haunted waters of the pools in hidden groves
And those who have dismissed their trail,
If I ask of my reflection
Why so pale
Thou why so pale
It would shatter in the telling,
As the rain to tell the lip
How death shall wreathe our every ending in:
How hands that trembled on the lute lie still,
And the sibyls in the vale.
The Ugly Gosling

A Fable for the Old at Heart

C. P. Stinchfield

Once upon a time there was a mother goose who was hatching a nest-full of eggs. At last the appointed time arrived, and the eggs began to crack apart. Out crawled the little goslings one by one, and they began to waddle around and make silly little goose noises: all, that is, but one. One, rather over-sized egg remained; and it just sat there in the nest and did nothing. But geese are nothing if they are not dutiful, so the mother goose admitted there was nothing for it but to go sit on the egg again. And she sat, and she sat, and she sat. And then at long last the egg began to tremble; the shell split, and out popped a head.

The mother goose put her wing to her beak in surprise. Out of the egg struggled what was without a doubt the most hideous creature she had ever seen. Its feathers were sparse and wet and gray, its beak long and ugly, its eyes red and protruding. It was truly a child only a mother could love, and Mrs. Goose did her best.

The other goslings, however, made fun of their ugly brother, and excluded it from their games. “If you’re a goose, I’m a moose,” they would cry, or, “Send this goose to camp!” All the other barnyard animals whispered about the misshapen gosling, and Mrs. Hen was heard confiding one day to Mrs. Duck that women “who have children late in life are bound to produce freaks like that.”

Poor Mrs. Goose didn’t know where to turn, and eventually, on the advice of Mrs. Cat, she went to Siegmund Vulture, an eminent psychiatrist, who examined the ugly gosling, and gave him square pegs to put in a little board with matching holes, and little pictures of ink-blots to look at. At last, shaking his massive, learned head, he intoned, “I’m afraid that your son will never be normal, Mrs. Goose. It would be best for all concerned if he were put in an institution where he could string beads and be a benefit to humanity rather than a burden.”

The ugly gosling heard what was planned, and decided that he would rather kill himself than be put in an institution. So that very night, after his brothers and sisters and mother were asleep (his father was a travelling salesman for a gooseberry jam concern) he crept sadly away, and slipped into a nearby pond.

But in the pond, the despondency and humiliation slipped away, and he took heart. “Perhaps, if I studied real hard, I could learn to be an eagle. They are strong and respected.” So the next day he swam to Vic Turkey’s Gymnasium in the nearby city, where he enrolled in the Special Six-Month Course in Muscle Toning and Body Building Designed to Turn a 96-Ounce Chicken into an 180-Ounce Fighting Cock. He lifted weights, he skipped rope, he did calisthenics, and he took steam-baths. But at the end of six months, he was older, but just as ugly and just as weak. Vic Turkey took him aside and said, “Ya can’t make silk purses outta sows’ ears, ya know.”
Crestfallen, the ugly gosling trudged from the gym. Suddenly he saw before him a great billboard which read:

LEARN THE NEEDED SOCIAL GRACES
AT
ARTHUR AND CATHARINE MEADOWLARK’S
DANCING SCHOOL.
OUR SPECIAL SIX-MONTH DANCE COURSE
WILL MAKE EVEN A CONDOR LIGHT ON
HIS FEET!!!!!!
DON’T BE A DODO.
SIGN UP NOW!!

“Perhaps,” he thought, “with study, I could became an urbane, witty, and accomplished Baltimore Oreole.”

So the ugly gosling waddled in and signed up, and for the next six months he cha-chaed, tangoed, two-stepped, and waltzed. At the end of that time, even Catharine Meadowlark had a pained expression on her usually smiling face from the bruises on her feet, and the ugly gosling had no more grace on the dance-floor than a drunken Kiwi, and in six months he had not even managed to master the Turkey Trot. Arthur Meadowlark limped over to him, and said, “I’m sorry, Mr. Gosling, but I’m afraid that even we can’t make silk purses out of sows’ ears.”

The ugly gosling, his head on his breast, his feathers trailing on the ground, walked sadly from the dance school. He wandered aimlessly, until at last he came upon a park, in which was situated a lovely little pool. “I shall drown myself there, and rid the world of an ugly creature,” he said. But just as he waddled into the water, a flock of swans came flapping down and settled on the silvery surface of the pond.

“Oh, how beautiful they are,” thought the ugly gosling. “If only I were as beautiful as they. But I am not, and they will hate me because I am so ugly. They will peck me to death because of it. But it is as good a way of dying as any.”

As the swans swam slowly toward him, he lowered his head to receive their deadly pecks. But he had grown since those first unhappy days on the farm, and time had wrought great changes. Awe-struck, he gazed at his reflection in the water. He was not a gosling at all. Nor was he a goose! And slowly, majestically, the swans swam over to where he floated and pecked him to death.

He was not, in fact, a goose, but rather a ring-necked grackle. And there is nothing in the world uglier than a baby ring-necked grackle unless it is an adult ring-necked grackle.

MORAL:

Accordingly, you can’t make silk purses out of sows’ ears.
"The fire of life destroys the dead," said he spreading back a caress of grass which tingles too the shank of his naked trunk from the broken bar grate of his cold furnace where embers should sift onto the ground, vomited from its mean green paunch.

The dead bear life on body dirt, the burnt match on his stung finger sung him a sizzling reminder and sprinkled the heat of his maimed memory which for lust he would heave into the pot, but for fear could hold back from the fire.

"Metal which gets in the way of movement". Blow hot air or old will explode, some must spout steams and speak in flame. The skin of the fire melts in a clang and points the moulten finger in him, and drips the present on his belly’s altar.

His hand which packed home the past in a poke of mesh opens the flue. The fed fire churns his roll of static black on yellow pain which would toll a stale tear. He watches himself burn over his shoulder. "Put a nail in the backward looking eye."

The stain of his thirst is washed by the storm which overflows those it spatters; the torn blue flamed bodies of work sheltered in her heat to slake together with their condensed water and to pound the surface of his sky’s light in a cool spasm of the strewn thunder.
He wished to rise with heat over the flame
in a flight of his image loosened from her,
the earth, who lies dryly in heat and strokes
him like dimples of love's girl, and thus her voice,
the stride of the storm; use it slowly
like the sea used her, to calm the fire.

But he stands burning in the crumpled storm.
On dirt the flame waves with one flow which weaves
through the altar of his stomach and hesitates,
"burnt past, who is to scrape your ash," said he,
his not so shoddy feat lapping at his steeled paunch.
The scratch of fire still alters all his dead,
sacrificing his forged smile watches from within.
The Memory

Lauren White

A meagre start, a shooting hale height, a swift decline. Then the animal peers
la-bas, to penetrate black thickets at night
down windswept slope where the mindless whirrs,
on mountain sides and in a humid pit. A hopeless terrain
where we, strangers from another planet, stand guardedly
and tense at moving lights.

Lying on the could sod,
now grass creeps thru our hair and roots
shoot from our heads to the navel of the earth.
Aku-aku waits and sinks to his neck,
a landlocked iceberg. Far from sight of homely jutting
fjords that sheer off into northern sea; rising
from the mist of days at sea, we reach a swell
that is a tryst; a desolate quay
ringed with funereal polyp beds. Where are the redhead
natives? Where are their crowns,
the topknots? These I came long looking for; these
I found: red monoliths like heads of a forgotten race,
the sloping nose, the natural
hairbow, sharp Dick Tracy jaw: massive
masks; a ruse against spooks

in tall grass where they tumbled
time and time again
downhill from the volcano, who says
they were not formed in molten rivers
ere there was that crater, creatures
in cahoots with . . . who knows what? Today
they loll in silence. From out at sea
they look like broken teeth or feathers on a
crumbling headress.
Kon-Tiki's men of bronze and sinew
whose pathway thru the waves
I traced, are dwindled now in number
and in strength. Stone guardians do not stand;
they do not counter musket-ball;
stone cheek does not turn God,
who intercepts these dumb inheritors
who ropes them in his fold.
Lone missionary is a pope in the outcast isle.
Armies of angels hover overhead;
our fathers hide in caves.
Our history limns the rocks that perch
on inaccessible ledges, fronting surf.
Who will know of the pallid maidens
locked those days in grottos to be sacrificed?
Who will weep to hear of wars that staunched
our race, caused brother to bleed brother,
made fire to leap the width of the land?
Who will see the sky as we have always
seen it; constellations whence we came and
where great warriors rest?
A bell sounded in the back of the A&P store and Siggy, glancing about to see if Mr. Walters was watching, raced back to the stock room, tore off his apron, and threw it carelessly on a wooden peg that protruded from the wall. Two days before, Mr. Walters, the store’s general manager, had made him stay forty-five minutes overtime to re-stack the holiday boxes of nativity figures that he had filed on the dog food shelves. He had known the proper place but, fascinated by the bright colors of the little figures, his mind had wandered. Mr. Walters had collared him and shouted, “Listen you big jerk, Fido ain’t gonna eat the three wise men. If you weren’t so natural born ignorant I’d fire your ass out of here like a bullet. Now get these things back where they belong.” Siggy stammered, “Ya, ya dat’s what I t’ought,” and, clutching the cartons to his protruding stomach, shuffled from aisle to aisle like a fat centipede.

Sona had given him a scolding for returning late. She usually did. Since she had married Lars, Siggy’s father, some fourteen years ago, Siggy’s joy in life had undergone a black decline. She had brought with her a sizeable sum of money, enough to provide a small income for the three of them. But canny old Lars had not reckoned on receiving, as part of the bargain, the instrument by which this small fortune had been acquired. Siggy, having achieved an indolent twenty-seven with no more strain than occasionally mowing the lawn or carrying out the trash, was the first to feel the scourge of this instrument; a shrew’s tongue that Satan himself, so Siggy thought, would not dare, until it had permanently ceased to wag, and he could carry her off to hell in a sound proof hearse. Siggy, having not yet seen three decades, had been dragged off a hereditary place on the porch, and on a fine day in a distant May been set to toil for his keep. All of which his father had hardly approved, but being at least that canny, had endured from that day forth.

The five-fifteen bell, warning all of the employees to vacate the premises before Mr. Walters turned his thoroughbred Great Danes loose to romp away the night hours in this silent city of cans sounded. Siggy realized, with dismay, that he had been standing in the stock room staring at the peg on which hung his white grocer’s jacket. He would be late again. On the way out he passed Mr. Walters who was engaged in his evening sport of pitting one dog against the other in a scramble for raw hamburger. He was so engrossed that he barely remembered to snarl at Siggy as he left.

Outside the snow had piled into white drifts that glittered like neon in the passing lights of automobiles. The bus stop was crowded with Christmas shoppers but Siggy, aided by long years of experience, was able to maneuver himself into a rear center seat. A heavy red haired woman carrying a large paper bag sidled up next to him and gave him a long stare. Siggy gazed ahead blankly and focused on a non-existent spot about three feet in front of his eyes. She stood, feet firmly planted in the aisle, until the bus started to move. Then she leaned down and hissed into Siggy’s ear, “Hey Bub, howbout holding this for
a couple of seconds. My back is killing me.” Siggy nodded negatively and pointed to the large container of potato salad that perched on his lap. Sona had insisted on it. Taking his bobbing head as an auspicious sign, the woman dumped her bag in his lap. Immediately Siggy was overcome with an unpleasant smell. Gagging, he pointed at the package. “What,” he mumbled, “who...”

The woman glared at him suspiciously. “What’s the matter? Don’t you like cats?” she shrilled. A number of passengers twisted uncomfortably, sensing a cat hater in their midst. Siggy, envisioning a wasteland of wilted and mangled pussy cats struggled with the window. On the street a light pole ornamented with a tinsel wreath caught his damaged senses. Tearing off one glove with his teeth and trying not to breathe deeply he attacked the lever of the window. But he leaned forward too far and poured a quantity of unidentifiable material from the woman’s bag on to the floor. This new sabotage was greeted with a cry of betrayed trust and the woman snatched the dripping bag away from Siggy. Mutely she appealed to the surrounding passengers. Siggy started to apologize, forgetting that his glove was still in his mouth, and the humble appeal for forgiveness ended in a menacing grunt like the starting of a large machine. The woman stepped back in shock. Siggy sensed that an enormous mound of flesh filling an entire seat across from him, was beginning to feel a primitive impulse of chivalry. Two ugly eyes squinted at him from under their size eleven hat. Wisely, Siggy pushed his way forward and alighted several stops too early.

The snow had stopped falling and only an occasional gust of wind wreathed the street lamps in shimmering haloes. Siggy enjoyed the walk because he could stomp through the gathering piles of snow in the new high topped lumberman’s boots that his father had given him. He had said that they were a Christmas gift in advance. The snow piled into a sweeping fan shape at the juncture of two tenements. Siggy stamped on in his boots and marveled at the way the dark leather bit into the snow, throwing it up in all directions. This must be the way a soldier’s boots would look, he decided, as they marched on the enemy. Sona had given away the soldiers his father had made for him. But he remembered the way they had looked, lined up in the snow, with one foot coming down hard in front of the other. Their progress had been unstoppable.

He clutched the carton of potato salad more firmly and began to trot through the snow. Coming to an alley he picked up his pace and in a burst of speed wheeled sharply around the corner. He could imagine the ground shake as big eighty-eights hit the earth. Bits of snow flew around him. He dodged to one side, avoiding a land mine, dashed around the side of his father’s garage and fired a quick strafe into the amorphous trash cans huddled there. Crouching, the house loomed before him. It would have to be a quick dash. Sniper in the eaves. And lunge, ground flying, quick crunch of booted feet and with a final burst of speed he gained the entrance to his house, slid into the doorway, jerked the pin from a grenade, kicked the door open, lobbed the missile, counted to ten by thousands and then walked in to greet his parents.

