

Sinner

By Eric Howard



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Home

San Diego, 1969

ABOVE, out of focus,
a squad of wings writes
TAN DON'T BURN
across July's big blue.

An otherwise invisible wind
soon dissolves them,
leaving a seamless
distance as bright as a lens's point.

Down the block, a screen door
slaps between two arguing:
just what I told you!
One will work, teethmarks

on cards measuring his days.
The other will be found
in a thicket by a river, head blown off.
A child goes by, balling up some string,
methodically, as the wings begin again.

ICBM Test Launch, Point Dume

WHEN the bullets come
we stop them with our hands
and magic shirts;
our hearts break blades, the voices said.

But I could not see into the ground
to the flickering ghosts
or past the sky or into my body,

so what did I know
but that the voices said:
do not be afraid, we are not afraid
this *cannot-be* cannot be.
Sometimes they lie, the voices
that want harm done. They tell
the suicide to do it, the insane
to strike, the drunk to drink.

The voice that tells you
that your world's dying
of its sins is your friend
if that's the truth.

One clear night we shot
some missiles up high,
where the sun still shone.

If that rocket had had eyes,
the horizon would have tilted away below
to the size of a black circle
at the center of a target.

Ribbons stretched over the Pacific,
curling with the upper winds,
bright colored lines in the sky
beautifully crossing out
some mistake in the dark.

San Diego, 1983

1.

It is good to be a stranger here
where I once walked for years
by this junior high school yard.

As a child I wished for invisibility;
I've grown to like it now
but still I change what I see:

“the long-legged girls playing ball”
may be the same—are the same words right?
Five basketballs

bounce off the old backboards
as cannonballs
did off the face of the Sphinx.

2.

At the bottom of the hill
gold wild oats
families with fat mothers walk

across the K-Mart parking lot.
Past this, and the Chinese
restaurant, the Philippine

massage parlor, the shoe store
and the temple the redeemer
a young pair on a motorcycle comet:

It's Sunday and warm.
I can see the mountains behind them
as they ride past she leans forward

sticking her neck out, and gives him
one two three
quick kisses behind the ear.

In Praise of the American V8 Engine

ITS walls are iron: the block alone is too heavy to lift.

It is intricate and ingenious in its design; years of experiment have gone into it.

It uses waterways in system, hellish canals.

It uses oil to move freely and for cooling; its pistons and central shaft move with rockcrushing force at inconceivable speeds on a film of oil.

It uses gasoline for power: pink, sweet-smelling, and capable of flashing instantly on the incautious and unfortunate; its power made useful, burning in iron chambers sixty-six times in one second.

It breathes air mixed with finely misted gasoline, sucking it into its cylinders, where bullets of wind scream past glowing valves.

Its warmth can heat a house.

It starts, informs, and times itself with electricity that flows in patterns baffling to all but the most learned, but in unflinching obedience to a few simple rules.

Its shape has the beauty of pure function.

Its block has a surface that is pleasing to the touch, like the sand it was cast in.

Its machined edges are sharp enough to cut. It is made of metal yet is fragile, easily ruined by dirt, its flat surfaces too hard and unblemished, its shapes too exactly shapely.

It flings two tons about and gives them movement like a bull's.

It pushes this weight at seventy miles per hour all day and all night.

It depends on myriad details: gaskets, filters, pumps, bearings—yet works reliably.

Its points open and close 528 times in one second.

Its carburetor has six jewelrylike main circuits.

It rewards sensual delight of the love of speed.
Its artifacts—pieces of Hemi in a box, rare valve covers, sell for
 high prices.
It has proved unbeatable in many forms of racing.
Its conception and execution are a summit of practical science.
It is beyond the ancient philosophies—what in *Timeaus* is
 equal to it?
Its internal parts—pistons, rings, valves—are beautiful in their
 accuracy of line.
The logic of its working is shapely to the mind.
Its unmuffled sound is terrible, such is its power.
Its workings are the magic of reality.
Its owners do not own it, though it makes them rich: it belongs
 to speed, to songs, to driving down the road with the groceries
 and the dog.
It is for rejoicing in its green leap, its elongated rush.
V8 engine, you took me to her.

For Carol

1.

LIKE a miner, coal dust blackening lungs
light never enters, pitchblende dust
floating down eyes, as far above

roots spread like invisible static,
I would dig for coal, for diamonds, something of value
when burned or brought to light.

2.

I will still know you
when it's too dark when the person standing
before me in gray reappears in blue,

when the child takes a breath before telling a lie,
along with the you I knew who is also you,
the one I flew to see.

On approach, the jet's wing
angled down like a road narrowing away
into a jeweled bedspread city

where empty elevators
moved at night and in windowless buildings
walls of circuits clicked and sparked.

3.

The moon blurred in a dusty mirror.
Tongues touched the edges of their cages.

My spirit learned to hold its breath
diving, drowning, too far down.

My spit traced lines across your stomach
as food and blood flowed down rivers

of the taste of flesh, the sweet weight
of hip and leg, arms pulling together.

