

To the Virgins, to Make Most of Time

(after Robert Herrick)

Gatherings of men and boys went forth, and I gather
Major Robinson attended with his battered bags and his dismay.
Old Doc Hooper could not contain curses, the mottled scold,
Flying off the handle and delivering his mutt a full-on flaying,
Andante-like. Meanwhile toothy Tillotson reached for the hand
Davy's princely boy extended toward the icebox in hunger today,
Two fingers at a time. Fluorescents hummed a plaintive salute to
Undying Uncle Lemuel in his corner, blubbering on about local lads dying
Thermally in the decommissioned cess pit nigh. "How I loathe
Sons-of-bitches with dull hawsers harassing Bosun
Theo in the engine room," shrilled Keck, but our joy in the
Getting-the-filthy-job-done prevailed. It was a way of forgetting
The morning we arrived, beardless and bent sideways with the
Runs, just in time to find Stein putting a pounding on that runt
Anderson in the showers. Chewing our nails, closing eyes and
Setting down power tools—true, it was a touch upsetting
Thatcher could burst in and peel away body stockings just like that;
Thirsty fellow, officious preener, wagging his thick attaché. At first
When we consorted with honchos a sedative twilight set in, when
Warmer-blooded animals lay their hides on us and night got warmer.
But we no longer think about it—the drenched spiny sleep—but
Worst of all were Flynn's stinking boots on our pillows like bratwurst.
Times darkened. The sky ran heavy with discharge, and pastimes—
Former childhood spoils and riffs—fizzled. El Güero showed up, The Reformer,
Then came bouts of market discipline, blurts, spurts, seizures, then
Time and again young Kim, Deputy Spence's fellow, turned down a good time
And reappeared later at the Solicitor's Club, jacked-up, having given his hand
Martially to the firm of Kipling & Benz, who banged him but good. In summary
Forbidden futures were traded—cancer, influence, capital, shame—before
Primeval winds snatched away Kutner in his big-throated prime.
You starry sentinels above, teach us to swim the serpentine channels of your
Tarry sands, searching for sign, sticky with misery's mystery.

The Argument of his Book

Tell how little Brooksy's pissing stunt teed off the minion
This morning at Holy Blossom Temple in Toronto, Ont., deep
Downstream from Dad's coma: Tell how Flora Bird kept the adolescent
Pews amused with her annealing powers, supplying wet blessings
To "those who know who they are" who opened their wallets last April
To fortify Sy Goldfarb, Mayor of Mitzvah
And his jejune platoon, of blessed memory.
"Tell how you lie to us, little chicken hawk, when you plead with us
To hide your ashes in a box of Maypo
Lenore Braverman packed up for you" squawks the Rebbe in our direction
In chopped tongue: See, our tribe was in hock to the cart-man's
Skin collectors long centuries ago, see; holy snow assailed us
On the mount and wooden paddles would not wake us and
For this we smash our kishkas in your ratty cab ride?
Dolus specialis, the well-dressed fella grooms us for a float down
Today's white pride parade, brandishing in the gutter
His fat bridle. "Baby cakes"
(He hums), "my youth is spent,
And a mouthful of wanton necessity it was
To share such fondues/With the likes of youz."
Ransomed wads are thusly offered
Unto the outspread paralyzed palms upon which our
Pocked cheeks balance, and though we would not spoil the ending
We would not spice it up for you either, god willing,
Miss Anna Banana: Your words could use a little limberness
Rehearsing your grisly pantomime in the boss-man's Trans-Am,
Shifting for the feel of it, can you feel how it feels?
Hedgerows, hardly hedgerows, sporty hemlines
Split down the seams with a mighty case of dreads
At Aunt Lily's ranch house that night
Mom is set to expire and take her white lies
With her to the grove with the plates you busted, you get me?
My god, I cannot find my people in the twilight searchlight
In their flammable gingham, yet
When we open our eyes we are all aboard the Kingston ferry
With no Graval for queasy aunts and uncles and dead pets

And you listen, little mister smarty-pants, you are asking for it,
Asking a survivor to drop you off in Hell
At the front curb where we just may interrupt our heaving for you
After all we've done for you.