Sona was sitting bolt upright in her chair. A book lay by her feet on the floor. Lars was examining, with horrified surprise, the television screen which was
covered with mayonnaise and bits of diced potato. All was silence except for
the diminishing sound of a cylindrical cardboard carton that rolled ominously
back and forth on the floor.

Siggy walked into the room and stood there dripping mud and snow on the
carpet. Sona began to quiver and shake. "Siggy . . .", she started, and her
mouth twitched like something in hunger. She gathered her resources. "Siggy,
what in the name of the lord do you mean by covering the house with . . . what
is it?" Astonishment, rage and curiosity rendered her helpless. Lars pulled
himself up from his chair. Siggy began. "It was the enemy. I had to t'row . . ."
and then gave up in despair.

"Ai yi yi," moaned Sona. "This is your grown son. Still playing at soldiers."
She advanced on Siggy like a spectre of vengeance. "You", she threatened,
"down in the basement with you. Get a mop and pail, Go on now, get." Siggy
happily retreated. Lars followed him down in the basement and took the pail
that Siggy was filling with water. "Here now," he said, "you let me do that."
"I can fix it," protested Siggy. "No," said Lars, "you gonna make a worse
mess than the one that's already there and then Sona gonna really get mad.
Tonight I don't want the house coming down on my head. That woman is worse
than twenty devils when she gets started." He finished preparing the water and
carried it upstairs. Siggy followed him part way and hesitated on the steps
listening to the flapping sound of Sona’s shapeless bedroom slippers. When she
walked she sounded like an invasion.

When Siggy reappeared Lars had finished cleaning up the salad and was dis-
tilling Sona's strident tones through a clear filter of Schnapps. Siggy, who did
not drink, picked up the bottle while her back was turned and, using it like a
telescope, examined her corpulent figure. Through the glass her wild gesticula-
tions seemed vague and distant and the greenness of the glass lent a verdant,
gentle aspect to her shape. Like a reflection in troubled water the figure glided
around and with a sensuous sweep restored his vision by giving the bottle a slap
and trying to put out his eye. "Why don't you grow up," she yelled. "If you got
to act like a kid maybe you should start going to Sunday school." Lars, missing
the irony in this blast, observed complacently, "Well, he goes to the YMCA twice
a week, don't he." He turned to Siggy. "Ain't you supposed to be there tonight.
Your little friend ain't gonna like it if you keep her waiting."

Siggy had forgotten all about it. His bi-weekly tutor, an angular young woman
endowed with terrific athletic prowess was fast rising in the inscrutable Christian
hierarchy because of a unique and devious snare developed by and for herself
and employed in snatching souls from perdition of one variety or another. Under
the ostensible guise of a basketball coach she would lure hordes of unsuspecting
young ruffians into the gymnasium and after securing their shoes (no street
shoes on the gym floor) in an iron vault would lecture on Christian ethics until
her sweaty, betrayed audience cracked and ran screaming and barefoot back
into the snowy streets. Barefoot boys in arctic parkas were a not uncommon
sight in the environs of the Henderson Street Y.

A few regulars, like Siggy, did not require the inducement of pain to guarantee
their salvation. And his skill at basketball, previously non-existent, was fast making him a draft potential for various Church leagues around the city.

Lars repeated his question. "Ain't you supposed to go to the Y tonight?". "Ya, ya", replied Siggy. "I better call and say I'm gonna be late." "You've got time if you hurry," said Lars. Sona jeered, "Yaa, you gonna go see that church woman again. You ought to be out finding yourself a wife instead. So you wouldn't have to live off us at your age." Lars became irritated. "Don't go filling the boy's head with that kind of talk. He's got plenty of time for that sort of thing." Sona screeched her reply: "If that lunk waits two more years he'll have to do his courting in a cemetery." She stopped scolding long enough to stick her tongue out at Siggy who was tying on a cap preparatory to leaving. "Naa" she said. Siggy left.

Outside he wandered through the streets in dejection and desolation. He kicked with his high topped boots into a pile of snow. It collapsed in a sodden heap. He repeated the experiment with added effort and was rewarded with a satisfying splat. It was a dull heavy sound which quivered in the air and suddenly became high pitched and reedy. Siggy listened for a very long moment but the noise didn't die away. It hung in the air like a static thing, a divine summons that must last through all eternity. Miss Podanski, his basketball instructor, had told him about Gabriel and he had envisioned a sort of Santa Claus figure armed with a tuba. The vision melted and transmogrified into the most delicate of tubercular cherubims piping the ranks of the just up each step to Paradise. Like a homing pigeon, Siggy focused in on the sound and came to an enormous wooden door. He brushed aside the wreath, placed his hand on the latch and, drawn on by the sound, plunged through the door.

The room was dimly lit but Siggy could discern a little man sitting cross-legged on a bar stool piping to himself. A spacious, gleaming bar stood beside him like a bastion and radiated back into oblivion. The piper had a hooked nose and enormously sad eyes. He glanced up at Siggy but said nothing. From the back a man in a white apron emerged wearing a name tag that said "Grubble". Grubble, the bartender, had never seen Siggy, approached him suspiciously and demanded proof of age. "We don't serve nothin' to no one without you got something that says you're of age," he stated. The piper then looked up and said, "This gentleman is fat bald and forty and if he's not of age now then he'll never be."

Grubble, a man not easily fooled, twisted his apron in bewilderment. The piper said, "Bring this gentleman a drink." Grubble, unhappy that the issue had been forced, complied after almost vacillating to death. Then he reproachfully slouched to the rear of the bar where three elderly men competed with a lone dart against the toilet wall. The piper motioned to them and said to Siggy: "You can compete with them. Or you can stay here and listen to me play."

"I t'ink I stay here," replied Siggy, "that flute sounds pretty good to me. You really think so?" asked the piper giving him a carious grin that bristled with eye teeth. "Ya" said Siggy.

“I’ve seen you at the Y”, said the little man.

“Oh”, said Siggy, “You go there too?”

“Well, let’s say that I work there. You know, plumber, engineer, janitor, all that sort of thing.”

“I didn’t t’ink I ever saw you in the gym”, said Siggy.

“No, I usually stay away from there.” said the piper. He raised his flute and blew a few notes.

“Try it?” He offered the pipe to Siggy who puffed on it until his cheeks grew dark with the exertion. Only a muted hiss of air rewarded his efforts.

“Finish your drink and let me show you how.” said the piper. He put the instrument to his lips and without even moving his cheeks began to blow an odd tune. Siggy thought of a hornpipe he’d once heard. The piper increased his tempo and Siggy rose, like a late spring lily, to his feet. He did a hop and skip. The piper showed his approval by hitting a shattering high note.

In the rear some of the old men were beginning to show signs of encroaching irritation. A flickering beer sign illuminated their faces in alternating reds and greens and yellows. and in the flashes of light and dark they hung together like a fantastic tableau of plastic figures. The single dart had been lost and the three of them, one behind the other, paraded around in a circular search. Finally, striking matches, three waxen faces filed into the toilet.

Siggy began to move around the bar like a majestic prima donna. The notes from the little man’s flute leapt in unison with Siggy and all connections seemed to dissolve. Siggy, the piper and the gleaming silver flute seemed encompassed in mist and the room paraded around in a slow sweeping motion. The sign from the rear floated towards Siggy, changing shapes and sizes, and stopped directly over him, materializing suddenly into a large, carnivorous “Y” shape.

“Miss Podanski,” gasped Siggy and sat down heavily.

“Who?” asked the little man.

“The girl at the Y” said Siggy.

“Does she . . . does she . . .”, the piper’s voice trailed off into an incessant rhythmic throb. “Does she . . . does she . . .” An uproar of excited voices emerged from the rear followed by a flash of brilliance as something in the toilet exploded. Out crawled the three old men, their search completed. The first carried the toilet handle, the second carried the seat and the third carried the heart of the thing, a great dripping plunger. These they set before Siggy. Once again the piper handed him the flute and this time a wet, bloated sound emerged. Siggy saw that around the plunger a pool of water was gathering because, at the end with the ball-like float, it dripped and dripped and dripped.

Siggy leapt up, roared a challenge and waving the flute like a sword, raced up the stairs, threw open the door and burst out on to the street. Traffic lights ran wild from red to yellow to green in an uncontrollable series of flickers. Giant mercury street lamps nodded and bobbed like immense, shining night
blooms. Siggy, the moth, flitted from light to light and whirled into the downtown district.

He stood in the glare of winking neon. “Young Men’s Kerisht-yan . . .” in garish colors bathing him in a pool of luminosity. He rushed in and confronted a thin young man, wearing a tie and glasses, at the desk.

“Where . . .”, he shouted, pounding his fist on the desk. The young man, Christian, looked up, blanched and started, “Now look here fella, we don’t want any drunks in here. There are no rooms available, absolutely none. NO, I’m afraid you’ll have to leave. As much as we’d like to have you, go on, shoo now. Before I call a cop and have you thrown out on your ear.”

Siggy grabbed him and glared into glazed eyes. He raised the flute with a menacing gesture. “Where is Miss Podanski?”

“Officer”, wailed the young man, Christian.

“Where,” yelled Siggy, “is Miss Podanski?”

“She’s gone,” gibbered the little man. He broke into a sob. “She’s gone with a barefoot boy in a motorcycle jacket. And she’ll never come back”. He collapsed in a wailing heap. Siggy considered bashing his head, but in the tussle he had lost the flute. Looking around he saw only a length of plumber’s pipe rolling on the linoleum floor. He turned and left.

Outside the snow lay heaped around in haphazard piles. Here and there the lawn was crisscrossed with footprints. A midnight bus churned its way up the avenue. In its fluorescent interior the pasteboard ads that adorned its walls looked grey and mottled. The single passenger was an old man either drunk or asleep, whose head hung down on his coat. For a moment Siggy thought that it was Lars. The way he hung his head . . . He was tempted to call out. But the bus started up and as it sloshed by him, just for a second, he looked deeply into the malevolent eyes of the driver. Then he remembered that it couldn’t have been Lars because the farthest Lars had been away from the living room in fourteen years was the basement. He never went out of the house.

Siggy’s head was still giddy from his mad run and the cold air made his view of the street swim slightly. Reaching home he found that the door had been left open for him, and wondered why he didn’t have a key. He pushed the door open and almost stumbled over a chair before he could find the light switch. It was leaned against the wall at a crazy angle. Seeing the chair like that he remembered that the reason he had no key was because Lars had forbidden it. The door would always be open and Siggy was not usually out late.

For a moment he had an impulse to look into Lars’ room to make sure that he was there. But then he decided that he really did not want to know; at least not until the morning. He sat down heavily on his bed and began to unlace his hightopped boots. It took him a long time because there were many, many steel-rimmed eyelets and each one had to be undone separately, one at a time.
A Coat

*Douglas Cushman*

Once, from a siding, leading to a woodlot,
Unkept and overgrown with foliage
From a distance
Is a path
Now starting in the middle of a field.
Patches can be seen as weeds move;
Raindrops splatter in its mud.
Near the ground
Where the way disappears
Under cover of rotting leaves
A coat is hung,
Bending an old branch,
Stunted in its growth.
Yet the floor is undisturbed;
New leaves let in the rain.
The Brickyard

*Douglas Cushman*

Stacked bricks,
Red on red,
Mortared by concrete,
Hollowed by the constant rain.

Lights,
At military interval,
Lining ruled streets.
—Waiting for the morning shift.

Inside,
A light turned on
Reflects nothing
On the pavement.
Puddles

*Douglas Cushman*

There was a man,
Wandering in the street,
While trying to splash the water
From the puddles at his feet.
Just a second he came down
And we, laughing,
Asked him for his name,
But he asked us for our own,
And said he didn’t have one,
And if we had one to loan.
Then, seeing new puddles,
Collecting water from the rain,
He went off to splash
The water from the street.
And on and on he went,
Laughing,
In our sleep.
The Watch

Peter Hollenbeck

CHAPTER I (of a work in progress)

But then face to face: out of the mirror of shadows, and the dreams of fire, out of the hooded vision, and the fearful eye, the prologue to the waking omen comes:

From the conception to the unfolding’s issue, as on his bed the sleeper sees the face of the waters in the tides of time, and sees the faces of the drowned, soundless and sounding, fallen as from a dream of air,

Now declining, thence subsiding, two by two into the sunlike center of that serenity,

So in the vague, unceasing fathoms of this life, as in the glass of time, that I might see amid these hollow prophets the face framed in fire, not the outward cast and character of things as they are, and the prophetic signs of things to come, but the cast of things that are to come, and the sign of these, the things that are—that I should see these things in might, I held my hand to the sun.

Here on this bridge, over no such waters as those, here on this stone-ribbed span so resigned to time it seems not of it, over these pale waters of the river going, below me, who have held my hand to the sun, the traceless eddies of the traceless currents flow.

On the thoughts of things not yet, and what has been, I spent the pensive hour, impaled on the lacquered mildness of that morning tide. As with its own, the feminine air met the massive element; no dragonfly stirred the air but stirred the water, and the rain circled the both, spreading ceaseless rings like the coral rays from the Asian archipelagoes, yet swelling, and widening still, as to the rim of eternity: ever, in growing from that primal center, dissipated from what they were: and onward from that conception, widening into unembodied rings of selfless silence, as meditations from the sealed springs of winter stars are inexplicably released. But over all these watery contemplations, my hand was as but another shadow written on the waters, and so did I hold my hand to the sun.