Shadows shrug with breathing. You speak low
and smile with my ear on your cloven chest.

4.

The rain left leaves sticking to the window
and ribbons of water as they slid down.

Curtains, then veils of daylight
moved with the sun, and spider webs

came out of the fog like stars.
Mouths, faces, hands, bones, we woke.

Morning took in clear air and sang:
not one song, traveling through the keys but being

all at once, slow, Ivesian, traveling a single-line drawing
in the mind with my tongue from collarbone to nipple.

Skulls full of dreams, we rise
still wearing the paints and wings of sleep.

5.

Fog falls between buildings
like thousands of white kites.

The skyscrapers are like polished cliffs
that want to move, pushing up waves

as birdsong starts
coming through the windows,

the noise of day and end of morning.

6.

You would not think me foolish
for saying things to you when you aren't here

or leaving letters in a desk, for wanting
another silver chain for you,

combs and feathers, plenty,
like the half million I held once in one envelope,

tiny clear stones, or the time,
chicken in a cardboard box, and movie tucked under one arm,

your arm in my other arm, I walked home with you
diamond-hearted with joy.

7.

No day since you lacks the movement
of your arms. No child with her book
and lessons is not learning of you
and no street that I walk on
does not rise to your ache,
because I love your smell,
your sins, and your bones.

8.

In your eyes I saw me
as a tiresome husband eating my onions and eggs
every morning, my words blankets and you

in the shower.

I can't govern myself. I want
to be free of this desire that does you no honor

and doesn't please you.

I imagine that the eye of each place
you pass through attends you, not because

I can't be there, but because
the sky would curl its hand
to touch you.

9.

Like a flower,
it is full of puzzles and circuits.

Some hidden movement
can cause blossom.

Only gentle hands
can cut clock from bomb, gentle touch defuse

and make the body still,
taking the pressure off slowly,

so nothing breaks.

10.

Last night, a woman ran down the street
and called out a name
I could not understand
that echoed off the stone-faced buildings.

I could only hear the wind pursuing,
with a sound like the turning pages
of an enormous book.

Then quiet,
and sleep, and Stalin in a newsreel,
smiling and avuncular at Yalta,
a laugh at some silent joke,
the camera next on a car
driving a long time

down a dirt road,
bodies stacked on both sides,
and the sweet-faced kid who called me sir
asking, have you ever stuck a firecracker
up a cat's ass? Then the big bald man
disgusted at his desk, writing a fatal word
in my file, and pointing,
and I go.

Finally the phone booth as I always see it,
and you telling stories and jokes,
keeping the knife inside you,
the crimes done to your body.

11.

You lay under the knife
asleep and awake,
while they put things in and took things out,
like the metal rod against your spine

that put you in the madhouse,
and they pulled your skin back
around the cut, and sewed it shut.
They would not let you dig it out.
Lesson learned, you held the knife
in your fist, your sex clenched and burning, hitting yourself
in the shower, doing what they told you not to, seeing them
assembled before you; you say,

Look, as you live out
the story of imagining going for a walk from your house

to the store and looking at magazines as one of the guys says,
hey,
leave some for me, and you say

look at me now, this is what you wanted.

12.

After *Vertigo*, walking back
to the car, a yellow light
in the windows of a house

showed me that future I kept wanting:
bookcase, shadows on the ceiling
from plants, some classical music, and you.

But in the movie,
the guy thought he knew
what was going on,

but didn't even get
that he was nuts about her,
and she fell from the tower

over and over, for real
and in his dreams,
and he tried to think the past away,

to brush it as easily aside
as more substantial things.
Men put knives in you.

I remembered trying to hold
your insomniac kicks and arms;
hard for you to fall asleep

because they put you to sleep
before they put the rod in you;
hard to stay awake, because

they kept you awake that time
they wanted an audience
for what they did you.
Then some people walked by
joking about the dream sequence—
the Technicolor flower

with its petals falling away,
and even how she stood
by the graveyard stone

that admits no light but cannot keep the rain out.

Shame

Shame

You aren't fit to be the world.
Aimless blue ball, ancient, slow,
Your face half in darkness,
You shine but you aren't very bright.

Incompetent and forgotten world,
Unmarked point on an endless, messy map,
You are four billion years of nothing much.
You are a bad place to live, unkind to all.

You aren't fit to be the world.
A mistake too little to be noticed,
not worth fixing, smashing's better,
too dirty to be an honest mistake.

Failed world, my wagging finger
hangs in the sky over you Parisians
sobbing over your coffees,
the unemployed, the angry, and the rude.

Shame on you Africans, my disgusted face
looms over your cruel villages, your mutilators,
your gaudy genocides, your hunger,
your kleptocrats and your diseases.

Shame on Kuwait, the undeserving
of all but suffering, spoiled and evil;
Indians, in your rage and appetite:
where are your books, don't you read them?

Shame over Bangkok, over Jakarta,
the ministries and the whorehouses,
the Sultan of Brunei, East Timor,
Air Force One bringing blind cameras to bloody soil.

