

Pronouncing Borges

BÖRK'ess ?

by Gerald Locklin

lōk KLIN'?

as Wormwood: 67

MAYBE PYNCHON IS RIGHT

#09-38-35

There was something familiar about the number,
but it was months before it came to me

that my child support payment number
was the same as my gym locker combination.

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*****  
P*R*O*N*O*U*N*C*I*N*G  B*O*R*G*E*S  
*****BY*****  
***G*E*R*A*L*D  L*O*C*K*L*I*N****  
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MAYBE IT'S TIME TO RE-COMMISSION THE QUEEN MARY

I tuned into the sportalk show
just in time to hear,
"I agree with you completely;
it's time professional athletes
began deporting themselves with class."

VECTORS

I just received some poems back from a young poet-editor,
the same one who once told me
that I had a definite style
although it happened to be one that repulsed him.

He said of this batch
that there were two he liked best,
that they were the best writing I had ever done
(had he been researching the little-mag archives of the
University of Wisconsin?)
or that he at least preferred the direction
in which I was now going.

Unfortunately I had written those poems years ago
and they do not resemble my present lamentable efforts.

What's more, there was something vaguely suicidal
about them --
was that the direction to which he was referring?

Anyway Ron Koertge and I got chatting over the phone
about directions in general:
would you, for instance, rather be
a poet who had come from a good direction
and was now going nowhere at all
or one who was coming from nowhere and going nowhere also
or one who was riding off in all directions at once
or one who was on his way from Lodi, California
to Eloi, Arizona?

We pretty much concluded that,
as many others, Bukowski most recently,
have pointed out --
the only critical direction
is the one that leads you to the typewriter.

AVID SPORTS FAN

when she finally managed to drag him to the theatre
he was disappointed
that all you could get at half-time was champagne
and startled to discover
that the second act began
without a kickoff, center jump, or face-off.

EVOLUTION

There are only two things a man can do
that a cat would like to but cannot.

I mean there are many things a man
can do that a cat cannot,
like working and going to school
and signing a marriage contract
but cats are not interested in doing any of these things.

There are only two things a man can do
that a cat would like to but cannot:

open a refrigerator and open a can.

THE EXISTENTIAL BULL

He was bored by it all.
Impervious to pic and banderilla,
he scorned capote and muleta.
Bravery was not in his vocabulary.
He considered cojones as instruments
of love not war.
As far as death was concerned,
he couldn't have cared less one way or the other.
Occasionally he glanced into the crowd
as if in search of what all the excitement was about.
He seemed to find something comical
about the way the matadors were dressed.
Can bulls yawn? I'd swear that this one did.

He would have been a hit at the Deux Magots.
In fact, when I checked his registration number,
I discovered that his name was Albert.

LIKE DAUGHTER/LIKE FATHER

when my daughter was in kindergarten
her teacher, a Christian,
sent her to the school nurse
because she had forgotten to put on underpants.

this morning, on the first day
of my poetry workshops at a local elementary school,
the regular teacher,
the sort who is strict with kids because
he's scared of them,
gestured me urgently to him
as they were working on the obligatory wish-poem.
"I thought I'd better tell you," he whispered,
"that when you bent over to pick up the chalk,
the students in the back could see your shorts."
"Yeah?" I said, thinking they were lucky not to
have been treated to the full-flush spectacular
of the crack of my ass.
"Yes," he said, "they picked up on it right away.
"Well, look," I said, "there isn't really much
I can do about it right now is there?"

"Well," he said, "for God's sake, don't bend over!"

he wasn't real thrilled either
at the character, Fat Annie, who kept occurring
in the boys' poems.
I thought she was a new cartoon character
that I just hadn't heard of,
but it turned out she was a little girl in the class.
I felt bad about that one myself,
and I'm sure I didn't do a hell of a lot
for her appreciation of literature.

in fact, I'd like to apologize to her right now,
even though the guys did come up with some
imaginative workings of her into their poems.
one wrote, "I wish I had a motorcycle with five engines
which would be just big enough
to flatten Fat Annie."
and another dreamed, "I am a wide receiver
for the Oakland Raiders
and I go deep for a pass from Kenny Stabler
and it reaches me in the corner of the end zone
and I jump up and catch it
and flatten Fat Annie."