Impaled on that golden face, on those two reflected heavens, between, as it were, all embodied and unembodied things, on life and death I had my motion, with not so much as a razor’s span between them. So must have Tristan have leaned over the brink of the fountain, composing his epitaph as he sang; so must have been that reflection as wavering and frail as the fancied memory of a fancied love, as the twilight burden of a remembered song, painful and serene. Into all these things the river poured remorseless reflections, clasping in its sable bosom what blind fish no such mortal watcher knew, in what Acheron’s shining darkness, and in that darkness what demons of damnation, and in those demons what fire-infested serpent’s seed, uncoiling in wretched germans—yet in all that monstrous modesty, for depraved man to seem so mild, and all truth transfixed as in a quivering blue cloud, is this to be nothing? Through the choirs of the valleys,
the river coursed with thoughts without thought; such thoughts looked up, as in the head of the Medusa, to turn to stone.

Whatever other its thousand masks had been, one mortal watcher scarred its face: a baleful pedestrian, or seer, or sight-seer if you will, oddly footing it along the sandy paths of the river-bank, who, stopping at none of three road-signs, wears a gaze of inexplicable fixity strangely affecting to the beholder’s mind, the peace of which only an explanation of subtle (rather than incomprehensible) humor would preserve.

He stopped, and plucked a reed, which he would not forget. Well-clad but ill-fitted, he resembled the rejected hero of an epic—or the hero of a rejected epic; neither hobo nor Mogul, but a curious indeterminate mixture of the two: a Zoroastrian oracle, then, without a way in the world to vouch for the worth of his native currency, and hence let in at no inns: a fighter of undecided battles in undecided lands: a stroller by the wastes of the Samoed shore. He bore no staff, neither of disciple or the devil, and no flag but a white one, a continual breech-flap of surrender. With a sanguine, though brooding, and both thoughtful and thoughtless, tumerous look about him, he was by no means a man of commerce, and was, as I take it, under no obligation to believe in the universe.

Of what he more truly was, none of the quick-faced children at dice under the stairs might say: none of the stolid, silent, sweating men in shirtsleeves, men with short answers and long faces, glaring out of the flickering windows, might say: but that is all conjecture. This fellow was myself, nor in the cold, secret rain was there, in the cold, secret town, anyone but myself alone to tell, and here had I, Daniel, come.

After nameless months at a college likewise nameless, I had left at the commencement of the third dimension of that promised four-dimensioned intellectual rectangle, after the months of mornings of tracts and breakfasts half-finished, after the endless answers of the cocktail scholars, the men with the long answers and short faces spreading even as their indomitable theses narrowed—after the despicable, passionless secretarial scholarship that from such a footnote factory produces books—I went away; the dogs of the table are the guardians of the gate. The yoga, who fixes his vision on one fixed point, sees but a point, and all points are but points on a line. If one, standing at this point in the world, should follow such a line, and none straighter than a shadow, he would see the other side of the sun. It is not seeing the other side of the world that counts, but seeing the other side of that by which all things are seen. That one point is the sun, and that line but the lighted chamber of a shadow-show, and we but the shadows of that show, led (worked) from that midnight by the master, and since that line is continuous, that point despite its utmost solitude may be any point, represents the whole and total of the line. The star is still, but only because both you and the universe are being bundled through the bleak, gaping galaxies in that white annihilation of eternity at the same inhuman rate.

I am but a one of petty circumstance (though there be many such)—one with no ambition but the promise of a following tomorrow, seeing nothing in the clouded glass of circumstance but that white ring which mortality has stained;
content in honoring to be content, even if honoring hangs on fawning, fawning
to a slight submissive silence of the sense, and thence the sense to no more
honor, no more content.

The self is more than this. In that tainted mist, cannot we write our names?
Is not the self a lantern of itself?—turning from this to this, conscious of all
the ages and cycles, of all the palpable and impalpable faces of the world, of the
deep show and the shallow ceremony—that little emperor of the sun to which
all else must in relation stand, or stand not at all; that blessed circle of radiance
whereunto all shadows their allegiance tend.

But ambiguity troubles the ambition, and by that very welcome of drowsy sense
poisons the drowsy will. Should the self have become a god, close upon its
self-riddance a god. A great tyrant, and yet there’s no fear, for there is no
tyrant great than death is greater—uneasy comfort there, but revenge will yet
bring redemption at these hands. To be or to be made: this let announce the
very act, and henceforth let my prayers not seek to be acknowledged by a god,
but to be—a god.

Showing his shining back, the dolphin sun shoulders the white islands of the
sky. So far from hiding her princes, water is, for out of those clearer depths
than glass horrible unimaginings darkly come. And thus did I hold my hand
to the sun.

This choice must all men make, whether they would or no, and doubtless there
are many to whom the choice would have been an easier one to bear, if they
were assured there was a choice; whether to be led like a trained but never
nimble bear at the end of that whip of scorn of which not a thread is more
than wind, led by that continual little night we cast, and sweat under in the
brightest day as under prison stones—whether to submit to that subtle gravity
whose one blow sends us bundling to the grave—these are the malicious riddles.
This little death in life, this hunchbacked crippled prince of darkness, this child
of light—O glass without a face! Who would dare thy fearful image to pro-
claim? That darkness, dancing in the very match and mockery of life, holds
all that makes us mortal; for when its obscene revels end, then do we. Even so
our life, inconstant sun-dial, more immemorial than Ahaz is immemorial, keeps
its time by a shadow. That pack, which all of us must carry on our backs, makes
beggars of us all.

Let water show only the mask of such immortal faces; what is the true whence
of light, only can the shadow show. False is the mirror of the sea, that holds
our seal no longer than the seal is pressed, which now molds to the hand as
mildly as ever maiden bride her Indian lover, and now is most pitiabley dissipated
over the unformed horrors of the hand of the floating abortion. Ancient and
pristine sea, never in thy baptism can my soul be cleansed. So fearful, and so
deceive, it seems some huge eclipse whereat the earth would gape and yawn the
vapours of the unborn dead. False, yet mild, false, and therefore true; even
the Medusa, being reflected in Perseus’ shield, could not strike his heart to stone.
O pale and beckoning fire, I turn away, I cannot bear to see thy tortured image
writhe. Dread spirit of immortal fire I see reflected in the water’s face, O
eagled sight! thy feathers are thy most malicious fetters; thou movest slowly, in clumsy lethargy not of any mortal slumber; thou movest slowly, as in chains. Thus under that heavenly light, and the appointed hill, do I raise my hand to the sun, O deity without symbol, and god without god, thus do I pledge, even as the devil, with thee. Thus under the willow at the ends of the elms in the immemorial valley, more boldly than ever Icarus arched the impetuous cathedral of his wings, to thee, huge god, I raise my hand, in whose cheering glory the fields, folded with evening, return; remembering nothing but the apparation of that whiteness, like a hand aloft among the clouds of night; thus do I hold my hand to the sun, and thus do I vow that whithersoever would its shadow fall, there would I follow. And out of that dark hour am I, Daniel, come.

2.

After that sun of morning, it had begun to rain, and now I made my wading way through the downpour. Under the bronze age of the morning, the Kennebec seemed of the same sliding smoothness of the sky in its numbering centuries, and in all that almost sunlit serenity the town of Bath rose from the floating towers that brooded below. Here, in these mapled streets, the hours are shaded as are the gardens, and both inspire the deep, dried musk of the sea-captain’s houses, where the boards are from Maine, and the air from China. With the names of all its children, and the bronze gods who gazed from the masts of the tail ships floating like disembodied clouds with whose reflections the river ran whiter than snow, the river ran grave and nameless into the sea where no pious posterity would fade above their perished names.

Up the river, to the utmost of that stream, drifted the rumours to the early explorers of the golden-spire Norumbega, the visionary city of crystal. So welcome must have been the little spire of Phippsburg, guiding the tall ships up the river from China. This cradle of the nation is marked by the justice of time, just as, in another way, that granite obelisk that marks the grave of Jonathan Buck was marked with the foot of a witch for whose murder he had mercilessly condemned an innocent imbecile of the town to death, and by whom he was thus prophetically cursed when he did not gain his innocence.

On these viking countries for which the world holds no chart, and of those whom water marks their graves, vain it were to geographize, and if the haze that wraps the early town were a slow unfolding of the ages, then might philosophizing not be vain. And yet with this morning a book has been opened that all the ages of the morning will not scan, though all their eyes be suns, and which no print will touch, though were all the suns, letters.

By a road through the muffled midst of the hills, on the brink of a portentous glen, the way to the town takes its way. The air sleeps over the snails of the graveyard, the woods drift in the pillared darkness of their pillared light, the stone houses and graveyards under the yellow calm of the goldenrod slumber alike in this silence as of some Etruscan place, under the fabled mountains. Such is the road, but no such road had I.

A tempest as if too distant to be imagined involved the sky, the dark-veined heavens, like a marbled dome, perilously leaned over the stones on the meadow.
and murmured with the sound of thunder like an avalanche over the abyss. Like a still struggling Enceladus, such dismembered fragments as these—even like the great heap of stones over Achan in the valley of Achor—shade the noonling cows on this Maine meadow, grazing under such hills as might have whitened with the sheep of Samaria. It is a land of broken things, this night watch of America, the child of a superstitious mother, first found and soonest left. It was the men, frightened from here, remembering the nights of blood and fire, remembering the heads on the night ground glistening with blood where hair should have been, remembering the faces painted like trees and as silent, who settled Virginia.

Ruled by the aspect of toppled monuments, here among these hills might the shattered and half-sunk visage of Ozymandias lie. Stones possess every meadow like a mutilated Stonehenge, or the gravestones of the titan vikings that settled here. Of what are these stones the sign? But as with the all things great and grand, these are bounded by smaller and less significant stones, and it is these stones to which, if they be disputed ever, the judges of the law will come; by these that friendships will be decided and wives chosen. Nor in all this bloodshed and ceremony do they suspect these stones to err. But err they do, and most savagely, not to paganize themselves before those inexplicable obelisks which some hideous unerring certainty has decreed; not all the mountains arched in their utmost woe could pile the tablets upon such a solitude as this. O solitude! to be bound by a miniature and mockery of thine own solitude, and piled about by little emperors. O nobility! to be judged by such a pygmy valour of thine own kind.

Of what are these stones the sign? What unwritten tablets can explain away their uninscribed magnitude? Such a book, none by light of sun may read, yet to recount a colloquy with an unknown acquaintance of mine, one of the Yankee farmers that hereabouts dwell, raising beans in soil insufficient to choke a chicken, may substitute for some of their history.

Go where you will, from the numb-palsied North to the sweating limberness of the South, from the top of earth’s morning to the bottom of her night, and the everlasting Yankee you will find; his razor is the true Damascus, stropped on the wind of Midas for a golden harvest, his sanctity is often shrewdness, and his sweet savor often the reflected halo of a morning nickel; the history of man’s necessities is the history of his inventions. His name is Jimmy, and he may be still alive. He was promising a good bean crop, but his rooster had gotten loose (taking his cigar out of his mouth and ejecting an oath) with the denouement that he had to train the rooster all over again. He had just trained its brother to live without eating, when it had died. I was elected by him (Jimmy) the divulgee of several incontestable but, as to the details, much debated facts, about the town of Bath, and the local inhabitants, and any subsidiary legends that might have anything to do with nothing in particular, and, most particularly, the strange stones scattered on the meadow: that one marks the spot where one winter was found, frozen in a snow-bank, a man accountable days dead; that (hazedly visible under an apple tree on the horizon) where a mad woman ran away one March.

And every spring there is talk of some farmer turning up a giant with his plow. I let on as how I had better be going, and said in parting, “God and you have
done a pretty respectable job on this field.” “Yeah,” said Jimmy, “you should have seen it when God had it by himself,” and went back to his rooster.

Yet to those in whom unquiet thoughts from quiet things are mingled, these scars, these unquarried monoliths, are more like that huge image of gold Nebuchadnez-zar set up on the plains of Babylon. They stand like the charred and blasted chimneys posted like watch-towers through the hills over the blown surf of the daisies, and all the utterance of the tales of horror is as still as the act of horror itself, for here among these shades the Dawn people lived—such is the meaning of the Abenakis—moving now only in fancies on the face of the woods, but to the Puritans who settled here, the fire-dances were the sulphurous revels of the fiends of fallen heaven. What ghosts of theirs cry themselves awake with undreamed dreams of the executioners? The river I passed is a river still running with American blood, and the memories of the torture islands where the fires burned all night, and the dancing heard across the waters. The Indians grew to hate even the watchdogs for their barking, and visited the same tortures upon them.

To these Indians the vast, dark ivy green of the forests were the abode of huge ghosts of men who had died of starvation. These attacked wandering hunters and, running a bony finger up their guts, sucked out their livers as they slept. Chief among these was Bumohle, whose visage now on a nearby mountain slumbers. But there were other giants; that white giant of the White Hills, Ethan Allen Crawford, and Sparta’s stoutness and Bethlehem’s heart, carried such a hunter on his back from the summit of Mount Washington.

On that same hill it was rumoured that a great serpent, with bat-like wings of veined purple, and in the midst of its head a great and shining stone, stayed the burning horror of his watch. That glowing gem, which flooded the forests with crimson radiance, like the dawning of a god, held the radiance of eternal fire, as eternal as that legendary dragon which bites its own tails, endlessly devouring itself, slaying, wedding, and endlessly begetting itself, in the pictures of the Phoenicians, and in the wild wastes of Mesopotamia, and in the engravings of the alchemists. Such a stone by one warrior was, by a world of endless cunning, finally captured, but being both captured and pursued by others than this lone here, it was flung into a deep lake which reflects the mountain, and therein forever lost. Who would regain that burning fountain would regain the burning spring, and on this earth whose name is darkness, relume that Promethean might until such time as fire will no longer live to outlast its parent spark. On such a fire might have Narcissus through the waters gazed.

