

While Riding on a Mule at Two in the Morning

It's two in the morning
and I had dreamt
I went away to China Town
while riding on a mule.
I met a man who put me down,
so shot him once and one time more.
On the floor he begged to die,
so shot him twice again.
The jury said the homicide was justified,
the only thing to do—

But it was but a dream,
Won't waste much time with that
Or pay a seer for her analysis.
Sleep will not return and brain is running hot.
I've tried both sides and top and bottom too,
See all that must be done, so little time,
I've had my nap, will sometime nap again.
Make the bed and start the coffee.
Stir the fire and get the pan a'goin.
I've little time, so little time,
You have much more than I,
You're that much younger still.
I've seen the promise outlined fading in the mist.
I'll point the way. You may catch it still.

Who am I to lecture you may ask. Of my advice, it's worth to you,
You must decide. But I am older and have but little time to say my piece.
You are younger, still have time to make a mark, though who's to say—
Shelly drowned, Hector slain, many a slip between the cup and lip
Of what's assumed to be a life's allotted time.

Achilles, plumed and terrible in bright blazing armor,
Slew noble Hector before his father's eyes,
Then drug the corpse behind swift running car
Around the city walls until,
What was great beauty but at day's beginning
Was at waning light a bloody sack
Of shredded flesh and shattered bone,
A rag that was a man but trophy to another's pride.

I am the prophet of the Raven God,
But more to the point,

I made the Raven God,
The metaphor a mirror to my soul
As gods of Greece were mirror to the mortal.
Gods are made by mortal men in search of commonality,
In search of continuity, in search of what transcends the moment
What can be gathered this side of death,
What remains this side of death,
What continues with the babe at mother's breast,
It's cry thrown back from granite walls
Beyond which no mortal passes,

Made the Raven God not in my image
But in the service of the God more greater still,
That of Metaphor, in whose august presence
We pause to contemplate the mysteries,
The fiery firmament, the briny deep,
The heaving breast of wine dark sea.

Waters drawn for absolution from a sacred spring
Where woodland dwelling nymphs will come to bathe,
And if you do not make a rustle
You may watch and they won't mind.

But when he had made sacrifice to the god of that place
And set long in stillness in that deeply shadowed grotto,
He heard a song in voice sweet but what told his blood ran cold,
Of treachery and greed made bold in absence of the law
Or of any man who would dare to speak against injustice.
The sacred sheep were roughly shorn and torn with bloody hands.
Virgin thighs were cruelly forced; dishonor stained the land.
And those few good men remaining, or returning from afar,
Bade heaven their revenge be blest. Their sorrow not subsumed,
But honor might be bathed in blood, pride's light by arms restored.

The gods shed tears to hear their plea and rose to send their aid,
Could not directly intervene, but yet might tip the scale
By a sprite wind called up and cloud of sand impede the sight,
Or irritant of insect by discomfort cause distraction,
Thereby might thwart the villain's progress, only to but slow,
By a moments inhibition, his downward thrusting blade,

Or with breeze to loft their sails that these good men might carry on.
Yet they, these true and honest men, drawn from their hearths and fields,
Uninured of war, untried in battle, must in this hour
Each stand alone, confront his fear, be first to duty bound,

Or by untrammelled fear lose hope of continuity
Within the bosom of community, must face mortality,
That love of country might assuage the awful dread of death.

But I must rest my case.

This what comes of riding mules so early of a morning.
I have lapped now the hours passing, the cock is at first crowing.
These gathered words come fresh in form, wrapped in acanthus leaves
To hold the dampness of the dew, now dropped by Venus passing.

A Turkey's Pardon

For Thanksgiving
I pardoned a turkey,
did not stalk it when it yet
was wild and still could fly
through the tangled undergrowth
beneath a drawn November sky,
with youthful hands half frozen
cradled the polished walnut grain,
the cold blue barrel, impatient for its discharge,
the call now close that echoed through the trees,
the black primordial eye.

Or in my grandmother's yard raised
from a poult to perfect plumpness,
did not stretch its neck across the
blackened stump but stayed the hatchet,
did not unzip the carcass
to read its entrails,
so as to know the mind of God,
or to make a stuffing from its innards,
did not parboil it in
the cast iron cauldron so as to
more easily pluck the feathers.

Nor did I buy it neatly packaged
at the super-store, where my act was
duly noted, sent a market signal back in time,
made one less egg, hatched one less poult;

but read the label, had visions of vast herds
of “free-range” turkeys driven
through Indian country to a railhead where
a callow youth lies dying on a barroom floor—
close followed by a picture
of an assembly line that begins in cacophony
with living birds hung by their feet on hooks
from a moving chain that passes
a long line of flashing knives.

The pardon is retroactive and inclusive
so as to cover any
crimes yet to be counted,
though I can’t think how a bird might sin
or for what might beg one’s pardon
unless inspiring gluttony a capital offence,
Christ come down from off the cross forgiven
for sins not yet committed.
My proclamation was—in this season of the virus—
an easy sacrifice, my table bare
except for its single setting, the other chairs
drawn up as in attendance. I’ve not
set out the crystal or the silver candle sticks, I’ve
sent no invitations. Old Albert died in ’18, so we’ll
not discuss again what caused the towers to crumble.
The other ghosts have no need of chairs or plates
but are content to hover. No one’s traveling,
the kids are hunkered down.

Our dear leader pardoned two
warming up for Flynn and others.
Now I’ve done my one,
I too will give thought to
the forgiveness of myself, but
that is complicated, best left to other seasons.