I also want to apologize to my daughter
for bringing up the embarrassment of the underpants.
one day perhaps the pen will be in the other hand.

FIRST OF THE MONTH

this is the day the town drunk
gets his check from his daughter

and all the day in the bar
he's talking about the big steak

that he plans to buy
and asking everybody how you cook one

he says his wife always did the cooking
(although everyone knows he's been separated

for ten years) and so he gets one hundred
quite similar sets of instructions

for the broiling of a steak and finally
he falls asleep in a booth

an hour before the grocery store closes
but before then one of his cronies

happens in and has lost his job
and he says he could have it back

if he apologized but he says
he never has kissed ass and never will

and tony says you better get that job
back you have got five kids to support

and the guy says i've always supported my kids
and i always will, and tony says me too.

THE EDUCATION OF A MISTRESS

I was reading an article in Esquire
entitled "Class -- some have it, some don't,"

and then I wandered in to the bathroom
and there hanging from the shower-curtain rod

were two of my three shirts
(the third was on my back)
and they were recently laundered and dripping dry.

That meant that even though you are not speaking to me
and have been sleeping on the couch the past three nights,

you did my shirts along with the other laundry.
That is the most class you have shown

in the six years we've been together,
especially when one considers

that you must have had to overcome the temptation
to shrink them in the dryer.

We do have a ways to go though, don't we, dear:
you might have mentioned the split in the seat of
my pants.

DON'T REST ON YOUR LAURELS

God, I couldn't begin to count
how many times I heard that phrase as a kid.

It was a favorite of my father.
When he'd discern me lingering a bit too rosily
in the afterglow of some minor achievement,
he would swiftly endeavor to rescue me
from the jaws of complacency:

"You have every right to be proud of yourself ...
BUT DON'T REST ON YOUR LAURELS!"

It's a funny phrase actually -- so Grecian and semipoetic
-- so unlike my poems,

which he probably wouldn't consider much of an accomplishment anyway -- my mother certainly doesn't -- though, who knows, he might surprise me, he died before I began to publish, and he'd always gone along with everything else I perpetrated.

Another funny thing, though, is that he had no laurels, in the common usage, to rest upon himself. Please please please, don't think I'm putting him down for that. I went without nothing. He suffered my mother for my sake. Most importantly, he always made it clear to me that I was loved by him.

He was the most lovable man I ever knew. All my aunts envied my mother. Men with fingernails that would never come clean wept at his funeral. I wept for three days running and have not altogether stopped.

In truth, however, he had never striven for fame or money or creative excellence or a much better job or anything else that one would ordinarily associate with "laurels." I don't mean that he didn't work hard. He worked much harder than I can imagine (much harder, it goes without saying, than I do) and, a handyman, he did a lot for others in his off-hours.

But he did sit around his share also -- at ballgames and Sunday family dinners and in the bars with his friends and on Monday night with me, playing chess and watching "I Love Lucy" and Brian Donleavy in "Foreign Intrigue." He sipped Imperial blend backed by water.

No, listen, please understand, I'm not putting him down for that. I wish I were sitting on his lap right now.

And I realize that by the time I knew him he had come back from the war, a man weakened by diabetes,

and I know that his advice was sound. I know that people when they retire, for instance,

have a tendency to die,
and you don't have to travel far to find examples
of people who are resting, not even on their laurels,
but solidly on the seat of their pants.

Still, why, when I spend a few hours with my kids,
should I find myself asking,
"Is this another insidious way of resting on one's laurels?"

Old man,
(which is what I think we called each other)
I realize that I teach shamelessly few hours
and that I have some of my summers off,

but still
sometimes I think I need a rest.

CHARLIE BURCH

Vodka and root beer?

I've mixed vodka with just about everything imaginable,
not just your tonics and juices,
but coke and milk and tap water,

and if holy water were the only thing available
I'd probably mix it with that.

But vodka and root beer?

That is an affront to human innocence,
to our memories of childhood-as-Eden,
to merry-go-rounds and bicycles and fishing poles.
Not even Dylan Thomas would drink vodka and root beer.

Smirnoff, your boys on Madison Avenue
have gone too far this time.
We're a corrupt people, to be sure
(what people isn't either decadent or hypocritical?)
but we haven't hit rock bottom.

