

*Hesitation Interval: Three Parables
on Improvisation*

Submitted to the *Sixfold* Poetry Prize, October 24, 2020

First Parable on Improvisation

Then God looked down upon his work and said:
“I fucked it up again. Who can I blame this on?”

The egret stood, a tall parenthesis, still as a stone.
The hermit crab held his breath in his tiny home.

The sea otter, who’d been smashing an urchin,
with a little rock, paused, mid-stroke:

That’s it. I’m fucked, he thought
& did a quick roll into the greens and browns

and sun-flecked columns of a pub downtown,
and hid next to a starfish whose tentacles

had touched every last syllable and sigh
of an oyster it was opening, slowly, an oyster

who had nothing to lose, now, who gave God
a look that only a bivalve can give, and said:

“O, Great and faceless blunderer, O ad hoc
guarantor of all suffering, O, bankrupt cosmic

criminal and stooge, O, Non-mysterious One,
O, feckless, shell game con-man on a cloud,

O, obvious projection upon cave walls
of all that frightened the Neanderthals,

O, plagiarist, O, D-list rip-off artist,
O, pinwheel on the used car lot of thought. . .”

By then the starfish, with his heavy arms,
had daubed its mouth, and pushed away its meal.

Then God gave every oyster a tiny piece of grit,
a bed, a bar--and an ocean of time to think on it.

Second Parable on Improvisation (How Chill Bill Got His Name)

1.

Equal measure tenderness and rage,
which works well enough on guitar,
the troughs and swells of, soaring highs of,
the laying back, the point of attack of,

the boy like an early planet, bombed constantly,
molten in his gaze, like someone looking out
from under the lid of something. A high school brawler,
fighting football giants in Phys Ed., Dietmar Knowlner,
for instance, who pegged him for a wimp,
Bill falling backward, punching up.
The offensive line—who embraced him,
saw him as trapped in a small frame
(he later sold them dime bags)--
gave him his first street name: Big Dog,
the way people call a fat man “Tiny.”

Big Dog flunked every class but one,
the one beyond words,
i.e.: Boys Chorus.

And she its teacher, tough and mean, like him,
wrote him off at first, but for reasons neither voiced,
he stayed after choir, in back, working the Timpani mallets,
mullet-head on the drum heads,
tinkering with the trumpets, whatever was handy,
a fixture in the far corner of the music room.
(Outside, a fight awaited him in a gravel lot).

Here, in the band room, the two of them
tapping through a long afternoon, she at her gradebook,
he the goon among instruments,
clutching a French horn, like some Ostragoth
back from a sacked city. She handed him a violin,

just to get rid of him—but he scraped and sawed
and made the instrument sing a rough-cut tune.

Well, *That* had never happened.

The next day, she brought him
her old dusty & blown-apart Gibson cutaway.

“Take it,”
fix it. It’s yours,” she said. He did.

He vanished for three months that spring.
Got expelled for good. Summer came,
then summer’s end, then, at the bandstand
by the lake, Labor Day Weekend, she spots
Bill fronting a band, a bunch of dead-beat dad types--
imitation Stevie Ray, but still. Impressive.

Then came the football game.
She spotted him outside a bathroom.

“Oh Hey, Ms Voss,” he said, nose bloody, knuckles battered.
“I just punched-out a 45 year old dude,” he said.
“Don’t worry,” he said, “He deserved it.”

What does one say to *that*?
--when you’re frozen like stone,
the French Horn’s metallic taste
of fear in your mouth?

“Look at your hands,” she said, finally.
“Keep it up and you’ll never play again,” she said.

2.

What happened? He got better, of course,

(but so did so many others like him. Why *him*,
we want to know, as if the answer might be bottled,
as if we might learn how The Mechanism
of *Orpheus, Incorporated* descends upon the one
and not the millions of others). Better ask why, at dusk,

against the backscatter of every poem ever written,
that great sustaining substrate of lost afternoons
spilling onto empty chairs in the Kingdom of the Un-sung
a slide guitar threads through the Never Summer Mountains
and through Emmy Lou's voice (again)

--and the Red-Eyed Vireo, in threnody,
finds the rasp of sorrow in a song,

and why we love it so.

3.

And why sorrow's
harmonic artifacts spill from a silo into laughter,
a dress waving in the wind,
grain scattered on a concrete floor.

What happened? He got better, of course.

4.

He vanished into the *demos*, took what he could
and (maybe this a secret to remember), somehow
remained undamaged by the company he kept.

Amid the haunted, thrift-store suits and slacks,
the whispering of coats in closets,
the slough of other lives cast off,

Salvation Army racks
(an AM radio playing Monika Robinson's
one hit, "One More Time"), Billy found,
as it's sometimes reported in the mags,
the narrow-brimmed black hat—his signature.

He tilted *The Hat* into place.
An oval mirror framed a face
he didn't recognize—and he called it good.

5.

This was when
each hunch seemed like a dream we had at night
and then forgot, until it issued forth from his guitar,
and each step was that next right note he struck.
He rolled his own Drum cigarettes,
their plumes like fog across the stage
where he found his name—Billy Voss—like an off-brand
tuxedo label, but short, simple, sayable.
He found women, he found an agent. He got better
at dangling catnip to reporters

(--and this, reader, is where Odegaard comes in, O
moonlighting for a little on-line music column,
buttonholes Bill at a party during CMJ in NYC.
They both look like bandmates, but one's a professor
who keeps a notebook in his back pocket
for just such occasions. The other
lives on some distant galaxy.
Odegaard, thinking he's just met a latter-day
Rock 'n' Roll Rilke, (which will soon become
the title of his next article for *Stereogum*)—

Odegaard scribbles furiously in a corner
as Bill, Bourbon-fueled, riffs on smoke and rue):

*Most people, he says, look across a field
and see the trees and the grass and hear the birds.
The artists I admire seem to hear the air
that moves through all of that--
and that's what I'm after, I guess.*

6.

i.e., It helps to have a penchant for bombast

6.