Shame on Berkeley; you're all so special there
really evolved people sipping herbal tea,
empty addicts, not a damn for anyone,
channel-surfing for a fix, selfish and alone.

Shame on your tossing oceans,
Shame on your shifting scales, your boiling guts,
Sluggish stupid rolling guts,
Shame on your furious idiotic wind!

It Happens

I am tired of being me,
of looking up or down, condemned
to a point of view, tired
of saying I love you
into a telephone mouthpiece
and scratching my ankle.

I am tired of my wants;
my fears bore me, and I continue to be afraid.
Unwillingly I try to twitch
some bad memory away, also
wanting me to leave, driving too long,
eyelids hot and dry. The hot sun
shines equally on void and world.

That bird,
unlike me, does not will itself
to live well. Cain's anger
boils in me, no animal, but rather
something more dangerous
and more in danger.

Home,
I stop the car, and deal
with the keys, seat belt, bag, and all.
I see myself by the mailbox
and shoo me away. Opening the front door
is a great struggle for some reason;
my fingers are clumsy, numb
on the light switch,
which doesn't go on, that I

can't move, my hand is fading
as I see I am standing before me
in the room already, annoyed,
interrupted, talking on the telephone.

Signals and Noises

ONE angel points with her thumb at God (a bright light) and says to another: “Don’t worry about it, he knows how to chill”; ice is not too cold, or absolute zero; a sun’s belly is not too hot; the angels fly where they please, through trees, through earth, through houses, pulling up like stunt planes, diving like fish, dropping like stones. They grow horns and snort bulls and rampage over freeways like this one I’m on: “Remember,” they shout, “God built this world for you!” But through the car radio only riddles come through: He’s O for two, the S&P dropped three, read Revelations fourteen eight, where are you calling from? Houses cover the hills that circle my car, except for one, a patch of darkness in the setting sun and starry fields of burning city lights, Bosch flashes of welding in a dark rail yard, an abandoned bakery wrinkled with graffiti, a seafood place. What scholar could puzzle out that dark hillside’s name—Forest Lawn Glendale? A lawn in a forest? A lawn in a valley valley? That is where the man in the newspaper story shot himself dead at his wife’s new grave, where the art quotes textbooklike from Western Civ., where money is made, and the dead squirm in their coffins against metal, locks, tacky upholstery, underwear, makeup, strings holding extremities in place, itchy fluid, insomnia. This is the slow hour finally come, the wheel of sunlight turning home; this stupid hurt is home; it belongs, hammering like the flame of gasoline inside my car, yammering like this cute angel, her wingtips on the sidewalk.

TV Nature Show

THREE Christian missions failed
to convert or kill them,
the last tribe of the bird-men
still living in the wild.

They've kept their creation:
a man fell from a tree
and founded patriarchy.
Always in erection

thanks to a woven sheath,
the men daily wear
a hibiscus on one ear
and pick their perfect teeth.

Resistance has taught
the women still to leave
their breasts bare, and weave
the mats with which they're bought.

Language Lesson

IN light, each word says *go*,
while in water, the word for *flood* is like our *rally*,
and there is no first person singular, just as
fire has no word for *barefoot*.
Except for the vulgar insults *scented* and *prudent*,
the wind has no words of less than twenty syllables,
and in stone, the words *day* and *time* are the same.
Beer has an infinite number of words for *shapely*,
and in coal, like Spanish, *sky* and *heaven* are the same.
In sex, unlike Latin, there is no masculine and feminine,
but rather male and female, along with,
as in all these languages, words that we
can only get at by analogy,
and snow, of course, has eighteen words for *eskimo*.

Incomplete Sentences

“I want you to complete these,” I say,
“the page number’s on the board.” And so
I must correct oracles, because *If you want a good date*
get up earlier,
and *Driving on the sidewalk*,
it’s faster.
Nevertheless, *Teaching a parrot to recite*
is really easy work
if you just love
and just really want my parrot too.
But *The cost of living is so high*,
they had to increase the minimum wage.
And *What my parents never taught me*
it is
to obey the teacher
when the teacher
gives to me only some punishments,
because *Getting dizzy on the roller coaster*,
I find I must to vomit or go home.

An Indexer's Daydream

A sound on the stairs woke me up last night,
or at least I think so, but now it's 10,
and I'm at work, and I don't know. I turned
over and went back to sleep without you.
Was it the man that corrupted Hadleyburg?
or was it the man from UNCLE, needing
to use the phone because his car broke down,
or perhaps the man with the master plan
was wanting to explain it, maybe to
the man without a country, who died twice,
and who never was. But it was too late
for it to be the man who came to dinner
(but if you came, my love, I'd cook for you),
and last night's bump, I know, was never made
by the man with the blue guitar, nor by
the man with the golden arm, not even
the man who fell to Earth, who after all
could have used a drink and a place to stay;
or maybe the man in the iron mask
sneezed so hard that his refrigerator
magnet fell off, and so he lost the note
that he wrote to remind himself to talk
to the man without a face about dating.
But then, the man who knew too much got a job
up in Washington and never writes home
to the small town where the man who loved women
still sings "I Saw Her Standing There" to himself,
but now she lives alone in the family house
on the tree-shrouded street by the high school,
where she's become a woman who's on the verge
of a nervous breakdown, or so she thinks,
so far away in the Ws, dear,