Every August hurricane in these wild valleys uproots not pines, but the gnarled claws of Grendel; here, below they May winds, Daphne still her metamorphosis invisibly endures. Medieval are the fallen trees, and what frozen lion of stone waits outside a hollow oaken trunk for his St. Jerome? Nor should at this point we have to be reminded that in 1673 Dr. Olfert Dapper saw a wild unicorn in the Maine woods.

Crossing the bridge, and thence almost in the very midst of Bath, I saw at one gate a chapfallen beggar, and thought him but another Yankee farmer—a lookout posted, no doubt, on the look out for any arable soil being smuggled in by my
trouser-cuffs, so covetous a premium do these Yankees put on their land. But he stood as if to assault me.

"Which way do you go?"

"The way of the sun, old man. And you had better be out of my way."

"I in your way.

"Aye, in my way. Can you not hear unless by hearing yourself?"

"I am not in your way, sir; it is not me, but my shadow, that is in your way."

"Sir? Then do not spend your foolish omens, sir, on me, sir, discourse with my shadow here. Out of my way, sir, costume of flesh, wise one, beggar . . ."

"Beg? Of you?"

"Beg, Beg about the streets, wearing beggar’s clothes, asking beggarly questions."

"Beg the question, sir?"

"I’ll give you money. Here."

"I thank you for the money, the more because it was unasked. And yet I feel I should thank you not at all, since you had not the right to give it . . ." slowly drawing open his coat.

I must have hesitated, for he looked at me almost impudently. "No right? Do you mock yourself in mocking me? No right to give money to one in rags not enough to furnish a decent purse for it; speaking such unwieldy prattle about the streets as to be right cause for being taken forever off them—one who gives me cause for sympathy, noble gesture, and respect."

"Guilt?"

"Cause, cause. There’s no guilt there—nor any more questions."

"I have given you no questions, but you have given me money."

"Therefore keep it; your purpose is as empty as your purse, and I’ll not fill either of them again."

Continuing through the calm, narrow streets, in the calm, narrow town—as calm as ashes—the bricks heaved off waves of heat in the hot wake of the sun, fevering the town with the smell of hot iron like the walls of Nebuchadnezzar’s oven. I never thought that such a slight a thing as air could ever deceive the sight. But if such things of little substance can proclaim the changes of the sense, what great or lesser things undo the fabric of the soul?

Deeper descending in that labyrinth of alleys and sub-alleys, which by right of means seem for the circumnavigation, but by right of ends seem for the irrigation of the town, the weather the consistency of an oyster, and the whole atmosphere moist and hot, and hot and moist, I looked by chance in a window at a mad boy, wearing a mask, bent over a harpsichord, in a dismal, utter solitude of ferocious virtuosity. His eyes shone with the bright pain of a bird’s. Why then did he exist? I could not rip that mask from off my mind. Simple because he existed within that frame: because in that frame all beholding lies, and therefore in that frame did he exist, and exists no less on this page than the light which now across it falls. All things have their frames, and know them not, and when that frame should fall, there comes an end to knowing. Beginning up the hill, I passed a
bloated, disintegrating laundry, producing an unwieldy cloud of steam which soon lost enthusiasm and seeped in gaseous vapours down the hill.

Guilty? I was not guilty; I was honest as the sun. And yet shadows worked upon my mind. That the sun is a fire, we know; know too, that the sun touches all, know that whatever is touched must partake some of that parent substance. But I know that all is not fire. I am a mortal, touch mortal things, think mortal thoughts, but all that I touch is not mortal, and I see through a glass: but nothing I see through that glass, is glass (as a boy looks through a topaz and expects the world, when he lifts it from his eye, to be turned to topaz). Matter is but matter, and light but light, but glass is the wedding of these two, and that light would not exist if it existed not in such a frame, just as the desert sky would be but a tinted gas without its pyramids. There is as much difference between the clouds more mighty and more exalted than Everest without Everest, and those that barely touch its peak as between the hole in those clouds and the hole in the Pantheon. These Sisyphus stones that mark the graveyard are bare matter, and the air above them but a holy void holding no light in itself, but the river that flows beneath both these things reveals its light by its matter, just as the grandest oak revealed its bright architecture because it was blind. Than this there is no greater thing. But in all these things there lurks a bleak and glimmering splendour, for in the minds of myth, at the end of the world, and the kingdom of the dead, is there not always a mountain of glass?

Those mountaineers of Everest, like Lazarus, feel their way with bandaged eyes. But what fixed force of wondrous annihilation has driven them? What unbeholding eye? What mystery at white heat, to which all the dusty wonders of the earth are but troubling reflections, has blasted all faculty and sense of seeing? But in that weird circle of the unembodied sun, as in a formless clump of protoplasm, all prologues are clustered, and on such mere wheels do eternal Ixions spin. Yet from such a blank are all likenesses struck. O blind sun! by which all the world strives to see, whoever looks on thee, looks on the awful act of seeing itself; once we have looked on thee, we have eyes for no other. Once we can see, we then can see no more.

What quality of fire sentenced Prometheus? What inhuman and immortal dread glazes the eyes of those banded by fire, and those who look on that brand of brightness? That brightest of wounds is not without the darkest scar.

Even as I reached the top of the hill, and saw on one hand the gathering intensity of the sky, and on the other the monumental immobility of the river, and paused from my now weary way, adjusting what little I could of my traveling articles (these being a handkerchief, a book of figures, and an old gold watch), these first surmisings found their first mark.

Suspended from a tree before me swung a white sign of painted wood, proclaiming C. N. FLOOD, ANTIQUES. Drawing my coat about me in a mixed gesture of blind benevolence and cold devotion, as if this August were the bitterest January, and facing North and South (the way, as I remembered then, the Persians bury their dead), I made a last promise to all things under the sun, and a last farewell. And to the all of the things it led me to, a slow unconscious murmured vow of fear, and a first encountering.
As indifferently deposited in its dumpy repose as the ark on Ararat, this incongruous and stately temple was placed, looming like a colonial Ka’ba before the Muslin outside Mecca—from which legendary spot the primal waters spread out, and so spread out the world. That stone was as white as this house was now, before the impurity of the pagan centuries brought it to its present shade.

Not of either world, aspiring to both, with its crippled roof and improbable turrets, enduring in its ruin even as a decaying hand turns to stone, the house rose like St. Peter’s, founded on the hollow sepulchers of death.

I passed by the side of the house, still keeping to that fixed track which the morning had so long ago had begun, not yet diminished by the ascension of the sun, beneath the trees in whose depths of gliding green grazed shadows as of horses. From the stone lintel of the cellar door slid slow liquid drops of rain as if with the lethargy of syrup, which drops would not fall, but toppling upon themselves like the waxen traces of a candle, the whole weight of time itself, trembled and then shudderingly fled. The door I tried, but it was locked, or held by what inarticulate hand I did not dare to know.

Since that passage, where the shadow-line had more truly led me, was locked, I turned and faced a length of stairs leading from the lawn to the entrance of the house. Into a long camera obscura of a vestibule were you led by them, lined by many windows, except that they seemed to be placed on the principle that the sun rose in the North. So I took a last look through the keyhole of the cellar door, and saw in that dusky illumination what seemed to be trampled yellow sack of hair, now mingling unmovingly with the unmoving dust, and started up the stairs, wiping the anonymous moss off my brow where the look had layed it.

Lined by a lattice of windows, and wreathed by grape-vines through which the summer light crept as slowly as vegetables, the floor of that first entryway was ripening with blooming curiosities: a mammoth trunk, prodigally carbuncled with an Aztec procession of carvings that looked to have been executed with a tusk, or a set of silverware. Heaped over the intricate carvings on its lid—it may have been Paul Bunyan’s snuffbox for all I know—powered with dust and cobwebs were white seashells, lost in their own convolutions of infinity.

I strode directly to the door, whose keyhole of sealed wax admitted no key, But it was open; the lightness of my invitation, however, was met by the inflexibility of a frightful Negro, squatting like a toad, who, acting as a doorstep, gnashed his cast iron teeth, mutely indicated a fern growing out of his navel, and desired a penny.

As robbers of desert graves break open the tombs of Egyptian queens, but find those virgin sepulchers as empty as the sarcophagus of Queen Hetepheres, though outwardly affixed with all the code and cunning of their kin, so I opened the door of the house, scarcely not knowing what, beneath all that elaborate austerity, I might find within—whether immortality, or hollow hell.

I passed that threshold. This where my own hand had led me, such a mere hand of hours age, bound to no haven, nor bound for one—a hand that held more secrets than Harpocrates’, and older than those hands outlined on the ceilings of
ageless caves, ringed by a sun of red or black. These painted hands cast no shadows, but the tales of their mystery and their sacrifice is longer than any shadow; they have left no diaries, nor any letters that can be set in the type of history, yet the blank left by that hand surpasses all paper, and all the epics written on them, for on these tablets are inscribed the numbers of the stars. That the Gypsies consult the Zodiac in the reading of palms, that the Chinese would not go to war without first consulting their life-lines unfolded in these parchments, that gestures sublime and unremembered by Rembrandt and Vermeer and Michelangelo have been in colorless eternal secrecy pledged to the hand—all this must be likewise read. Yet for all this the hand is a face without eyes, a mute void, whose way of darkness is absolute as that tomb in which St. Peter was for nine months imprisoned, and on which I understand not the smallest hair.

Once in that room, I was struck by a peculiar and almost infernal mustiness, but this passed, and I found myself overshadowed by a looming Ethiopian who held out a carved wooden hand whose pierced palm, in place of the expected ring, was traced with a black square, like an invocation to darkness. A case of small glass elephants, harmonicas, and spoons was faced on the opposite wall by a palld gallery of notable Indians, a detachment of Sam Slick’s art collection here posted, no doubt, and peering through a Babylonian hanging forest of spears, knives, clubs, human teeth, swords, and war-canoe paddles lined with teeth. I went through such an endless verdure that I could not determine whether, like Aladdin, I went among the huge enameled vases brimming with pearls, or whether I was treading on a delicate signal system of springs, designed to let small men with open mouths come bundling headlong from the ceiling. In all that overpowering Victorian velvet maroon fog, the faces of numberless Wielands and Coverdales half-turned away. Yet what I most remember was an engraving by Redon: a young man with eyes, wondrously wide, and uplifted like a watery moon, with the Ramayana on the table before his outspread hands, breathing the tales of ancient India. Above this there was a painting most strange, that seemed to have been woven of human hair. Beyond the doorway I saw not a shrunken head, but a shrunken hand.

I seated myself on a couch, after wandering through some of the other rooms, and picked at a rosewood violin such as Nero must have played, thinking of the old sea-captain whose house this was, and pretty well had I considered by this time that that N. must stand for Noah, and this house the very ark itself, blown loose in a gale, drifted here by chance. How came the captain by all these clubs? He may be retired, indeed,—retired from the Fijis, that is, come to the city in this appetite trap to set up business. But all this conjecturing was in vain, for as I looked at the room, it seemed to be the very sign of desolation. Nothing but a high mirror adorned the far wall, and in that mirror, or through it, as a glass, was seen a single door open no wider than the blade of a lifted sword, no wider than the narrow and infinitely high gallery which one descends in the pyramid of Cheops.

Bathed by the drifting, now lingering air, with inanimate listlessness the draperies moved, and to this motion my breathing inevitably wedded itself, a lulled possession held me.
I started at a figure moving beyond the door. "Anyone? Who's there!" I shouted, "Hello! Goodbye!", but no echo answered through the fateful shades. What mood of violence, what epilepsy of fantasies possessed me then, I know not. But sometimes, it is true, I have started out to walk through the hills, and found myself at twilight lying on my face. The figure moved again: "Impetuous wretch!"

As one who in the sealed chambers of the valley of the kings sees in the faded pigments of a coffin lid his own features set down there, yet dares to break it open, I advanced to the door—and checked myself, for involuntarily I had rushed to the mirror. Beyond the world whose glass my breathing stained moved another realm thus indomitably hinted, and half-surmised: a reflection of a reflection, of which to me a glimpse was given.

4.

Beyond that door, the figure moved, and the conception opened to the prologue of that omen. I broke into a bright, high-ceiled vaulted room bathed in a hollow trance of light. I stood by the door, seized the first vase I could see, and raised my fist to dash it down to the floor. But, so uplifted, I saw my gold watch in my hand, which unremembering I had taken out and looked upon before, raised to the level of my eyes. Opening its face, I saw my own image there. I set the vase down. Into that soft sun of unembodied fire I had often gazed, when the mere assurance of the hour warmed me with no faith, and seen, below the inscription of my sister's name, my own face there suspended—floating like a bright Medusa—or, in darker scriptures, the rim of the golden power which Midas owned: the horrible power to fix an image. So had he died, transfixed in that inhuman brilliance.

As one who longs for such a messiah, that prince of likeness wherein all ambiguities are met, yet in his lonely bidings coils in nameless horror, so with frantic eyes I searched whatever immortal here might be my executioner.

In his horrible splendour, a clerk with lion eyes and the hands of an embalmer moved toward me, poised as in the sanctity of King Tutankhamen's golden visage, gazing on what grave infinities no mortals knows, and away in the trees a raven shrieked: into the enfolding darkness the ka! ka! echo followed the ka! ka! cry, and so his eyes followed it, into the west.

"Who are you, and from where come?" I demanded as I moved backward. "Nightmare, left horribly unmurdered at the hands of night, are you a figure passing over the mind, as hollow to reason as to sense? Yet I touch you—so I touch this mouth, but it is full of thoughts that words will never touch."

"What is your god?" he slowly said.

"Why—what you see before you."

"You see me before you."

"I do not deny that you are a god."