(for Grandpa)

The Vine

ICE agents slip on a scab Ollie's
Dad sent back, booked for passing germs.
It's all I won't bear. Wheezy ally,
The tale my garlicky flu (avian)
Tells Fortune of April's meat is
Dimwitty. She in mid-juice
Met very untoward end. Nails
My spy over there needed make
Bad for mule's health; illicit bums,
All in it up the windward sod,
Bleed rare beef, the finest cut.
For many quick ages there strove
Ghost pups, and pups maimed by Time's spend-
Y rural toy punks. Yes: lending a
Mammal an ample chimera
To address our love's belly is
A challenge. Base lodge is closed.
But then, I'm excited that the police
Dog went rabid and sicced rescuers: Inert,
Useless, yet wise Nature agrees. I go now,
Paddling the scary dismal potted
Astroturf canals. Else, I've only time
To tell if the black mortar in me lacks slime.

Without Robinson

To whom do we refer, Robinson,
When we refer to you?
The sky above you offers
No reference, nor do the shambling barrens
Below, nor the undeciphered trimmings
We scrounged from your
Circumference.
What word, Robinson?
Yesterday's randy boy
Leaps over the meadow
In mad pursuit of you, tripping
Into the hay's hump
Into the opening we fear: Down there, there
Is no interference, is there, no
Boozy buffer interrupting
Transfer to a further shore;
Where Mama wades deep in the dirt and defers
To wormy inference, hunger, drear;
Where Pops, old sufferer, has declined
His heavy parcel. "I never saw the man himself"
Is his way of putting it in indifferent
Wrecked Greek. See here, Robinson,
You were born to the middle state,
The upper station of low life, and you bear
Origin in your midsection like
A middling manager of human resources
At a cast-off parts maker
— Bolts, clips, dowels, fasteners
Brackets, clasps, despised wrenches
Bent midway through your
Assembly; and the thing
You pound together looks like
Exactly nothing. That's your affair,
The furtive, infirm, fury-wracked
Leathery reek of your weakness for weakness.

Somewhere you wrest a tuber into daylight
After long struggle; elsewhere you confer
Upon your footwear a preference
For friction and chicken-steps.
It's cold in the canyon of your rough-made room;
Hellish hot in your furnace.
Abiding your corner, cured by sun
Is how we know you when we find you
Stretched like a tarp to load our goods
And drag them ashore, when
We have no goods because
Demand for our kind is dead.

“Strange Shadows on you Tend”

There go another million minutes
 In the history of the misery
Of the nursery rhyme
 That puts our baby to bed
In a high bed at the end of time's
 White corridor.
There goes a voice, tripping over
Salutations, ostentations
 Today's recital of a day's rations
 Boiled potatoes, cream potatoes, black bread, rye
 In a woozy murmur
In a rose-throated hush
 Our ragged public address
 System lingers over.
It is a long caress
 Calling us home, come home
From chalked sidewalks, sloping shadows
 It is a bouquet of names
 A mother musters in a year of birth
 Laura, Linda, Thomas, Gregory, James

Lost, long-sought
 Wine-dark interiors and rumors
Of warfare here and there
Among acres
 Of scattered wildlife, watery wastes.
 But if we do not come when called
 We'll have no supper, after all.
 But if we come home halfway round
 No one will be waiting up.
It will be as we have feared
 As day's end has neared

And a day's work left in its rainy place, stone work
 Needlework, field and factory work
 Transportation, trade, hard use
Mobs are spilling forward now
Onto barriers, Old Friend, onto esplanades
 And dizzying

And would he look back towards us
Where we leave him
Rising from the thick-strewn forest floor shadow-crossed
Goodbye.

It is not that he was never here
Or that we were never here.
It's just, oh just that he and we
Have lost a way
Together