

A HOMAGE TO HENRY

*To the memory of John Berryman (alias Henry Pussy-cat)
on the 20th anniversary of his death, January 1972*

(Five Movements. Seven Pages)

I Instead of a Dream Song

These Songs are not meant to be understood you understand.

They are only meant to terrify & comfort.

O John.

That night I introduced you to your Dublin audience,

I didn't know, John, didn't recognise

You were my sole soul-spiriting soul-spirit.

My own dark destinating hadn't started.

Or even stretched itself. Or scratched. Or purred.

O Pussy-cat, Pussy-cat Henry. Now I know

Why you selected your sure-footed dark

Indifferent creature of the night to curl your anguish

To seeming gaiety. Wild sonorous madness. Dream Songs.

Yes. Now I know, my chosen journey sure-footing,

That mirth and terror will be my accomplices

For life. As yours. As Henry's. Shall I summon you

From your devouring dark to toast my health?

Or sickness? Or my dread intent

Of darkly destinating (blithe as you)

With the same spectre that enticed you, spliced you

To split-hollered laughter till death stilled you?

No, John. No.

I'll *sing*, instead. A sturdy song

My mother sang to me (and to my pussycat)

During my furbished childhood's kitchen-emberings.

- *O, no John. No John. No John. No.*

II You Did You Did

"I cannot tell a lie." - George Washington, aged six,
Facing his father's wrath with emblematic truth.
"I did it with my little axe." But you, John, you
Had no one to transfer your guilt to. You, aged twelve,
Seeing your father dead. Self-calibered. Unaccusing.
Odd the distance frantic. You accused. Embraced him finally.

A bridge you chose. Above a frozen river.
Ice-packed with isolation. Oh, Lord Hamlet.
He would forgive your earlier hesitancy.
Even your protestation that life sags. And literature.
Especially great literature. And Henry also.
Henry, whose gripes, whose songs, whose sad hilarity outlives you.

I didn't. And I didn't. So you wrote.
Mock-orchestrating (two days earlier) your leap.
Your frantic leap to frozen immortality.
Armed with a Spanish blade for fearsome slashing,
Before your icy access to your father's bourne.
Where he, like Hamlet's father, might a tale unfold.

You wouldn't. And you wouldn't. But you did. You did.
That gauntlet dawn in January. Your spectacles self-cased.
Your watch in time with your descent, ascent, to territories
You'd dream-songed of, like Hamlet. Humble. Terrified.
You couldn't face your students, you'd lamented.
(Without an insight russet-crystal as the dawn?)

II You Did You Did (cont'd)

Weep for life-culled Henry. He is dead.

Weep for Hamlet. Weep for me and you.

Who live to concede victory to the grave.

His face so grave in Dublin that time.

That sad hot night in June. Basting his scary Dream Songs.

Oh, drink up eisel. Eat a crocodile. All gnashing teeth and all.

And all he wanted was to be.

To be. Like Hamlet. Everyman.

III Two of a Kind

Hamlet and Henry. Henry and Hamlet. Ha.
Dublin. Easter Saturday. No lilac springing yet.
But Christ is rising. And to-morrow, Sunday,
Christ is Risen, church-going Christians will proclaim
At church in Dublin, Denmark, Holy Russia,
Where the divided heart is least divided. O Chekhov. Pushkin. Mikhail Lermontov,

For whom a ship, wrecked recently, was later named.
Eight days I paced those decks eight years ago,
Exiling back (New World to Old) to selfhood, otherness,
With my Atlantic fellow-voyagers. One from Tennessee
(Composer, cellist, jazz-man) I shared my stanzas with,
Soul-spiriting also Will Shakespeare, Berryman.

Who worded wisely, jauntily, of life.
And love. And loss. And human striving, failure.
Still voyaging, eight years later, still soul-spiriting,
I re-read *Hamlet*, Berryman's *Dream Songs*.
And weep for all who weep for all who weep
Frail fellow-voyagers.

Hamlet and Henry. Henry and Hamlet. Ha.
Two of a kind, they worded, word-wise, desolate,
Towards their lost fathers forfeited and far.
Far far from farthest farthest comprehension.
We must be patient, but I cannot choose but weep
For them with them for loss of loved ones. Innocence.

cont'd on page 5

Two of a Kind (cont'd)

Perhaps God should be curbed.

And Poets.

Perhaps the thud of love required by God

Scuds to me even now denying, crying

For Hamlet, Henry. Oh, I word words. Words. Words.

And cling. And fling my love to distances.

Our Father Who

IV Swing High Sweet Chariot

Of Hemingway, *that cruel and gifted man*,
John Berryman (not cruel, but gifted) elegied,
As for a brother. - *Brother-Suicide*, it transpired,
Ten bridging-winters later, when Henry plummeted
His own half-century-and-seven years to iced oblivion.
- Oblivion from his dark woes he humbly sought.
Dark-destinating voyager.

Save us from shotguns and fathers' suicides.
So Henry prayed. Still preying on his father's death
By his own trigger-finger. Triggering dark dreams, memories,
For Henry Pussy-cat of what life should be. Isn't.
Alas all all alasing lovers.
All all alasing lasses.
Lacerating.

Some lacerations likewise I reveal,
Expositing dark death, dark suicide.
But I hide. I hide my triggered hurt.
The distance distancing all fathers, sons,
From consecrating union.
Oh for another chance, I sing.
And cling to grassy distances.

When on a swing I curved my son to startled freedom.

Merriment.

V And Again Henry

Alone breasting the wronging tide mad Henry mused
On suicide. On such as Sylvia Plath,
Her final face a geography of grief.
Self-ovened, lithesome *Lady Lazurus*.
Her final suspiration strategied as Auschwitz childrens'.
In naked obscene procession shuffling, obedient

To S.S. orders. Suffer the little children
To come unto me. Death blows hot. Then cold.
All cold as Sylvia. As Simone Weil. As hapless Henry.
Now vanished also. Like a lily-of-the-valley,
He dangled in the breeze of dangled thought.
Before his final plunge to selfhood, otherness.

Lily-of-the-valley.

A wondrous-sounding name.

(*Muguet* in French. More wondrous-sounding even.)

How language filters through the Poet's sludge
Of hapless grief. Compelling hapless utterance.
Alone breasting the wronging tide mad Henry mused.

Alone I muse on Henry. Henry's Muse.