but then that puts her close to the woman
on the edge of time, who still longs for the man
who loved both cat dancing and the woman
in the dunes, who, while the man with two heads
licks her nipples, is daydreaming that she'd
married the man who loved children until
the PTA called the sheriff, who was
the man who would be king once but now calls
information for an old friend's phone—no
listing—and who put the man they could not hang
away, to do push-ups in his cell, on life
without parole. He dreams he was the man
who shot Liberty Valence, the sunset
in his eyes as he bowlegs away, wondering,
as does the Manchurian candidate,
just what the hell is going on around here,
where something is shining just out of reach
that he knows is there, something in the air
that can't be caught or held, and that he must
have, as I must have you, whose secret name
the woman in flames will always know
and never tell, while the man of La Mancha
(in Spain) and his old pal the music man,
two singer/actors who're between jobs,
pay the bills today with a moving gig,
and try to get a piano up some stairs.

For Mark and His Advice

ADDICTED to both kinds of crack,
you're cruising Santa Monica,
looking for hustlers who like pipe.
Mark, I promise you, a see-through hand
is writing all your good deeds down
someplace hard to get to from here,
though you don't turn your car around.
The sun's long gone; the good people
have already locked themselves in.
Above the kid who's on parole
dark sky approaches, like a tire
rolling over, with a bad smell.
Mark, you think that you can't be free,
but that you can buy what you can't be:
some young one who has no soul,
who's free because he's beautiful.
It won't take long to die here,
but the streets go on forever,
the faces change just a little;
this hard stage has no hero role.
You've got the big recovery book
looming above your angry mind,
which doesn't feel good, not like
these young ones on the street tonight
do. They never give it away,
like you did your shot at escape.
In fact you'd like to shoot that book
that tells you what to do; you'd like
to watch it fall for miles, into
the devil's yawning, scaly, hairy,
wrinkled, puckered, red, caked, creviced,
upside-down, and flaming asshole.

A Group of People Climb Some Stairs

It seems that some great weight rides on each back.
They bend beneath their burdens, which are like ornaments,
which pass, with the liquidity of shadows,
through one another without a tremor.
What glasslike globe so weighs unseen on them
that one after another they bend like cards
being shuffled slowly, tensed and falling?
As they ascend, their feet wear curves in stone.
No atlas opens to the page that answers
how a bubble can with each sad thought weigh more.
How can a shoulder hold what breaks foundations?

Ego in Arcadia

THE glass between us and Heaven
did not understand light quite as we thought.
Out of respect for history,
scholars numbered each cathedral stone, restored the glass
that had been altering outside air
into a richer blue,
and found the original
motley colors loud.

The windows done, the scaffold taken down,
the door opened and gently,
blinking at the direct sun, the crowd
stepped into the afternoon, one by one,
to die, although
from the nearby sea there was
the sound of waves on the sand,
speaking in Greek
and Hebrew, speaking in tongues.

Hawkeye

UNDER a spotless blue sky and Mylar balloons,
amid the meticulous arrangement
of grass, trees, and low rolling hills
designed to lull memory,
groomed, serious, well-dressed people
gathered on the flat green
that lay like a tiny stage before
the stony amphitheater
of desert hillside and dry brush
across the cemetery's property line.

The priest in white reasoned, as a hawk
circled overhead, that they should not
mourn Robert, who, fearless
in heaven as on Earth, rode
fast on horseback, although only ten
(and dived alone one day,
into his glittering backyard pool,
where his mother later found him),
and was free from sin and grief
before offering the Eucharist
as a symbol to all who wished it
and introducing a song
(Rod Stewart's "Forever Young,"
put on the public address)
as the child's favorite.

The mother could not face
the shiny, powder-blue casket
held by a mechanism of polished metal,
hiding the hole, the dirt mound
draped in Astroturf. She lowered her eyes

but did not cry, and pressed her face
into her husband's stoic suited side.
Everyone, for a time, it seemed then,
was silent and still, permeable
to what lay before them
and forgetful of next meals, errands,
the revenge coming to fruition for a slight at work.

There were crows in the oaks
that chattered too loud, like drunks
in a bar, where the perfect grass
stopped and the lion-colored hillside began.

The ground held words to the sky—
one said: death took me in the midst of health.
A standout among the bare,
year-marked names across the lawn:
Hardy, Aguilar, Failing, Brand,
Verdugo, Jaeger, Lav.

No brass buttons wriggled there that day
with careless patience up to the light
the way they do in fields in France
where thousands of boys lie bent in the earth
who were swathed as they rose from their holes
to face the guns trained upon them.