"Why therefore do you not worship! Kneel!"

"My god is what I see. What I worship, I cannot see."
“Do you mock me?”
“I do not need to mock you.”
“Cozen me? Beg of me to reason? Talk this woman’s talk to me? Do not prompt me; I will make an example of you . . . you, perversity, fear not. I will save and deliver you.”
“That will I do myself!” I went for his throat, bending his own wrists to the task. Rushing to the door, he broke my hold, and seized the watch which I had so senselessly exposed, half-fell behind it. A vaporous breath passed like a cry from soul to soul; I rushed to the already closed door, and found it locked; screaming countless curses, I stood in the reincarnated silence: all purpose perished in its revery, as one who, washed on an unknown shore, sinks more deeply with his deeper purposes to save himself, and cannot point his finger to accuse without pointing to the fathoms without fathom that compass him within.
The Eagle

S. F. Warner

His journey as long as a lifetime,
The eagle misfledged by age
Shook the wings that longed for thicker air
And left one earth behind.
His shaken flight we followed on the sky—
Then, a newspaper blown in the wind,
He fell; what part had failed we could not know,
But crossed wing over wing he fell to the troubled sea
And sank. Before we realised our shock,
The water smoothed above a rising form;
The eagle renewed in plumes and past,
Seized the air with foundling strength
And in rising circles sliced the sky.
Higher it screeched, and eyes ablaze
Aimed at the sun and the promise of sight.
We traced its flight with hope until
Our dazzled eyes had lost their sight
And we could only turn away.
The Short History of Henry Fielding:
A Foundling

Tom Jones

Before, as it might be put, I launch into my present history, it might be wise to modestly preface it with a slight disclaimer, which, I hasten to add, relates to the central of my characters, a singularly unpleasant sort of fellow with the famous literary name (now cinematic also) of Henry Fielding. What I wish to renounce is the possibility of there being any semblance between my protagonist and myself. This comment, of course, is directed against that breed of literary critic which constantly accuses the (usually) innocent author of projecting his total personality upon those unsuspecting figures he chooses to portray under the guise of fictional characters. It should be noted, however, in all fairness to the managery of Freudian critics, that I do not rail at them through a sense of their total incompetency. I do it rather (and I hesitate to mention it) in order that I might avoid introducing Master Fielding, whose presence, I strongly suspect, might not add a great deal to what is potentially a fine piece of expository prose. But Henry is there, and, as they say, his story must be told.
I have termed this a “short” history for what seems to me a reason in impeccably good taste; I wished to retain at least the vestiges of literary form, and to call it a “tiny” history or a “superfluous” history, while perhaps more accurate, would be definitely sub-literary. And to call it anything longer or bigger than a “short” history would be an outright lie.

I have intended to write this for some time but have been continually deterred by the singular uneventfulness of Henry’s life. After much prying and imaginative twisting, I have, however, managed to conjure up what might be called (at least in the world of twentieth century fiction) a “dramatic” situation. It’s an event which relates to Henry’s love life, Henry being seen by a certain facet of the history’s populous as a type of suburban Beau Brummel. From this point onward toward the perhaps-inevitable conclusion, or petering out, of the history the first-person narrative will be dispensed with, although the author, you as reader should be forewarned, might occasionally leap onto his soapbox, eighteenth-century fashion, to discuss the irrelevancies of any significantly unpoignant situation. But anyway, be that as it may, on with the story.

Henry Fielding was a foundling. He was discovered bright and early one fall day on a suburban porch by a suburban housewife along with three quarts of non-fattening skim milk and a pint of sour cream. The housewife, a Mrs. Thelm Noblesoul by name, immediately took custody of the child, not possibly more than a week old and whose face was covered by wrinkles. Mr. Noblesoul, upon returning home that evening to find the child swaddled in his favorite chair, made mild objections, which were duly trampled by the good woman, who herself lovingly favored, after the necessary inquiries had been made, of course, the keeping of the child, whose wrinkles she swore gave him the look of wisdom and noble parentage. To whom the child belonged was never forthwith uncovered, and his adoption by the Noblesouls subsequently occurred, that day later proving to be the acme of Henry’s uniformly unclimactic life. The following eighteen years, up to the beginning of the major narrative of this short history, were totally uneventful, although they did result in a rather startling change in Henry’s physical appearance. This change was so startling, as a matter of fact, that it necessitates for its description a new paragraph.

The wrinkles, which so marked the young Henry, in time proved to be little more than the result of a biological over-abundance of skin, and, under the over-fed tutelage of Mrs. Noblesoul, they soon disappeared. To say that he gained weight is to speak euphemistically about his somewhat-alarming bodily development. But to trace this development would be superfluous to the present chronical. It will suffice to say that although his weight was, after the age of fifteen, just slightly more than two hundred pounds, and his height, fully reached in his eighteenth year, never seriously threatened more than two inches above five feet.

Henry’s eyes, nose and mouth were crammed between his fleshy cheeks, giving him a look not unlike that of a very large toad, a semblance exploited somewhat too enthusiastically by the lad’s school boy contemporaries. Whether or not Henry realized the reptilian nature of his countenance is a moot problem; he never mentioned it, and the author, believing that discretion is, indeed, the
better part of valor, has determined never to invade the sanctity of Henry’s mind. With this in mind we can now attempt to recall the earlier episode around which grew Henry’s reputation as a great lover. It is not possible, as it is not possible in many events of this type, to distinguish the exact beginning, but nevertheless it did appear in his eighteenth year that a love had entered Henry’s life. Local town gossip would necessarily have had it be so, which took the responsibility out of Henry’s hands. In fact the author is at times inclined to believe that Henry was an innocent bystander during his whole affair with Miss Sophia Nonesuch. There was no reason why he should have remained so, however, since Sophia was a delightful girl. She was really a lovely girl, and the author for one cannot understand why she ever showed any interest in Henry. That is, assuming she did. The events are there, and the multiple interpretations the author has heard make it hard to believe that something didn’t happen. It is probably best to let the events speak for themselves, however, which will give the reader the opportunity to interpret them in whatever way pleases him.

Sophia had lived in the suburban town all her life, as had Henry (one week possibly excepted), but for many years no one suspected that an ardent desire burned in their copious bosoms for one another. It was not until that fateful day in the spring of Henry’s eighteenth year. It was a beautiful day, as some poets might put it, in the springtime of love, when, as some country rustics might put it, the roof fell in around their collective suburban ears. The news spread like wildfire, up the streets, down the avenues, through the school corridors, into homes, shouted by children, whispered by adults, and, very nearly, printed in the local weekly newspaper. Henry and Sophia were about to have an affair! If you will excuse the heroic metaphor, it was as if Hermione Gingold were about to fall in love with Boris Karloff. Such was the magnitude of this event.

As far as our hero and heroine were concerned, however, there remains some question as to when the news of this great happening rached them. It certainly would have been of some interest to them, no doubt, but apparently those parties at the higher levels in the town’s government, perhaps including the matronly civic leaders, thought it best to let nature take its course without the interference of irrelevant facts. The positions of all those concerned were, at any rate, clearly defined, Henry and Sophia excepted (perhaps totally).

On the afternoon that the news broke, Henry was very calmly and very slowly, as he did every day from four to nine, squirting coke syrup into large glasses and letting chocolate ice cream plop from his scoop into ice cream sodas in Squire Painkiller’s pharmacy and delicatessen. He worked slowly because he never worked fast, this being perhaps a physical, perhaps a mental impossibility. Once again, it is feared, the decision must be left up to the reader; the author, it must be admitted, doesn’t really care which is more accurate (which might be indicative of his attitude toward this whole story). Henry, however, just kept plodding along. During the afternoon of the event this particular section of the history deals with, several young ladies from the high school, along with several young gentlemen, appeared at various intervals in the drug store, apparently
making some effort to conceal a highly emotional state. There were heard from time to time rapid but unintelligible whispering and an occasional titter from one of the young ladies. But it all seemed to make no impression on Henry, who continued to squirt and plop, unperturbed.

Henry went on to squirt and plop for several months, as a matter of fact, before anything of note occurred which might possibly be useful in our little tale. It even seemed for some time as if the higher-ups had been so successful in letting nature take its course that nothing had happened. But do not despair, dear reader. Something did happen. The only problem which remains before the next event can be narrated is the purely literary one of traversing a large space of time without violating the reader's, your, sense of verisimilitude. This will be accomplished by use of that handy little literary devise, the author's note.

The problem of transmitting reality to the printed page has always been a rather frightening one for this author. This is often partially disguised under the erudite phrase "the illusion of reality," but the problem remains the same, and it is only magnified if the writer gives any credence to the idea of telling an interesting story. A semi-solution can perhaps be attained through the use of such techniques as the author's note and stream-of-consciousness, but possibly the surest method is that which is being developed in this short history, the use of the extended introduction. The basic principle upon which this operates is that the longer the introduction, the shorter the fictional or illusion-to-reality part has to be. As a way of avoiding the multiple difficulties stated above, this system has tremendous potential. Granted, it isn't fully perfected yet, but few systems are, which isn't much of an excuse. It will have to do for now, however, because it's time to return to Henry and Sophia, who have just reset themselves out on stage.

Sophie, as she is called by all of her friends, was a frequent visitor to Squire Painkiller's business establishment, where she on occasion indulged in one of Henry's, it must be admitted, excellent ice cream sodas. And it happened that during the period covered by the last author's note she became an even-more-frequent indulger, up to a point, in fact, where she would have been described, had it been habit forming, as a soda addict. At least, this is the author's opinion; there were several other versions of what had happened, all of them being more interesting than the author's (it being quite difficult to make any kind of a story out of a person with a somewhat-unnatural drive for ice cream sodas). Therefore, for the sake of the story, we shall consider another alternative, the supposed romance between our hero and heroine.

This brings us to one fall evening just after nine o'clock in the drug store. Henry and Sophie are, by some chance, alone, Squire Painkiller having, for some inexplicable reason, left our hero to close the story. The events of that evening, as they were related by the large number of people who gradually accumulated outside the huge store-front window, served for months as the final evidence necessary to prove that Henry and Sophia were undyingly in love. Of course, the author hastens to add, his feelings in regard to the situation will remain modestly out of sight.
Henry and Sophie, anyway, apparently uncognizant of their audience, set about their shrewd and nefarious plot, first suggested, oddly enough, by our hero, who by doing so spoke to Sophie for perhaps the fifth time in his life . . . .

Well, the author had hopes this time of remaining hidden for a while, but it seems he has run into another weighty literary problem. If Henry and Sophie were alone in the drug store, just how is the author supposed to know what was said. Did he get his information from either of his two protagonists? As a matter of fact he didn’t. Did he guess what they said? In a manner of speaking, it might be put this way. The author would only like to point out to the reader here that he (the reader) should be willing to accept the fact that the writer, through very ingenious means doubtlessly, has acquired the necessary information, and it is really quite irrelevant to the story to ask exactly how he obtained it. There are such things as trade secrets, you know. Well, let us get on with our history, shall we?

Henry’s suggestion was quite simple, that Sophie and himself take a few moderate samples from the various types of sodas his long years in the employ of Squire Painkiller had taught him to make. Sophie, as you might have already guessed, was not totally adverse to the idea. And so they begin, Sophie sitting at the counter, behind which Henry worked, it seemed, with unusual swiftness. He pushed the syrup knobs, scooped the ice cream, pulled the handle on the milk machine, flipped the switch on the mixer, squirted, and plopped until they were ready to begin their extravagantly sumptuous repast. Sophie had in front of her three chocolate sodas (chocolate was her favorite), two vanilla sodas, and one of Henry’s specials, called by the master himself, a mochaberry delight. It contained two scoops of mocha ice cream, one of walnut, a shot of strawberry syrup, two shots of coke syrup, a dash of milk (skim), one half cup of water, two cherries, three cashew nuts, and a prune. Henry himself had three mochaberry delights, a chocolate soda and a vanilla soda. Thus they began.

The author must once again interrupt the narrative to point out a very important fact. We have now reached the middle of our history, a middle which he desperately hopes is much closer to the end than the beginning. This section, for you who are erotic enough to see the implications, may also be called the climax . . . . No, as a matter for the record, it cannot be called the climax. In all fairness to Henry and Sophie, to call it so would be highly incorrect. It would be a lie, a dire untruth. There is, in fact, no climax in this history, of any kind, so you might as well stop looking for one right now.

Sorry to seem angry about this, but it’s the way I feel about it. And as a matter of fact, those people who always expect the author to remain an impartial and emotionless observer of the events he narrates give me a pain in the ass. If I feel something emotional about one of the persons I’m speaking about, why shouldn’t I say so. Or if I suddenly see one of them in a different light, why shouldn’t I say so. Like take Sophie, for instance. You know I said that she was “a delightful girl.” Well, she isn’t. No, not at all. She’s fat and ugly. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anybody so fat and ugly as she is. Boy, is she ugly. She’s uglier than Henry. And I want to tell you, fella, Henry is ugly. Maybe Sophie isn’t as fat as Henry, but she’s uglier. That’s for sure.
And you can bet that they both looked God-awful ugly as they sat there gorging themselves with all those sodas, slopping them up like pigs! I can’t bear to look. Henry with his three chocolate sodas and two mocha-berry delights . . . .

Or was it Sophie that had the chocolate sodas, three of them and two strawberry-cream sundaes. No, that isn’t it . . . . It must have been Henry who had the sundaes. No, that isn’t it . . . . It must have been Henry who had the sundaes. Did he have five or six . . . ? On, well, what difference does it make . . . ?

Ya, as a matter of fact, what difference does it make. I’ve had it, with them and you. This isn’t fact or illusion-of-reality or whatever you want to call it. I made it up. Ya, I made it up, out of my own little head. None of it’s true. It’s a lie, all of it.