& just when you think you're something,

6.

when your band opens for someone people know,

6.
& you do *that* for a while, then juxtapose *that* with

6.
a cone of headlights in darkness, the cat's-eyed, chatoyant flash
of mile-markers, expansion plates on the Interstate

6.
making the rhythm of the road the way a record skips

6.
and keeps repeating,

6.
when you're somebody, when you're somebody. . .

Because when you're somebody,
it's always someone else's turn to take the wheel.

7.

When you're somebody, when time and space and chemistry,
(*and* physics, *and* the something that doesn't love a wall),
the whole telemetry of a beery night escape route,
from house to foreclosed house, room to empty
 room, from the pursuing officers, from bench warrants,
from failures to appear, failures
to pay child support, etc --when you're just a guy
who now fits a profile, here's what can happen:

8.

Cornered in an unfamiliar house (they'll add
breaking and entering to the list of charges), officers closing in,
(he can hear the crackle of two-way radios,
he can hear them pounding on the doors)

--isn't this, also, a moment that he's born to,
a moment of improvisation? How else explain
the calm that surrounds him, that inhabits him?

[stanza break]

Call it stage presence, the gift of clarity
when most would panic—
 fear become its own planet
with its own atmosphere, its own gravity and pull,
with its own rituals of sacrifice and reward:
its landscape's a lighted stage, the sweaty palm,
the center of a storm that you rely upon.

And when it speaks, when others hear
the ship's keel cracking in the rocky shallows,
it says, like an improv coach before the gallows,

“Yes. . .and?”

9.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

He never said “I want to be someone
who climbs inside an empty Frigidare,
in an empty house to hide from the police.” No.
He wished instead upon some first-seen star
with dreams the size of Montana
 —yet here we are,
 and here's *Chill Bill*--
the name chooses you, you see--
and here's to that, and to all that comes to mind
as he sits quietly, whole minute's worth,
waiting for the moment to blow over.

Hesitation Interval (Monika Robinson and The Heroes,
The Antler Bar & Lounge, Choteau, Montana)

Musicians and singers are willing to give their entire lives to a moment.

--David Ackert, "Artists / Actors / Singers / Musicians"

In this machine shop, for instance,
it's as if all the scattered parts of Orpheus
 have been laid out pretty—
as if Plato himself were involved, and this
were his absolute
gearbox/flywheel/clutch assembly—

And this, over here, by the solvent tank,
(where Robinson now brushes them with thinner,
then dunks them in a bath of hot water,
then blows compressed air through all the ports)
here—the engine headers, painted with Hamerite,
now gleam in the fluorescent light
of the Quonset like a stack of silver ingots.
And so does the rocker cover,
painted black with polished fins, shine--
and this, like the very idea of an engine block,
 center-stage of the shop floor
 aglow in red enamel,
 hangs suspended in the air,
all the bores holes checked, hosed
 & ready for the rings.
All the ported, polished triple-angle valve seats,
all the guides and seals and bearings,

all the piston rods returned and balanced,
all the conrod bolts renewed.
 Even the exhaust,
she notes, will be tuned, and true.

And the Maserati salesman she once knew
explained (or tried) that his million-dollar car

arrived without a radio--
so he'd hear the engine sing, he said.
as Robinson just (blankly) stared ahead.

But now, inside a Quonset with a ceiling
tall and ribbed as the roof of the whale

that might have swallowed Jonah,
she knows a little more (better late than never)
of the here and how of parts,
and what holds it all together.

*

Later, backlit, against a black cinder wall,
hair a blonde penumbra
with its own apogee & agenda—
Robinson, tunes her guitar between songs,
hips half-cocked, one foot turned out,
(in *plié*, like someone waiting for a bus
or hailing a cab into the hereafter),
Billy Voss, next to her
in his black hat and soul patch disaster,
cross-picking a tune that the audience spots

Ah!--at once: "Jorma!" someone shouts.
Robinson sniffs slightly—but not too much.

"Oh, Jorma," she says, in response,
one hand screens her eyes
from the super bright stage light,

as if she's calling out to Jorma,
as if he's in the audience,
if you want to call it that--all twelve people in the bar.

She puts her hands to her side (Billy, in arpeggio—
all she needs to do is sing), fingers splayed, palms down,

moving along with the rhythm of the song,
as if she were shimmering in *négligé*

or gently treading water in a pool.

“I was *raised* on Hot Tuna,” she says

and begins, eyes closed, a headful of wine
to welcome a steady beat and climb
all the way inside “Hesitation Blues”
as handed from the cosmos by way of St. Louis
flat-picking legend Reverend Gary Davis
to the founding member of the Jefferson Airplane
and Hot Tuna, the aforementioned Jorma
Kaukonen, in case you didn’t know.

But two people wonderfully, miraculously, do
for the moment, & (for the moment)
 a song blossoms forth,
and a river is made of whiskey
and every singer who ever lived
is a duck diving into those waters--

and the purpose of every song
is to take a whiskey-drenched plunge
along with a singer, or maybe to ask
in keeping with the title of the song,
why it is one can’t--or won’t—plunge,
 like her, up there,
so headlong into something,
 or maybe the song
 magically allows for both these things—
the plunge *and* the lamentable, questioning
 moment of hesitation
—to make room for both at once, like lovers
interlaced, summer stars above them,
in buckshot archipelagos, an infinite
musical rest between some first moment
 and this one, now,
 in which all is (so famously) lost.