That same earth, that eats its children,
was kept hidden within the cemetery
in the San Fernando Valley
where desert hills circled everyone,

who knew that they would someday press
tongue against mouth, and taste the earth.

Lost and Found

SMOLLETT heads for London, *The Regicide* in hand.
Love's Labours Won
and *The Book of the Leon*
fall from the arms of history.
Sad Sam Johnson toils in obscurity
the length of Keats' short life. Reciting
Greek, Jonson lays a brick, time coursing
on about him, as Shakespeare's sister stuns
all great wooden Os silent, and tired Wilde runs
on a treadwheel, fate handing Pope Dennis
to harass him with never-ending malice.
Jonson kills a man, and stands in tears
before his best poetry, as the years
rejoin them; Blake paints plates
for pence, as Hardy creates
a nonexistent place, and
Smollett heads for London, *The Regicide* in hand.

Secrets

*Three can keep a secret if two are dead.
—Carlos Marcello*

EVERYMAN, Good Deeds, and a lawyer
were waiting to cross the river

when the lawyer told Everyman
he had a better friend:

“Good Deeds will never lie with you in your grave,
or keep you company on the stainless steel table

and not desert you when someone asks
about you to an old friend or family

or the others who betray you,
if by no other act than living

as you betrayed them by dying. Good Deeds
will not stay with you in the silence

but separate themselves from you and represent you to God,
like a flack that cannot lie, but doesn't stay with you

like secrets do, true secrets, the ones you've never told
anyone, and no one knows, at least from your lips.

Secrets are your better friend. They'll go with you
to your grave, and stay there, close

to your heart even as it turns to dust.
They will not speak of you to others.

Like a dog, they're loyal even
when their master's gone.

Or like a leopard hunting you
in a dappled forest, they know you well

and are your welcome back
to the wild, your one true home;

they are what's most yours,
and the only thing the dead can keep.”

Prospero

Prospero's Arrival

WHEN God looked through a microscope,
as at a fingernail, at the continent,
almost invisible at its brave edge,
in motorcycle boots, a tiny man
a gun and cross and flag and staff and book
in his hands, like a cartoon Shiva, appeared.

And then this living green and formless land
began to set like gel; touched, it trembled
like a shimmering liquid that changes
as if by sudden magic to crystal;
a continent shattered into acres,
and forest meant paper and bison, cows.

Caliban, hidden deep in the bushes, stared.
Before the howling wilderness the man
almost despaired, but caught himself, let faith return.

He had a world to set straight.

Caliban Remembers His Enslavement

FATHER, fortune was your lady then,
spinning gears, meshing with the torque curve.

No tongue, all eyes,
I clung to you, too terrified to scream.

Filth swelled in me; your heart's cold logic flung
your muddy Triumph into Sunday's sun.

Dirt and smoke choked the air;
knobby tires gnashed like circular saws.

I drowned in noise and speed and fear and anger.
But you were in control—

the handlebars ran on the touch of *it-had-to-be-just-so*.

Caliban Watches the Storm

THE laundry flaps on the line,
but I am afraid to fetch it,
because it's getting dark.
I'd rather stay in than be a barnacle
or ape, or whatever this wind
might see to it I change into.

I watch the heads dotting the slick
water behind the rolling, spinning ship
that's come loose on all three axes,
a bonfire swinging on black waves,
the smell of smoke striking land
each time the storm blows shoreward.

What do I care what the old man
has in mind with this? He taught me
how to speak—then let me say
I will not serve him except he forces me.
What is happening to those men
in the water is all I need to know of him.

Secret Holdings

“PUT that down before you hurt yourself.”

A rope to hang by, a poisonous TV,
matches that set the garage on fire,
implements for acne, magazines for masturbation.

They are locked up in the house,
the gun too and the answers that I
keep snooping for, that are nailed
back behind the broom closet.
Thought is free; even Prospero
cannot read my mind;
his spirit listens, so I don't speak,
and my skin boils over.

I beat a dog to death with a stick,
and he fears me now, big enough to hurt him.

Prospero Questions Caliban

—*WHERE* have you been?

In the garage.

—What were you doing?

Building something.

—Building what, goddammit?

A thing like a box.

—Like a box?

Yes.

—Explain to me what it is.

It's like a picture frame;

it has four sides,

but it's not a box,

because it can't hold anything.

It's for a fort.

—What tools did you use?

A hammer, the middle-sized one,

the small saw, and some nails

from a jar. I found the wood.

—And what did you do with the tools when you were done?

I put them back where I found them.

—I'm going to check. What should I do if they're not there?

I think I put everything back straight.

Caliban Falls Asleep

THIS breathing nightmare's mine;
I clap my teeth until they crumble.

The sixth hour's sand has finally run,
and the tall machine that ruled this place

is changing to a changing thing again,
so strange and natural as to need forgiving.

It's time to talk now but I won't;
he's drowned his book and he can't make me;

he set war between the sea and sky
to show he could and profit from it.

His science pulled the spirit from the tree,
but my mess is better than his order.