But I suppose, now that we’ve got this near the end, you’ll want to know what happens, anyway, even though it is all a lie. Well, I’ll tell you what happens. NOTHING! THEY JUST KEEP EATING UNTIL THEY EXPLODE! How’s that? The ending exciting enough? Well, it is better because that’s exactly what this is.
Canto for a Fallen Colleague

Bruce Frier

“The offence of Gallus is variously described as base ingratitude, statues erected to himself and boastful inscriptions incised upon the pyramids of Egypt...”

I

Water wisp of a gilded ewer,
Steel upon silver,
Meat upon bread,
And the chalice of our newest poet
Full to the brim,
Filled to the brow,
O Hymen Hymenaeus!

Vermillion dribbling the paunch of a suitor;
Torches in counterpoint,
Forth unto Helicon,
Forth from the hilltop.
O Hymen Hymenaeus!

We inter in our dust
Alpheus and groves of Molorchus,
I with a chaplet of leaves on my brow
And gifts in my hand.
O Hymen Hymenaeus!

For I shall be victor and lead your procession,
Conspect in Tyrian splendour,
And rouse a hundred nags to the river,
O Hymen Hymenaeus!

Behold for you the chalk-white skin of the mistress
Who waits at thy lintel;
Mousseline of Cos ruptures thy groins,
O Hymen Hymenaeus!

And you, you, prince of the poets,
You shall be Gallus
(If only you fracture the bondings of time,
(Pitiable lad)
I lay lilies in full hand
I scatter scarlet flowers at your feet
And lavish about the soul of my nephew
A monument to emptiness,
The sculptured agony of perfect rhyme.

O Hymen Hymenaeus!
II
It was hot that year,
sweaty as a bitch from the alleys of Rome;
Nor did he stir
as I came upon him.
But his head bent forward in emasculated stupor
and he asked for the world as a toy:
Vulcan; bait for the fish-hook;
The lament of Phemius barred in impious halls:

"Why have I come to this
gathering-point of nations?
"Why have I stood in this
counting-house of time?"

As though it were enough, somehow, to sing
of windows stained by another's guilt,
and by his own;
Never once to reach like Augustus,
By a single stroke to end the pains
an age fell heir to.

III
Content? No, not really;
born in an obscure context
and raised in an ivied womb,
Where could he go?
It was too much, perhaps,
to raise Ossa on Pelion
and ascend to Olympus in triumph.
Demodocus gave warning of that.
Better, then, for a man of taste,
to wait in silence,
to scrawl a drunken word.
Better to emend the mind of Plato
or sup in the gardens of sage Epicurus
and frequent the booksales of learned Menander.
IV

The magnolias definitely weren’t in season
  as the fine and fiery economist
dripped corn down his lapel.
And the ellums were sick of a wasting disease
  and should soon be cut down.
A liberhal education is like a ta-ree!
  thundered the mace to antiphonal masses;
  and he was right, you know.
For all is a flowing save this,
  the tawdriness of cheap and knavish thought.
Juvenal knew better.

(Or Latin me that, my Trinity scholard:
FIVE million unemployed
EIGHT million voteless
TWENTY-SEVEN per centum per annum:
  interest pour les pauvres
FIFTY million starving
(And a brown, brown BROOKLYN baby
gnawed to death by rats)

With silver spoons for some mouths,
golden spoons for others,
And here’s to the boys of Theta Xi,
  and the men of St. Anthony’s Hall.

V

Who shall weep if it be not we,
  the pariahs of progress,
  the well-blooded lads of the hill?
Nothing we gave him, our honors were nothing,
Our walls but a prison, our mouthings were sere,
  and our clothes bore the fragrance of death.
  “. . . Sero, Sero . . .
“Sorrow to you if you slay me,
“For I am a poet
  and sing before gods, before men.
“None was my teacher,
  my lays were untutored;
“But need maketh velvet of linen
“And I sing unto thee as to god.”
He was blind, blind as a bat;
  he paid for his singing with blindness.
Envoi

Go, stately booke,
Go unto her that disdains you;
Tell her the bull-rushes cease from their guarding,
Even the oak-leaves yield to the snow,
And I will not wait till a fickle world
Tires of the warblings of Gallus.
Tell her that should she respond to the summons,
Her name is professed on the golde-bearing Gades
And no Roman soldier stands lonelie outpost
But that he ponders the dark-eyed Lycoris
And mourns the distention of empyre.

"Or if you keepe me still
As prisoner in these woods,
"My voyce the verie woods shall fill
And make the stones to understand."

So we depart,
And I unto life,
And thou unto death,
And which of the twain be the finer course
Is known to none
Save God.

Hail and Farewell.
POEM

P. G. Pierce

Two on beer-misted beaches broke
off and ran cans overfoaming in hand
up into the wind treading air with outstrung bodies
towards the village whitesplashed
onto the sea-set headland.
A dune sand grass tufted reached out
and tripped them up in trembling unison
as the air close about loomed
grains of sand spun shine white flecks of foam
glancing bird’s wing hues,
but the sun was settling into piling swells
staining dark shallow hollows
that cupped first depressions.

He, deliberately, twined and plucked a knot
of dry spawned grass, then with a vow proffered
it to the sky, where it hung till taken by the wind.
Not touching, he led her back wanting not
to see the last crimson probe
flash once on a seaward window.
St. Patrick’s Day

P. G. Pierce

In my twenty-first year March 17th brought
self-baffling thought battering softly down
like the confused fast path of snow.

Doubts posing as thoughts furrowed
my forehead, and bedded pin-prick fear
spasms for me in the world, gaining
crystal foothold.

A small figure swept by, blurred. If
he had stopped he’d be buried by now.
I sat watching while sharp corners lost their
edge and snow blown fields smoothed their curves
(nameless numbers were lost before the first flake
stuck, but now they all stick, falling faster in the wind).

Beneath, I freed from the snow a stone plaque
and blanched at the senile face of an old woman
hermetically preserved
— something to remember her by.

A stone
cross transmuted to a gentle mound, wound about
by one brown-spiked stem of rose, wind pulsed,
scratching at granite.
Calm and Bright

Russell M. Griffin

It is Indian Summer and hot and the trees in front of our house sag in the heat. I am playing with Sally on the front porch. Wes carved her from an old piece of white pine and Mother made a dress for her out of calico. Once I had a store-bought doll named Jenny-June, but she broke. Father came in one night to say good-night to me and he sat on the bed too hard and she slipped onto the floor and broke. She had china head with a painted face and red cheeks and real hair. But she broke on the floor. Father tried to fix her with fish glue, but he couldn’t fit all the pieces together so he stood up and threw her into the fireplace and her body burned. I put all the china pieces in a box. They are all black but I have them in a box in my bureau. I prayed that they will be fixed and if I wait long enough some morning I will open the box and they will be fixed. It is like my great-aunt Susan says. “Be patient, for the Lord works in strange ways.” Her sitting-room is damp and dark and embroidered and tasseled, and her bedroom is white and empty. So I must be patient for the Lord works in strange ways.

“Elizabeth! You, Elizabeth!”

“I have to go,” I say to Sally. “Mother is calling me.”

Mother is running up the road, holding her dress bunched in front of her so she can run. She has been at great-aunt Susan’s since yesterday, because Aunt Susan is very sick and I musn’t go to Aunt Susan’s while she is so sick.

“Elizabeth, go get your Pa and tell him to hurry on over to his Aunt Susan’s! I’m going to get the rest of the family.”

She runs up the stairs of the porch and into the house to comb her hair. I jump up and start running down the street towards the store. The street is dusty and the men’s shoes and pant-cuffs are dusty as they walk by the stores.

Pa is behind the counter with Wes when I come in.

“Any dunderheaded ninney knows you don’t put an order of ten-pennies in with eight-penny nails. You put them in separate bags. You’re the—”

“Ma says to right over to Aunt Susan’s,” I say. “She says she’s going to get the others.”

“I knew she didn’t have much time left,” Father says. “Wesley, you tend store. I’ll be back in a bit. And so help me God if you make one more mistake whilst I’m away, I’ll horsewhip you into sausage meat.”

“Yes, Pa,” Wes says.

Pa goes out and starts walking quickly towards great-Aunt Susan’s house.

“Aunt Susan must be pretty sick,” I say.

“I guess she’s pretty sick. She’s dying, ain’t she.”

“Ma said she was sick.”
"Aunt Susan’s dying. Anyway, what do you care whether the old looney dies or not?"

"No she ain’t! No she ain’t! She ain’t dying! Not now!"

"Well, I can’t tell you if it’s right now, right this second. You got to ask the gypsies if you want to know to the minute. You feel like asking the gypsies?"

"No . . . ."

"Then you get along home, Elizabeth," Wes says.

"Don’t want to.

"You go on home. And you stay away from Aunt Susan’s. They don’t want you there. You’re too young."

"Well, so are you. They don’t want you neither."

"That don’t make no never-mind. Besides, I got to tend store. Now you get along home."

"Will not!"

Wes comes from behind the counter and takes a step for me. I run outside.

"I hope Pa does whup you to sausage meat," I yell.

"Get!” he says, coming to the door.

"Sausage meat! Sausage meat! Wesley will be sausage meat!"

I start to walk home, trying to jump over my shadow’s head. Wes says that Aunt Susan is dying. Wes is lying. She is just sick. Mother said that she was just sick.

"Hell, Katie, she’s been sick all along. Sick in the head. She’s as crazy as a bed-bug, and she’s been that way all her life,” Father said. “You stay around her long enough and you start getting crazy, too.”

"That ain’t true, Pa,” I said. “Aunt Susan ain’t crazy.”

"Everyone in town knows she’s as looney as they come. That’s why we don’t allow you to go over to her place when there’s a storm. That’s why you’re to come home if you’re there and it’s coming up stormy. There’s no telling what she’ll do in a storm. That’s why none of us stay around her when it’s coming up stormy. Nutty as a fruit-cake, that’s what she is.”

"Stop frightening the child, Abraham,” Mother said.

"I ain’t frightening her, Katie."

"Abraham Nutting, you go outside,” Mother said.

Father snorted and took out a cigar and lit it. I heard him go out and slump into the new glider on the porch.

"Now child, I know you love to be at Aunt Susan’s and talk with her. But she isn’t all right, you know. That’s all your Pa was trying to say. When she was a little girl on her father’s farm, she saw a tree shivered by a bolt of lightning. There was a horse underneath that tree, Elizabeth, and it was knocked down. It got up and shook its head and cantered off, but it was a fool ever after: you had to shove its head into food or water to make it eat or drink. She was scared enough of thunder and lightning after that, but once she was caught out
in a storm in the fields, and when they found her, she was huddled under a tree and, so they say, stark raving mad.

“But ma...”

“I know she seems all right when you’re with her, but when a storm comes, she becomes something else. She doesn’t know what she’s doing, and she says... awful things. That’s why you musn’t go there when the thunder comes. Do you understand, Elizabeth?” and she stroked my hair...

I like it when Aunt Susan strokes my hair and tells me about my great-grandfather Benjamin and the farm, where Uncle Ben Breaker lives now. It is cool and quiet in her room.

I try to jump over my shadow but it leaps before me in the dust of the road. The coolness hides beneath the trees in front yards, behind the white-picket fences.

The air was fresh, that funny freshness that comes before a thunder storm in the summer, and the sky was glass-green beneath the green-black clouds. The breeze brushed my face with its funny storm-freshness. I pulled open the rickety screen door, and went in. It was dark and damp inside, brocaded mustiness with the storm-freshness coming in through the half-opened windows. I could hear the thunder far away. Aunt Susan was sitting straight and stiff in her favourite big chair. She didn’t move at all when I stepped in. The door slammed shut behind me.

“Hello, Aunt Susan. I come over to see you, but you musn’t tell Ma and Pa because they don’t want me here in the storm.”

She sat staring rigidly ahead, in the middle of all those little tables with her plants and pictures on them. The thunder growled louder.

“Aunt Susan?”

“Is that you, Gabriel?” she asked, still looking straight ahead.

“Gabriel? It’s me, ’Elizabeth.”

“Yes, I know,” she said slowly, measuredly. “You needn’t tell me again, Gabriel. I am the Handmaiden of the Lord, and I am ready.”

“Ma says you blasphemy in thunder storms, Aunt Susan. Is it bad to do that in thunder storms?”

She stared straight ahead. I was scared, but I went over and sat on the stool by the stove. There was a fire in the fireplace, and the red light danced across her face and made the shadows leap and plunge on the wall. She sat there, staring ahead, her breathing fast, her flattened chest rising and falling.

“Ma says I mustn’t come here when it storms. Isn’t that funny, Aunt Susan?”

She didn’t say anything. The thunder was closer, and you could hear each crash and the rain was beginning on the roof.

“I hear you coming, Lord,” Aunt Susan said. “I hear you coming for your Handmaiden.”

63 There was a sudden crash, close by.
"I am here, Lord," she gasped, breathing faster. She closed her eyes tighter, like she was waiting, and wrapped her hands around the arms of the chair. "I am ready."

I sat quietly on the stool. I was scared and wanted to run, but I didn’t dare move. Suddenly the room was lit up and there was another crash, like a great hand pressing the house flat, and the rain was heavy on the roof.

"Oh! Oh!" she screamed. Her face was horrible, like she was hurt, her mouth open, her breath coming hard but rhythmically. "Oh Lord, must it . . . must I suffer so?" Her head was pressed back in the chair, her hands still gripping the arms of the chair, her body almost arched, her words tumbling out in an endless, incoherent whisper. "Oh, may I be worthy may I be worthy lord lord lord dear lord." She began to whimper, her voice rising and falling as she breathed.