Clarity

To uncloud the mind, to peel back the layers
of illusion and despair, of ambition and regret,

seeking only clarity: to focus on a germ of insight,
as a point of light upon a silver sphere,
which grows to fill the surface, combining dream and memory
of many things and places, to that of a unified reflection,
as a word floating above the surface,
to be borne to heaven as a prayer.

It is my task to make a song,
not new, but of all things,
bound up as sticks on the back of an old man,
accompanied by split-tongued ravens.
I am the prophet of hope and doom.
Behind my eyes I see all things
that ever were or that will be,
the fall of Croesus, the birth of Christ,
from here to the end of the world.

A great cracking sound is heard,
goes even round the earth,
draws up the seas,
reverberates against the peaks.
It is that of hope
thrown down by certainty;
yet more subtle than disaster,
more natural than despair,
hope rises—
children still are born
that suffering might continue,
hope hardwired, despair invasive.

For the young death is a small and distant thing
least considered in youth's bounty,
age held in contempt, that losing vigor
one would wish to cleanly die
rather than to live a withered thing,
but coming there when hope is lost
find life a stubborn flame.
It is but death makes life so sweet.

The pilgrims came on bleeding knees
drawn by riddles from across the seas,
tore out their eyes that they might see
by light more pure than that of day,
might better know the mind of God,
might find religion there

within a pile of fallen stones.

Many perished on the plain
but afterward a city was built there,
a cenotaph to those who fell,
that in the terror of the battle
were first on duty focused,
though they might perish,
their people might prevail.

Could we not see Sisyphus as a contented man,
if he pushed many stones up many hills,
day by day, another job well done,
but did not know they all fell back?

Of a Skein that Threads Through Time

God is a name we give—
the shortest word for metaphor,
is of a skein that threads through time,
is a word that winds
through deed and circumstance,
defines the theme of our existence,
starkly in a moment,
recedes from one's awareness,
to reappear, as a refrain,
when least expected,
or finds one's self soul-naked,
distraught of loss, bereft of consolation,
or, in the moment of our triumph,
whispers of humility,

is of a sheen that spreads o'er all,
the word we find for reason
of life that springs in season,
of bounty gathered in the fall.

God thought, but what he thought,
man might not presume to know,
might not presume

to know the mind of God—

or put form to what was ever essence,
the pulse that beat
throughout the fabric of the world,
communion of its constancy,
our howling selves against the silent void,
orphans on a journey seeking place,
huddled with our mortal fellows,
seeking comfort
beneath a dripping ledge,
where was fear but ever extant,
where felt the dark an entity,
first worshiped fire, the power
that pushed back the heavy cloth of darkness,
gave hope against the horror,
content within that moment,
but to be warmed and fed
within the circle of our band,
made music of inchoate longing,
made colored magic on the walls of caves,
depicted outcomes as our prayers—
bounty of the hunt,
fecund copulation,
pictured joy
in a moment less encumbered—

before the mystery was foretold,
before the planets moved
by the priesthood's proclamation,
before the sleight of mind
that moved truth from its axis,
when to see the world
was but to see the face of God,
when spirit was the world,
before His exile to the firmament,
before passion's circumspection.

Make no god of certitude
but soften to allude
to what can be not ever known.
How know solace except surrender;
how know hope except by beauty's apprehension.
The name of God, unspoken,
was ever more of mist

than was of substance. Give Him
no mortal attribute,
take not the name in vain
but save for what is not explained.
Say not to know of purpose.

Call what pleases by His name: all beauty,
all harmony, all that sings for joy,
all left of loss when sorrow's passed,
all of wonder or of hope,
continuance of star light,
wholeness of water and of cloth.

He has mellowed from the time of burning flesh,
when, disdainful of Cain's offering,
shamed him to a mortal fury,
then cursed him for his rage-wrought deed,
now, in maturity, less concerned
of absolutes, less challenged
by Eve's shy theft of knowledge,
tires now of the Serpent's cunning,
rather now bemused of our audacity,
such would make our world anew.

Our longing was
before the object of affection,
before we clothed our longing,
named it, hung it on a frame of sticks.

Oh, you prideful gods,
we made you not of dust
but essence of an inspiration,
was of spirit, not of thing,
a fulcrum to our understanding,
an ideal that had no separate substance,
but by which to know our imperfections,
by which to know what is
and what might also be,
by which to make our laws,
by which to worship harmony—
not cause of flame but that
of which all flames have common.

God is, yet is no thing,
is in the symbol π unending,

is within emergent Spring,
Autumn's death,
and pregnant Spring's return,
is within the song that's sung,
Ode to Joy the joy itself,
is within a garment mended,
or any work well done,
is in the thrill that's felt
when one's thoughts are turned
to someone loved whose love's returned,
or in the grief of memory,
a pain through time to be assuaged
but not to be relinquished—
the remnant of that presence.

Descartes saying
God is the highest concept,
therefore, He is,
is caught red-handed,
in the act of making God.
All speculation of Creation,
of transcendence of impression's wall,
is what unbounded reason,
from emergent self,
would project from commonality,
an order on the lack thereof.

In the Grove of Silver Trees

Do you see the leaves are silver now
against the moonlit sky,
and do you hear and feel the wind
that moves the silver leaves
against the moonlit sky
in a rhythm known
to nature and to lovers
but not to others,
a secret in the grove of silver trees.

Hands detached find way
without forethought
but are directed by response,
sliding down your face and neck;

fingers touching lips send thrills,
exchange between electric skins,
knowing not where one begins
or where the other ends,
beneath the moonlit sky
within the grove of silver trees.

A cloud has darked the moon.
The trees are dark and still,
yet we've no need of light
to know the leaves are silver still,
our secrets better kept
within a grove of silver trees.