He freed the air and let it sing,
but I will fetch no wood nor wash one dish.

Caliban Awakens

DOES a spirit slide, like a fish down a waterfall,
on the light that slants between these trees,
while I lie here lazily doing nothing at all,
when even the wind works, pushing leaves,
looking for someone who isn't here and so isn't me?
I stare at the sky but see nothing, accepting the lingering
perdition that gusts about my every act
and winds around my head, because he is my father.

Who am I? His heir in sin. Who is he? A suit of air,
a TV voice, he murders nations with his fingers,
his face rippling flaglike across the electronic wind.
What spirit calls me to ask him a question?
I should have something to ask him,
sitting high like Lincoln in his marble chair,
that would relax that stony stare; I should say what needs to be
and can't be said, on this private ending, in this imperial light.

Prospero on Television

IF the world's most powerful nation
acts like a pitiful, helpless giant,
the forces of anarchy will threaten freedom
throughout the world. We cannot stand by
and let a pair of drunks and a monster
plot to wreck my daughter's betrothal masque,
murder me, and ultimately destroy
the natural order of society.

I am your leader and will never ask
that you face this threat alone. Let me help
as we work to preserve our way of life.
Our stratospheric bombers need moral
as well as electronic guidance systems.
We need your hands to put two bullets in
every square foot of Caliban's jungle.
He said he'd rape Miranda and be glad—
but all our women must be protected.
Let us turn our hearts and minds to the task.
The Bible says that when God delivers
a foreign nation to us, we should spare
no breathing thing; so that their ways shall not
corrupt our ways. This cause is just, and we
cannot abandon our duty to lead
in the world's great struggle for democracy.

The Message to Caliban

OUR one fall sign
it was almost desert there
small brown leaves
so deep they dragged my feet

from Chinese elms
weekends of stuffing bags
and remembering I now sing
my thirtieth birthday song:

My father went to work for me
as long as I am old
he never asked a thing from me
and still I would not give.

I want to run, not hear,
but I am in a giant church,
birds flying before the stonework,
the tune closing its hands around me

bringing me back
to him walking toward me
in silence,
the message in his hands

being
the work of years
his words cathedral-sized
and in those hands, leaves.

Prospero's Secret

EVEN before my dear dark thing hardened
my great sympathy into caretaking,
I noticed that he had a tendency
to see his own small problems as great ones.
So, to prepare that disadvantaged child
for the world's many cruelties, the worst
of which is indifference, I chose to have
him learn of them from me, although I knew
it could cost me his love. But even so,
sometimes I relented; I remember
one time how he smiled at my chess set,
touching every piece and then demanding
that I show him how to play—I knew then
what I would do. One late night as he slept
I came home, after long hours of work,
and presented him with a hand-carved set,
a clock, and a new chess book, telling him,
as he sleepily held his gifts, that I
could not be more pleased if he would take them,
he asked if he really could, and thanked me,
then gently put the things aside, and turned
his back to me, and went to sleep again.
He did not then and never really has
known how much I am alert to each look
on his small face, or with how much slow care
I take the steps that I can to bring him
happiness sometimes, because I love him.

Caliban Uninvited

THE king's good and gallant ship that he thought lost floats and shines in the gentle-weathered harbor while about its spotless decks the amazed crewmen inspect each knot but know somehow that everything's in perfect shape for the old man who walks at last to the sand's edge, water glistening at his feet, and hesitates. His tired old brain (his each third thought is to renounce all this) works his voice, but no meaning words come at first, until he says what he most meant to tell me after all this time—goodbye.

—I wish you peace, I say, and think:
Your dreams of empire have worn you thin.
This game you won is the end of you.
Let the ocean lap its noises to you;
your alphabet can shape it into words, so that
this place may answer you, but it will hear me;
its spirits are not, as I am not, blessed
with a human shape. My tears then are nothing.
I will not take what you told me to heart
or be wise hereafter or seek for grace.
Let your wizard eyes look untroubled
on the smooth sea. You bastard, the wind you told
to blow you home will blow. Get on board.

Caliban Sees Prospero Is Old

A call sends me back to the pinches
he gave me until I sense myself, let my body sag.

I sink back into loose bags,
curled black hairs sprouting from the folds,

misshapen shoulders grown too strong
for a child's fears of the dark or a bully or some heavy load,

like what I think, or of being told to exercise my body and my soul.
The harm has not outlasted me. Once I changed,

before the waiter's dull eyes, "Ditto for dad" to "I want
what you ordered too, father," at his "Make sense!" that terrified.

How odd that I should need to ask forgiveness from a father
who is not here now, tall and awful

as a grandfather clock; no, not from him,
but from this diminished man who knows he takes too long

to say a sentence, that he is listened to politely, who is ignored.

Prospero after the Fall Term

THE old man licks thumb and finger
and pinches out the candle
inside a windowless room—
the good kind, now—
within an enormous building
whose halls are deep in leaves.
His shotgun is worn to beauty
and dusty like the books
he's managed to save,
stacked like sandbags about his cot.