"I couldn’t stand it any more and I ran with the rain coming down on me and when I stopped I was on my bed and crying and the rain was on the other side of the window and Aunt Susan was in her cottage, and I was crying on my own bed.

I pass our house and go along the road toward Aunt Susan’s cottage. I must see her if she is sick because she may want to be well right away and I have to remind her that she must be patient for the Lord works in strange ways and she will be well soon, because Wesley is a liar.

"Ma, why does Aunt Susan change in the thunder?"

"You ain’t been over there during a storm, Elizabeth?"

"No, Ma. I was just thinking about what you said before."

"Well, I don’t know, Elizabeth. Maybe it’s because of the way she was frightened when she was little. And maybe it’s because she never had a husband and beautiful children like mine." And she smiled and kissed me.

Aunt Susan’s house has no trees, only grass. It is white-washed. It has only two rooms because Father said that it is enough that her family should keep her in two rooms and pay her taxes and buy her food, and that she should be in an Institution instead of costing people money besides taxes people should be benefiting from those taxes which is why she has only two rooms.

I go into the cottage. The Breaker buggy is outside. There is no one in the sitting-room. I go to the door of the bed-room and peek in. They are all in there—Father and Mother and Aunt Honoraria Breaker and Uncle Ben Breaker and Aunt Caroline—standing around the bed or backed against the walls of the tiny room. Aunt Susan is lying on the bed, her hair let down and spraying over the pillow like bleached straw. Her face is sunken and hollow.

"How do you feel, Aunt Susan?" Father asks, standing over her and shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "How do you feel?" a little louder.

"Is it time? Is it time now? Have we found a place?"

Father looks startled, and then looks around embarrassed. "It’s me, Aunt Susan. It’s your nephew Abraham."

"Yes, I feel it already. I’m about to . . . oh, I feel . . . such pain . . ."
The rest of them begin shifting their feet. Everything is white inside, the white-washed walls, the sheet over her.

"Would you like a cold cloth for your head?" Father asks. "I always say that a cold cloth . . ."

Aunt Susan begins gasping for air. It scrapes through her mouth and down into her chest.

"I'm afraid that this is the end," whispers Uncle Ben to Aunt Caroline.

"He's coming . . . I can feel . . . it's such pain . . . tell me . . . is it over yet? Tell me. Tell me."

Father leans forward uneasily. "Aunt Susan," he says, "we're your relatives—"

Mother steps forward and puts her hand on Father's arm to quiet him, the way she always does in company.

"Yes," Mother says, "It is."

"May I see him? May I hold him?"

"In a moment. "You're too weak right now. Rest a moment."

"Yes, I'm so weak, so pitifully weak." Her breathing is quieter now. "Is he beautiful?"

"Yes, of course he is," Mother says.

"Of course he is," Aunt Susan whispers, trying to laugh. "He told me he would be beautiful. He would have to be beautiful. The most beautiful child ever. They will call me blessed." She closes her eyes. "I'm so tired. I have to rest, I'm so tired, so tired."

Her whole body seems to sink into the bedclothes and she becomes very still. No one moves or breathes. Her body is a collapsed, shrivelled balloon beneath the white sheet. Nothing moves in the eternal whiteness of the room.

I tip-toe out. I know that she must be dead, because she is so still, but I must not cry because I must be patient because the Lord works in strange ways.
Pavane at Bedtime

Barbara Mooney

On feathers, the night
Descends to sing
Dark aviaries in your room.
I stand at doorways, listening
To sparrows quarrel, the sonic boom
Of geese in flight.

Old clowns shape
Their pelican way
Across the castled sand which spills
On sheets. Gulls rise to play
With toys of air, white bills
Agape.

Helpless, I walk
The corridor outside,
Taut to a history
Of birds, a voice that rides
On wider wings: the raptor cry
Of hawks, of hawks.
And Then There Were None

M. Phineas Anderson

All was silent.
A light yellow mist hung lethally over the black wasteland.  
It was almost as if it had always been that way;  
There was a certain peacefulness about it.

The wind blew softly over the dead land.  
It made no sound, for it did not rustle through the leaves of trees  
   or whistle through the twigs of shrubs and blades of grass.  
The wind made no sound, for there were no trees, no shrubs, no blades of grass.

Then, emerging from somewhere, a small dilapidated nebish form appeared.  
It cast its one sullen eye here and there,  
Taking in the lifelessness, the lifelessness.  
A tear swelled and dropped over the formless mass that had once been a face.  
Then slowly, unhesitatingly, the figure crawled into the sea.
The Class

Barbara C. Mooney

It was getting late, a few minutes after seven—late, at least for the graduate students who met with a promptness nurtured by office appointments and carpool schedules. The three Seniors who had received special permission to take advanced work, sat together on the low, red, leather couch, their heads bent, alert and smart as seals, over their notebooks. The class stirred, not with the exuberance of freshmen, who would have twisted themselves into postures of Laocoon against the serpent chairs, but slowly, with a soft sighing of pages being opened, of whispered, “Good evenings.” The Professor had not yet arrived.

The tall lamps in the long, book-lined study were lit and from the older students, there rose a dull, spreading warmth, compounded of the past day’s fatigue and the hesistant gathering of new forces for the evening’s future. Mrs. Talbot, who was to give the twenty minute student lecture, leaned over her armchair to open a window. Although in her mid-forties, her arms were still thin and white, jutting at the elbow like an adolescent’s. And the expression on her narrow, lined face as she looked out at the browning slope of the campus was childish too, vacant, dreaming.

The sky was grey and low. Wedges of darker clouds, rain-bearers, drove against the chapel tower on their flight to the sea. A gust of chill November air spurted into the room. The heavy door leading into the hallway, which connected the conference room to the undergraduate quarters, slammed shut. Startled into unity, the class looked up. Beyond the circles of light, a large, heavy shadow gathered itself just inside the room. Mrs. Talbot and the two other women gave small “Ohs” of astonishment. The shadow rolled forward with the curious, pigeon-toed gait of a large animal. In the bloom of light, the students saw a massive man, his silver head low but watchful, swinging from side to side as he walked to the desk centered in front of the empty fireplace. He sat down and began to spread papers and notes on the naked surface of the desk. His huge spatulate fingers arranged the piles precisely, and when he held out his arm to balance a heavy book, the nearer students saw the long deltoid muscle swell under the dark blue cloth of his jacket.

“I’m sure you will all regret the fact that Dr. Ames cannot be here tonight to conduct his class.” The voice that emerged from such a monument was oddly high-pitched and light, but perhaps this was because the full mouth was pulled into a half-smile as he spoke. Indeed, there had been a low murmur of disappointment. The class was genuinely fond of Dr. Ames, who was young and scholarly, an understanding taskmaster who had quickly broken down the group into its individual parts.

The smile widened. “I assure you, he is perfectly alright. Dr. Ames has been called away suddenly because of family illness. I, myself, have had only a few hours’ notice to prepare for this class. By the way, my name is Charles Thursday.”
The three Seniors nodded appreciatively. Dr. Thursday was not just a college authority. Publicly, he was a known expert on James Joyce and had just published a philosophy of criticism which was being heralded as a new approach to the entire study of literature. Privately, too, he bore the markings of a legend, although his fourth, and final, divorce had taken place over fifteen years ago. Dispassionately, the undergraduates who knew this fact accepted it as they did all knowledge of antiquity; it had no immediate relevance.

Mrs. Talbot jotted busily on her pad. In front of her, the light reflected only two blind, white circles caught in the frame of Dr. Thursday's glasses, but evidently a hawk's vision lurked behind the prisms.

“No. No. The name's not 'Thirsty,'” he said, pointing a long index finger at her pen, “although that's a possibility at this unseemly hour.” He paused, as though waiting for a response, and the three Seniors laughed, tentatively. “Spell it like a day of the week.”

In haste, Mrs. Talbot drew a line through the words on her tablet. A sudden nervousness burst like a skyrocket against her ribs. She knew she spoke badly and her speech tonight would have been torture enough even under Dr. Ames' prompting. Because so many of the class, like herself, were planning to teach, Dr. Ames had insisted that they not read their papers but deliver them orally.

“Some day you will all have to stand on your own feet in front of your own class. I want you to be prepared for that experience.” Mrs. Talbot had agreed. Yes. Yes. She felt, nonetheless, that she would be perfectly at ease with the sixth graders she would instruct. She had neither the intention, nor, she knew, the swift intelligence to answer the lightning queries of this new, well-drilled college age. She had married John Talbot the week they had both graduated from the University of Kansas and they had raised six children. That was her real subject. Surely, she knew children. The future job at a local day school, already as good as hers, would help their own educational budget, now straining at the seams. John was a fine father, upright, kind, loyal, but the larger world paid no premium for character. He was still not a partner in his law firm. Four times, younger, quicker, more aggressive men had leaped past him on the ladder. She sensed an increasing desperation in him, and felt the counter-wave of ambition—the children—rising in herself.

The plunge back to college had been an icy one. The work load was incredible. Her teachers appeared to be vying with one another as to the sheer tonnage of assignments. There was, of course, the difference between education in the East and education in the Midwest, and the long gap occasioned by child-rearing. For years, her mind had been attuned to the quarrels of four year olds, the locations of missing sweaters and imaginary equators.

The professor's voice buzzed like a fly at the window of her ear. He appeared to be reviewing the course. Well, she had done the work. She sank back against the cushion of memory. The rewards of this new learning had surprised her. As she discussed her books at the dinner table, John's smile reflected her pleasure, and the older children listened to her comments.
night students? How could they give their morning best to this hour, except, perhaps, the young Seniors. No, she knew of at least one who held an outside job. He had waited on her at the college cafeteria just before class. “Hi, Mrs. Talbot. Catching up for tonight? Can I get you more coffee?” He had been nice. The years had floated away. She was no longer a multiple choice on the domestic board. She was, like him, a student. She did not even know his name, Tom Blade, was it, or Baylor? Something simple and easy anyway. She glanced sideways at the red sofa. He was looking directly at her as though he expected her to do something. What? What was it? She realized the entire class was watching her. At a loss, she turned to the professor.

“You are Mrs. Talbot, are you not?,” he was saying. The lenses bridging his nose shone at her like headlights. She nodded. “The class has just told me that you are the one slated for ‘Dubliners.’ You chose ‘The Dead,’ I believe. James Joyce is the author tonight, is he not?” Mutely, she nodded again. Where had she been? These lapses were becoming more frequent as the pressure of the course increased.

“I have also been informed that you usually deliver your lectures from the desk,” Dr. Thursday continued. “However, I do not think we need stand on form. Now, I have all my papers here,”—his huge hand hovered in mid-air—“and I do not feel like moving them. You will not mind beginning from your chair? We can all see you,”—the heavy lip pulled up into a grin—“although we have yet to hear you.”

As Mrs. Talbot took the mimeographed outlines of her talk from her briefcase, the pages shook. This self-exposure dismayed her. It was not physical proof of the artistic trembling of her spirit, which responded so joyfully to the author of “Dubliners,” but a kindergarten reaction. Yet, she should have no trouble. Although she felt a welling of responses she could not explain, the stories themselves were simple and direct and had no connection with these paralyzed fingers.

“Go ahead, please.” There was no mistaking the annoyance in the professor’s voice. “You have only twenty minutes.”

“We,—we usually give out an outline in advance,” Mrs. Talbot ventured. The class murmured assents.

“Very well. We’ll pass these around. Go ahead.” Dr. Thursday leaned forward, put both elbows on the desk, and made a tent of his hands under the palisade of his chin.

Haltingly, Mrs. Talbot reviewed the story. “Gabrield Conroy, a cosmopolitan Irishman,” she began, “takes his wife Gretta to a traditional New Year’s party given by his aunts in Dublin.” Mrs. Talbot spent some time on the charming, warm picture Joyce presented of Irish society. “But, of course, sadness creeps in,” she continued. “As they leave, a song overheard by Gretta reminds her of that tune as sung by a young boy, Michael Furey, who, she feels, died because of thwarted love for her. She confesses the memory of this love to Gabriel after the party and falls asleep, weeping.”
Mrs. Talbot coughed. Should she mention the emotions of poor Gabriel, who had obviously expected a different result to this gala evening in town with his wife? Better not. “Astonished by his wife’s confession,” she hastened on, “Gabriel feels isolated and hurt, and sadly watches the snow falling outside his window.”

Dr. Thursday sat alert and silent. Was this poor fool trying to precis Joyce? She had already spent ten minutes misinterpreting the most obvious detail. He had taught too long not to sense the class reaction. There were discreet yawns and the crisp whispers of cloth as legs were crossed and uncrossed. Was it fair to let her waste their hard-won hour? Ah, at last, she was moving on to something else.

“We see in this story, much death imagery, like, like, well—the title, ‘The Dead,’ or the talk at the feast about the monks sleeping in their coffins. I mean, coffin is, I think, a death image.”

Dr. Thursday could contain himself no longer. “Not really!,” he exploded. He had come out on this miserable, arthritic night—anguish lurked in the bones of that big frame—to listen to this, this third form effort when he might have been lingering in front of the fire at the Faculty Club, having a close discussion with the new poet-in-residence. He had spoken too abruptly. Mrs. Talbot was flushing. Her face was mottled with pink, and as she lowered her head, the sandy hair clung in damp swatches to her neck. The class was withdrawing from him, too. Sympathy for the underdog, eh? What about the untutored joke she was playing on Joyce? “Go on,” he said. “Go on.”

Mrs. Talbot began to discuss what she termed “social situations” in the story. “I mean, take the maid Lily. She’s always downstairs. She never goes upstairs. She’s a domestic. The line is drawn quite clearly. She takes Gabriel’s coat and galoshes when he comes in—.”