THE FIFTY-FIRST WAY TO LEAVE YOUR LOVER

Chopped up in her flower pots.

THE HOLIDAYS

I used to use her absence to chase strange pussy.
This year, for some reason which I haven't yet discerned,
I call my kids instead and take them to a movie.

I have become a connoisseur of children's fare:
Sinbad, d'Artagnan, Bugs, Old Yeller --
a strange eclectic new mythology.
Already I find myself borrowing images:

ice caves and lava flows and bats and belfries
and the Mississippi River.
This ain't all bad, my mental retina being ordinarily
a blank grey screen.

As with adult films, it is seldom that you find
a children's film poorly photographed.
Too often, though, the story line,
not to mention the accuracy to history or the original,
is sacrificed to brevity and the excellence of the
special effects.

I also have bad news for you who may hate Disneyland
as much as I do -- the Disney films are still among
the best.

Not only the animated classics, but even those
starring Fred MacMurray and Ken Berry.

I guess they can simply afford to hire talent.
And, surprisingly, the socio-political slant
is no further right than the old left.

What really scares me, though,
is that I haven't been missing the pussy.
Half-pint of vodka in my side-pocket,
a warm body under each arm,
hot buttered popcorn transporting me to my own youth,

I'm ashamed to admit that I find myself quite happy.

WHALE POEM

I read this afternoon
a book of poems all about whales.
They were well written poems
and they seemed to be getting at something,
but significance, like beauty,
is largely lost on me.
Furthermore my attention span for symbolic whales
is even shorter than that for the literal variety.

Still, I wondered why I'd never written a whale poem.
I only live a few seconds from the ocean
and every February the whales cruise past
on their way to mate in Baja.
I think that Baja would be a nice place to mate,
especially if you were as big as a whale
and didn't have to worry about federales or banditos.

Anyway, last year I took my kids on a whale-watching
cruise,
but the whole process of spout and parabola
only takes a couple of seconds
and I could barely locate the damned,
protectively colored mammals in that time myself,
let alone get my kids' heads wrenched in the right
direction.

So little matters though: that night my boy
told his mother he'd seen a thousand whales,
just as in the mountains
he never fails to see one million bears.

And when my daughter was in second-grade
she took to reading voraciously
even "adult" books like Gatsby
that I would give her
and which she would skim,
comprehending a lot more than you would think,
although she was no doubt doing it
only to make her old man happy.

So I gave her the unabridged Three Musketeers
and when she made it through that in no time flat
I handed her Moby Dick.
Even I now think that I was probably a little crazy
at that time, in and of the time, of that stage
of my love for my daughter,
but I was also working on a principle
that has guided a part of my teaching:
that once a person has made it through

a Ulysses or The Sound of the Fury
he can be confident with any book that he encounters.

Moby Dick was the last straw though.
She ploughed through it all right,
and she still reads lots of books,
but she won't touch anything I recommend.
I have to pretend I've never heard of the Bröntes
or Jane Austen,
lest they be consigned to that Index
at the head of which sits Queequeg.

Well, what do I know about whales anyway.
Nothing.
My whale poem will have to be imaginative as hell.
Mauve whales, whales that speak French,
whales that personify Satan or Gore Vidal.
The Surrealistic Whale of Salvador Locklin.
Only Fellini will be qualified to make
an art-film of my whale poem.
It will employ discarded footage
from all the films that Gregory Peck has ever made,
because he's always seemed to have a harpoon up his ass.

Both book and film will out-dull Moby Dick.

GORE

I took my kids, one nine, the other six,
to the bullfights yesterday.
They loved them.
They didn't cry or look away or cover their eyes.
They wanted to see everything
and they were especially pleased
that there was more going on
than at the baseball game we'd attended the night before.

In the car on the way
I'd given them a little Death-in-the-Afternoon précis,
so they wouldn't make the mistake of seeing it
as man against bull.
It didn't take them many bulls to realize
how difficult it is to bring it all off right,
what with the variables of wind and sun
and the jumping and hooking of the bull
and the impatience of the crowd.
Not a single ear was cut all day --
atrocious killing spoiled a couple of outstanding faenas.