Coyotes trot past the growth-shagged bricks
of the history and government departments
and down the hill past scrub brush
covered in fernlike, thorny, and climbing vines,
terraced with spider webs, poured on from above
with oak leaves shaped like bowls with spikes
along the rims. The man and a million spiders
sit in silence in the cloudy dark,
not reacting to the scent of smoke
from embers, that once were bonfires,
into which, in the mortared town,
hungry feral children stare.

Spain

Madrid, Ascension Day

THE zero with a thousand faces
has a look of anxious pleasure

noisy trains and silent crowds
in the metro: pedals on a fat black sow.

Go on to the upper places
of ties, rules, money, connections;

face the unknown with no weapons
but a prayer: *fuck you* will do.

Up the escalator, steep as a ladder
in the column of angels in winter clothes

to a dingy point of light, a cataract
of dirty air; the street is near.

The sun's underground
huge and purple in fiberglass;

put in money, put your hand
in its mouth, get a fortune.

You get what you pay for
a future for a quarter.

Smile: nobody's here and the sun
has an answer ready to shine you on.

The Apartment Block

THE streets at an angle
and the warehouse out of scale
from way up here don't look right—
almost upside down.

You can say: someone just had to ask
to the huge letters on the roof
across the plain of factory glass:
¿Justicia, dónde estás?

but things get turned around
said, cried, repeated, left unspoken,
and worn so smooth

that what's stupid becomes smart,
and smart, stupid, and so on
'til down looks like what it is, down.

Plazuela de las Ursulas

To Miguel de Unamuno

11-25-88

calle Bordadores, Salamanca

1.

BELOW fall dusk, the sky threatening rain,
the traffic's random patterns thread
through the narrow passage, where the convent's
old cornerstones cut across the sidewalk
and a famous house angles outward, students
moving quickly among the moving cars,
accidents avoided by accident.
To my left, bar Camelot's veranda
is open now to Friday's coming crowds:
Attractive, sure, they'll drink, smoke, laugh, and talk
filling Gastby and the rest of the bars
with their evanescent cigarette clouds
as fitting here as this house of the dead—
a guidebook mix of sacred and profane.
A juniper, and a jacaranda,
whose fractal bones, cold-bared, ascend like cracks
into the sky's stonework, half-screen the house
to the right, and its formal pride:
bas-relief shields and busts, angels, bunched
acanthus, curtains, an isolation
in time in this not timeless street's new role
as a nice place, with no neon intrusion.
The writer's black steel statue is bent
forward, and the cubist body bulks a stride,
its head and hands exposed, the shoulders hunched,
with its concentric stare set on the house
where he died entangled, and where his soul

was—that, if no more, affirm the two plaques
that memorialize this gold-stoned block
where sand is piled for some renovation.

2.

I should be drinking in one of these bars
or even praying in this church,
not standing silent in the cold and knowing
that I can't spare his words from the corruptions
of shuttling from one language to another
and one disastrous life to another
and from fame to failure and passion to need.
Like him, I think, I am proud and ashamed
to say: I want to know I will not die
and that my own personal flesh and bone
will not be leaving here soon to forget—
once darkness and the coldness of the stars
come—and walk back home and research
my shelf for answers, feeling I'm fooling
nobody, and that fear is what moves me.
No consolation in philosophy
existed for him but in his struggling
with how all a mind's conceptions are framed
within a backward cogito: I am,
therefore i think, diseased with consciousness
and knowing that mathematics has proven
that nobody can ever be certain
at once of the when and where of anything,
that proof is less than truth, that discovery
is alteration. Still I would believe some creed

speaks of angels to me in the sky
and towers and trees and of how to mourn
for something cast in steel and set on stone
and cataloged and readied for business
in some small town where I do translations.

3.

The terrace-topped church tower behind the statue
with its buttress corners
scooped concave by the urine
of dead and living passersby,
the fine house before the statue
and the Purísima dome
I cannot hold at once and in detail
nor can I the burning green of these oaks,
an hour of good music, words spoken as felt,
nor a strange attractor in the ironwork
and his interwoven quotations
from Aquinas to Bishop Blougram
(but not the Spanish Rapunzel
whose penny-broadside story still rhymes
among some who were born here—
she tied embroidery to her braids
so her love could climb the tower
only so high as to fall, when the threads broke,
to Death, who took him in her arms)
nor the tower top where unseen nuns hang clothes to dry,
nor raindrops in the hair of young women,
in their groups, who will sing drunk in the street tonight:
nor the countless lies

I tell myself—that I can find,
and even remember, something here,
or have, like these others, a life like music,
and have that ear I lack, and hear
the message running down the bloodline:
to look for answers is to look
for a way out: to find them is surrender.

4.