“Ah,” interrupted Dr. Thursday. “Take the maid Lily,” he repeated. He stood up and lit a cigarette. The burning circle of tobacco stabbed at the class. “What about Lily? Lily? Lily?”

“It’s the name of a flower,” said a small, dark man, rather Sicilian in appearance. “Yes, yes.” Dr. Thursday’s thin voice was coaxing. “Anything else?” This ceaseless prodding for the obvious.

“You could associate it with the Bible,” one of the Seniors said. His name was Thomas Balder, Jr., and he had attended Dr. Thursday’s lecture on “Archetypal Symbolism.”

“You could. You most certainly could. In what context?”

“Oh, I see,” Mrs. Talbot said. “Biblical lilies. They toil not, neither do they spin. Isn’t that sort of ironic? I mean Lily’s working her head off with all the guests arriving.”

Dr. Thursday’s huge head sank like a bull in the arena, contemplating a final hook.

“Sir,” Tom Balder broke in. He cast a cautioning glance at Mrs. Talbot. Poor, silly, old woman. She had told him this was the first time she had left the
house all week. There were children home with measles or colds or something. He had two younger brothers of his own. Pests of the first water. “Sir, could it have anything to do with Mary, the Virgin Mary?”

“Take it, Tom.”

“Wait a minute, Sir. When Lily talks to Gabriel—.”

“Yes, to Gabriel—.”

“Wasn’t he the one who told Mary about Jesus. I mean that she was going to have Christ. I don’t mean to be sacrilegious but I think——.”

“Oh, learning sometimes involves sacrilege, Tom.”

“That’s it, Sir. The maid Lily is the symbol of, well, of something heavenly. And she tells Gabriel, I mean Gabriel Conroy, in this sudden, sad way about her disappointment in men and he is—. He, well, it must be because of the name, the Archangel, too.”

“Good, Tom. This beautiful brief scene at the beginning of “The Dead” is nothing less,” Dr. Thursday paused, “nothing less than the Annunciation. An extraordinary parody that has no more to do with downstairs maids than do I.” There was a hush in the room. Mrs. Talbot had shielded her burning face with both hands. The knuckles were scratched and blue work veins stood out on each wrist. Studiously, the class bent over the opening pages of “The Dead.”

Dr. Thursday was not in the least abashed. He had paid before for these flickers of pity. Damn it. What were these housewives doing in a graduate class? If they didn’t care to exercise their brains, let ‘em join a sewing circle. Ah, years of teaching had taught him, too. He could take a chance with the eighteen year olds. Once in a while, there was a late-blooming freshman who unfolded into glory in junior or senior year. Then Charles Thursday felt so heartened, so proud of the potential in human endeavor, that it made up for all the enormous effort, the endless consultations, the tidal waves of personal confidence he never wanted to hear, the hours of concentration wasted on faulted essays at the expense of his own work. Never mind. He had joined in the creation of a scholar. Crowned, sceptered, that was his reward. He asked no other.

But, in all his experience, he had never been able to affect this change in the older graduates. Some were fine students with resources untapped by their working lives, but they possessed that potential before they came to him. Others, like this Mrs. Talbot, were hopelessly out of their depth, unaware that the standards of twenty or thirty years ago were no longer applicable. Was not education a constant reexamination of the self in relation to the changing world of ideas? Discipline. Discipline. Yet, after decades of drift, the Mrs. Talbots returned, certain that shopping lists could be turned into novels, that in the desert of their memories, there bubbled the oasis of a poem. How common was their denominator for the infinite variety of man!

He glanced briefly at the slumped figure. Was this the modern feminity? Angles of bone in a land of plenty! At any rate, no sign of hysterics. Preserve him from the watery emotions of women. He had given her time to recoup. Her head was up now and she was fumbling with her text. Behind her, the first dark spattering of rain danced on the sill. The damp air cloaked her
shoulders. A sheaf of loose notes on the arm of her chair cascaded to the floor.

"Why don't you close that window, Mrs. Talbot?," he said. She was on her knees, awkwardly clutching at the papers.

Tom Balder untangled his long legs. "I'll do it, Sir," he said. He leaned over her chair, ducking his head under the lamp, and swung the casement into its slot. Like a helmet, the light flowed down over his cropped, blond head. He grinned at Mrs. Talbot. "Better?," he asked. "Better," she said. "Thank you."

The class was stirring again. The woman next to Mrs. Talbot was brushing lint from her skirt. The Sicilian flicked the point of his ball point pen in and out, out and in. But there was no easy murmur of voices. The class was withdrawn, hostile. They had averted their eyes from Mrs. Talbot, but now Dr. Thursday felt the glancing blows of their regard, covert but angry.

With an abrupt chuckle, he picked up the reins and guided them into the story. He led them down below the shimmering, simple words to explore the farther caverns. His voice, intense and light, flew out at them. He began to locate targets. Tom Balder gazed steadily down at the worn toes of his sneakers, but the two boys beside him were aroused, interested. Dr. Thursday began to elaborate on Joyce’s images of snow.

"There is one curious scene, do you recall, when Gabriel turns away from a heated discussion with a pretty Irish nationalist and—"

"With Miss Ivors," chimed back the woman with lint on her skirt. "And wouldn’t she represent the attraction and, at the same time, the barrenness of Dublin society?"

Dr. Thursday put one finger against his lower lip and nodded. The old and beautiful dialog between teacher and student was beginning again. "Yes, with the firey Miss Ivors," he amended. "You are right. Do not we see beneath all the physical cheer of this celebration, the shallow, sterile Irish world which saddened Joyce? Uow, Gabriel puts his warm hands against the icy window—how good it feels—and looks out to see—?" Dr. Thursday hung to the question-mark.

"To see the Welling Monument in the square." Mrs. Talbot was pale with knowledge. Her flat Midwest accent slapped the silence.

"Yes," said Dr. Thursday, surprised. "And how does that monument look?"

"Well, I really don't know," Mrs. Talbot said. "I've never been abroad, I mean, in Dublin."

Dr. Thursday hesitated. The personal response. He might have known. Was it worth pushing her? Why did ignorance have to turn its glistening face to him?

"No, Mrs. Talbot. I was referring to Joyce's description. It's on page 192."

He waited patiently, as her fingers rifled her text.

"He doesn't say much about it. It's only one sentence." She was really quite proud of herself for remembering such a short scene from all the welter of detail.

"Umm," said Dr. Thursday. "Now you have an excited, flushed man in his mid-thirties who has been listening to a lovely and impassioned woman discuss
Irish nationalism, and abruptly we are turned to a view of snow on a tall monument. Does that suggest—.

"I think it’s an awfully good contrast," cried Mrs. Talbot. "After all, it is unusual to have snow in Ireland. And Joyce is contrasting this snow on the monument to the party Gabriel is at. After all, it is New Year's eve," she ended lamely, as she saw the twin moons of Dr. Thursday’s glasses move out of her orbit.

The ball-point pen clicked in the upraised hand of the Sicilian.

"Yes," the Professor’s voice seemed weary.

"In this connection, Sir, the monument is obviously a phallic symbol."

"Yes, of course," chorused the class. Dr. Thursday tapped his notes against his palm in a mock gesture of applause. Ah, the pervasive Freud. Only the rare student failed here.

"Perhaps, Sir," Tom Balder broke in, "perhaps that’s what Mrs. Talbot was trying to tell us, although she didn’t come right out with it, naturally. And the snow here acts as censor."

"Hah!" snorted Dr. Thursday. "You’re the one who’s getting the importance of this scene, Tom. Gabriel has felt one of those short-lived but powerful moments of attraction common, I may add, to all men, and he is instantly reminded, as a married man, that this moment is a forbidden one. This passion cannot be consummated. It must be capped by snow."

The class leaned forward eagerly, scribbling in notebooks or underlining the text. The Sicilian was drawing a huge exclamation point along the margin of "The Dead." Mrs. Talbot’s mouth hung open, like a fish, thought Dr. Thursday in irritation, like a fish struggling on the barb of a new idea. It was time for the coup de grace. He was not unsympathetic. The woman looked tired. Good God, don’t we all live on the verge of total fatigue, he thought. Dr. Ames was younger and probably willing to carry her dead weight until he could unburden the load to someone like Charles Thursday. Few men faced it but there was always an element of execution in every necessary decision.

"Shall I go on?" ventured Mrs. Talbot. She could do nothing right for this man, but the class had always been kind and would help her, like that thoughtful boy. She did not dare to smile at him after all this discussion about phallic monuments. The professor would think her, oh, well, you know.

"Go on?" echoed Dr. Thursday. "I do not think, Mrs. Talbot, we were ever fairly started. I do not think that the lecture we have heard so far this evening has the remotest resemblance to a critique of Joyce. We are not babies, Mrs. Talbot. We are students. We are not here to be lulled, but to learn."

He surveyed the class. At last they were with him, uneasy, perhaps, but his. Two of the Seniors smiled openly. The woman next to Mrs. Talbot slid to the far side of her chair, smoothing her skirt over the shelf of her knees. Oh, he knew them. Secretly, they were congratulating themselves on their self-possession. They would never put their heads on the block. Even Tom Balder slouched, ruminative, circulating one sneakered foot around the toe of the other.
Opposite him, Mrs. Talbot's white arms lay helpless as gloves in her green flannel lap. A bright coal burned dead center in each slack cheek. Under pale, almost invisible brows, her eyes were widening with a reflection of tears. Dr. Thursday brought both hands down, palm open, on the desk. A clap of thunder rolled over the room.

"Not one word has our lecturer told us this evening about the very subject of criticism which lay so close to Joyce's heart. Did he not himself suggest that he needed the ideal reader afflicted with ideal insomnia. Let me tell you that no insight comes easily. Life, and the probing of that life in literature, is a struggle. There are those who will accept the challenge and survive in new knowledge. There are those who will accept it and fail. I respect them both. They carry battle-standards. Finally, there are those who do not even know the challenge has been made, and I suggest to them that they retire from the lists."

He was looking, not at Mrs. Talbot but at the glow of the lamp to her left. She had remained crouched in utter silence. He felt the thud of excitement pumping through his stiffened body. There was always this problem to be resolved. A teacher could not be all things to all men. Was it not better to let the Mrs. Talbots look early at the reality of academic life? Oh, the blind, stupid drive of the human ego that forced itself to an abyss it could not bridge.

"Let us do battle with Joyce this evening. He is the greatest antagonist of our century with all the skills of erudition and complexity, the metaphoric vision of the poet on his side. Who is brave enough to tilt with him? Come, all of you. Answer freely. Who will discuss the epiphany of "The Dead?"

A freshman class would have remained stunned and uneasy, but Dr. Thursday knew older students would stoop, eager, to the gauntlet. The two boys next to Tom Balder began to discuss Joyce's interpretation of Aquinas. Northrop Frye's definitions of epiphany were dissected and discarded. Apathy, which a few minutes earlier, had unrolled like a carpet under the flat, Midwest voice, now vanished. The room came alive. Everyone had a suggestion, an inspiration. Dr. Thursday's voice was light and instant as a wing, supporting, cajoling, amending, praising. The story was husked. Like field corn, it revealed layer after protective layer.

Mrs. Talbot shook her wrists as though they had been asleep. She gripped her pen and started to take notes. Beneath her feeling of futility, stirred a wavering courage. Was it really true, she was too old to learn?

Finally, "Dubliners" was unravelled, each thread examined, and the whole skein rewoven again. How clear, how bright, shone the once hidden colors of the themes. The class swung high, intoxicated with its own insight. It was time, Dr. Thursday knew, to bring them back.

"I congratulate you this evening. Yet I want to remind you—our time is almost up—I want to remind you, after we have so neatly packaged Joyce, that literature is a product of spirit as well as mind. We cannot explain everything. Ultimately, the great author is sensed rather than analyzed. He causes the well-springs of our consciousness to overflow and we go under in the wave, flooded with intimations of a new reality, a further vision."
Mrs. Talbot felt the iron grip of her humiliation relax. What handsome words! This huge, harsh man was describing her own reaction. This was what she wanted to share with her family, with the class, his personal intensity of delight. "Yes. Yes," she affirmed. She lifted her arms in an unconscious gesture of appeal to her tormentor. Tormentor? No, this demon-angel. "That is just what I meant. That is what I wanted to say about Joyce."

The class stared at her. This open burst of emotion outraged their sense of propriety, of discipline. Tom Balder shut his eyes, and dug the heels of his sneakers in squeaks of protest against the oak floor. Dr. Thursday, who was already soaring on the outstretched pinions of his own words, thrust his heavy chin against his collar.

"How, Ma'am, can we know what you mean when you are not equipped to tell us?" He picked up his volume of "Dubliners" and flattened it open on his desk. "I will read to you the last paragraph of the most influential story in modern English. I will not explain it. That would be useless. If you cannot grasp it, you cannot, and nothing I can say or do will help."

Without looking at the book, he began to recite in a voice slowly deepening with passion.

"'A few light taps upon the pane made Gabriel turn to the window. It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight. The time had come for him to set out on his journey westward. Yes, the newspapers were right; snow was general all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and, farther westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves.'"

Dr. Thursday knew for the hundredth time, the rapturous shudder of the words. They dropped slow and lethal against his pulse.

"'It was falling, too, upon every part of the lonely churchyard where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly calling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.'"

Dr. Thursday's face hung hidden, downward, over that final page. The sting of tears salted his eyelids. The class sat, frozen, listening to the immense sound of darkness. Like a sharp shattering of glass, Mrs. Talbot's voice broke on the threshold of their revelation.

"I hate Joyce," she said. Her tone was perfectly controlled, level and unmarked as the Kansas plains. "I hate Joyce. I'll never read Joyce again."