The kids seemed to understand the role of the picadors better than many of the fans, how it is necessary to lower the head of the bull without, however, bleeding the animal into a stupor. They rooted for the bull when it was right to root for him, against the horses, for instance, and the fat-clown banderilleros.

Afterwards they wanted to know when we could go again. I hope it will be soon. I hope they will go on, with or without me, to Mexico City and Pamplona and Madrid. I hope they will come to associate the bullfights, as I have, with good women and great friends. I think of Vince Prestianni and I at our very first bullfight in Nogales cursed with the rain but blessed with Carlos Arruza. I think of Koertge and I driving from Tucson to Juarez and back to see Jaime Bravo, Jaime Rangel, and the Numero Uno of that season, Paco Camino, and so tired by morning that we were hallucinating on fatigue alone. I hope they will love Hemingway.

No, they didn't mind the snorting and the gore, the snapping-to-attention of the bull as his spine was severed, but, on a gentler note,

my son, insecure as to whether he enjoys the full affection of his older sibling, asked at one point:
"When the bull dies, is his sister sad?"

PRONOUNCING BORGES

Everybody asks me what I think of him.

First thing first.

I don't intend to read a word until I have perfected the pronunciation of his name.

BODY AND SOUL

At the age of 35, a strange inversion:

Physical wounds no longer heal.
Overextend an elbow, knee, or neck,
and, sure, with or without surgery,
you'll walk, ski, fuck again,
but never without a little discomfort.
You begin to become a walking palimpsest of devolution.

Whereas, with hurt feelings, the opposite is true.
Words that would have got thee to a nunnery at fifteen,
now leave you yawning with forgetfulness
by morning.

If everyone I meet tomorrow tells me I'm an asshole,
(almost everyone today did)
it won't cost me an hour's sleep.

In fact, I'd like to philosophize herewith at greater
length,
but I'm just too goddamn tired.

At last it's true,
the double lie we brazened forth as kids,
that sticks and stones may break our bones
but words will never hurt us.

TWO FOR THE ROAD

Someone said that The African Queen
was going to be on,

and someone else said
that they were probably hoping
audiences would think it was
a gay Roots.

Later that day someone asked John Owens,
who had been drinking for 48 hours,
when he was going to go home to bed,

and he said, "Noon,"

and someone said, "Noon tomorrow?"

and he said, "Of course not: Noon Midnight."

ONE DAY THE LIGHT FLASHED ABOVE MICHELANGELO'S HEAD AND HE EXCLAIMED, "BIBLICAL THEMES -- WHAT A GREAT IDEA FOR A CHAPEL!"

I had an insight today.
I also had one yesterday,
which means I am now five years ahead
of my lifetime batting average.

I had written down an idea for a poem
and I came across it and started to work on it
and then I stopped and said to myself,
"You've already written this poem."
I thought, "I bet I wrote it when I was half-cocked
and then I took it to my drawer in my office
and I forgot to cross out the note to write it."
But then I thought, "No, I bet I didn't write it;
I bet I just worked it all out in my head
and then never got around to writing it down,
but I had it so polished in advance
that it seems as if I've already written it."

Or maybe I wrote it two years ago
and when I jotted this most recent note
I had already forgotten the version
that is probably languishing on some editor's bidet.

Anyway, the insight was not that my mind is a muddle,
I've known that since kindergarten,
the point is that this probably accounts for all
of Rubens' nudes and Degas' dancers and Goya's
atrocities.

It wasn't that they were trying to create a
characteristic style,
a theme, a mood, a subject, a trademark --
it was just that they forgot they'd already
painted the same goddamn picture three hundred times.

Honest-to-God, I can just see ol' Rembrandt,
a little in his cups of Bols gin, muttering,
"I think I'll wander back to the studio
and see if I can't whip up a chiaroscuro for a
change."

BURN

"I'll never be like that!" he vowed.
"It should be easy not to be so typical."

He didn't realize how typically young he was.

vito, i hope you become rich and famous,
and especially i hope you remain happy as a kinetic artist,
because i have no doubt that, should you ever feel like it,
you could still write rings around my ass.

THAT WAS THE WEEK THAT WAS

Between Monday and Sunday my car required
a tune-up, clutch cable, generator, battery, and brakes.
On Wednesday a magazine,
which had a year ago accepted five of my poems,
went under.
On Tuesday and again on Friday
I was too hungover to keep down solid food.
My sex life: well, let's put it this way,
I would have considered it group sex
if a second person was involved.