Is it ephemeral embroidery, a line
between his sentence
aunque no nos oyese, que sí nos oiría
and the losses of translation,
that seems to hold him here?
In the green, a great noise,
the unseen birds as loud as fire:
Here the dead are dead and the living dying
and the statue's always open zero eyes
are only like what, one old night, closed,
protein braids unraveling, blood gone slack
as he went out;
millions at his going slowed
and stopped and changed their motion
in nerve and flesh and bone
before his body was carried down the stairs,
his sentence over, no coldness or darkness there,
the metaphor to be
like a key in his pocket,
another witness silenced,
another that though he were not heard, would be,

his threat

When the sun sets, burning
the secular gold that embroiders you
with the language of the eternal herald
say that I was.

on its way to that plaque. Birds,
their sound fire, say they are
as I cross Embroiderers street, holding out a hand
and feeling rain begin to fall.

Divorced

A few rented rooms, one bare floor,
a sink spits air, a light blinks out;
stacked plates and some toys are her link
to a future she hopes is less unkind;
this is forever, until December,
a shrink's pill bottles on the counter.

Her girl's crayon marks on the wall
the TV glowing Martianlike
now she struggles to stay ready
against sinking into waiting
forever for the getaway;
her sadness is her reason not to stay.

No one will live here tomorrow,
and no one will be coming back.
Maria, I hope you get through
this grim customs, moving boxes
open on the floor, and you mind
taxed with all you must keep or leave behind.

By a Painting in the Prado

LET me see him, people walking by,
his jeweled cope and gilded sky,
his golden chair and each gold tower
ornate as ostentoria: Let me see the gold
a gem-haloed virtues, the crozier and miter.

His fleshy hands and face
show from a heavy case
of velvet robes and woolen cope
threaded heavily with gold.
Embroidered martyrs look on Hope.

Jeronimite seamsters squinted years
through needles' eyes to pass—it appears
one moment...the heaven's wealth the saint
saw and I would keep—but already I see the gold
as a shop's convention. Time lavishes sight with paint.

He loved the church he built
and shares Klimt's lovers' guilt.
These riches are still pure as fire:
the encircling robes of gold
and the textures of desire.

In the Gardens of La Granja de San Ildefonso

PAST the rows of bronze gods
and the fountains the attendants

turned on for the crowds,
I followed one channel, stopping among trees

by a small dam where a wire mesh filtered
the water slipping over,

leaving a bed of green and tiny gold
husks of seedpods in perfect quiet.

A frog slid its face up
through the surface, looked, and disappeared,

near the eddy
where water striders gathered.

Food must have drifted there, under
the mantle of their interwoven legs,

to hold them there, and me
with them, past closing time,

where once a mad king
had a copy of a palace made,

revolving in his altered soul
a confluence of pines and time

into an embarrassment
because this place worked as planned:

His keepers had to break its spell
and lead him back where everyone was waiting.

Leaving Silos

RAIN began to fall on cobblestone
outside the monastery

pharmacy, where alembics, walls of jars, and panes
of broken stained glass

kept their silence as we passed through.
On the bus back

through the narrow valley,
clouds drifted into hillsides and puddles made wings

as our wheels rolled over.
Then, our bodies and breath warmed the bus,

and on a fogged window
a handprint shone

Coy Mistress

found poem

DON'T pass by this advertisement
if you are a true hot stuff girl.
Get rid altogether of sweet false words
and all the big-ass wolves.
Abstain those who usually play hard to get!
I'm tired of looking at the cheesecake
and watching the blue movies
and having my five-knuckled fun!
For dear life, I've got lead in my pencil
and I wish to get it into your pants
as if there is no tomorrow as soon as possible.
I am seeking an easy make-woman
who takes pity on this miserable life
and wants to share my favorite wet dreams
like smakers, all around the world
and to cop a bird, to dip in the bush and like
to screw, to cornhole, and all the others
can you imagine. Ask for Lorenzo.
While you are waiting for Mr. Right,
have so many Mr. Wrongs as you can—
are you saving it for the worms?

California Blues

NOTHING'S better than a white Cadillac
to die in. The radio was still on;
fragrant leather pleats puckered around him,
who'd have some real pain, later,
but he smiled then in boozy comfort.
The dashboard gleamed more than was right,
going out of focus, chrome levers shining.
He held the bottle against his skinny chest.
The voice that carried him through the black smoke
of coal and oil and all his pain was gone. Close above,
six angels sliced his cheatin' heart with knives.
The scald of the open wound was soothing,
as blood and gin flowed away together,
Hank's goodbye. Considering where he went,
I hope I won't ever be seeing him.

He'll never sing with Roy in heaven
that geek-in-black voice is everywhere
flowing from radios, singing sweet
of what it's no use talking about,
like coming back to California blue,
a pain too full to wish it would end—
the soul would have no less—Roy's an angel now,
because he had the sense to do what he loved,
a man whose song clears the ether and me
of what's wrong, and rolls on, a digitized lament
that finds me in this empty club in Spain
that will look better with the lights out tonight,
waiting out a storm, dirty, tired, drinking,
and suddenly at the start of the trip back home.

Sinner



poems by Eric Howard

Eric Howard is an editor who lives in Los Angeles,
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