All in all, however, the week was a success:
I had managed to miss the t.v. remake of Dark Victory.

ONE OF THE MOTHERS OF MY KIDS

She says she always wanted to be a gangster's gun-moll,
but the three men she has lived with
were a struggling young painter,
a struggling young musician,
and a struggling young professor.

Here's one of the many things
she did to rattle my cage:

when we eloped to Mexico she left a note for her parents
identical to the one the maniac forces
the kidnapped girl to leave in John Fowles' novel,
The Collector.
She told me about it halfway down the Pacific Coast
Highway
and I almost went over the center divider.

Now she assures her friends that I'm a paranoid.

MAIN STREET, SEAL BEACH

it's gray outside grandma's candies.
i don't think grandma owns it anymore.
i heard she sold out after last st. patrick's day
when the police clubbed her on the head.

i didn't know her.
i just remember she was very fat.
i knew a girl once worked for her
and didn't like her.

i don't know john
of john's food king supermarket.
i think he sold out too.
the prices are high but the cashier's lines are short.

i don't know walt of walt's wharf
or vinzant of vinzant's varieties.
i heard he's selling also.
i don't know babe of babe's shoe repair.

i've met clancy of clancy's bar twice
and both times he has tried to squash my hand.
mostly his kid runs the bar now.
the irisher is owned by someone of central european
extraction.

i know sonny but his liquor store is now called
l and w supply.
i know kay, but her pre-school
is called the peppermint.

they all deserve novels,
all the old-towners.
but i don't think any of them will be here long.
the street is torn up and a sign says: coming seal
beach mall.

this was what the american dream could have been,
the neighborliness of a small town without
narrowmindedness.
good schools, good-times, old-timers, kids.
a can of beer, volleyball on the beach, parties, privacy.

shop by shop, the money will move in.
main street will be another "old town" in quotation marks.
they'll make the little people offers that they
can't refuse
and raise the rents to what i can't afford.

these aren't the people i can write about.
they have their chroniclers, the guys on the bestseller
lists.
america, the indians at least demanded beads.

THE POETRY CONTEST

A few years ago a friend and former student of mine
who is now chairman of a local high school English
department
was asked by a citizen's group to find a judge for
their poetry contest.

He got in touch with me.

Most of the poems were predictable expressions
of first love, patriotic ardor, and ecological concern.

But one young math student
had gained access to the school-district computer.
He fed it whatever Alpo those things devour
and turned it loose.

It came up with a lot of great lines.
The one that's always stuck with me
was, "The bird flies backwards into the barn."

Within that congestion of circuitry
lurked the soul of a Rimbaud.

Programmed, you say?

It was much less programmed
than the minds of the high school students.

If I could have wooed that computer
I would have married it.
It would have been my Sylvia Plath.
Our life together would of course have ended tragically.
Since it would easily have out-imagined me,
I would have been forced to drive it to suicide.

At any rate, I awarded he/she/it First Prize.

I haven't been asked to judge a contest since then.

WHERE HAS LOVE GONE?

Something has gone out of our romance, love:
we don't stay mad at each other anymore.

Take last night, for instance, when I stumbled
in drunk in the middle of the night
and peed all over the toilet seat,

and then you got up for a sleepy wee-wee yourself
and of course arose from the seat soaking wet

and I was furious because you were ostentatiously
towelling off your behind

when you should have been listening to my recitation
of the evening's bar-room combats,

so I said, "Fuck you and your petty charades,"
and I went to sleep.

Six years ago you wouldn't have spoken to me for weeks,
but tonight when I came home
you had dismissed it all for what it was,
a comically intoxicated episode.

I'm afraid we've been together much too long.

BILL

He was a teacher in the drama department,
an assiduous bodybuilder,
and a rather obvious homosexual.
What primarily distinguished him, however,
was his cock.

Here is how it came to my attention:
a friend and I used to work out
a couple of times a week at the faculty health club,
and Bill would usually be in there
busting his ass to add to the already heightened
definition
of his pecs and treps.
He was a genuinely nice guy
and we would always have some compliment for him,
as we sat huffing and puffing
from the strain of the previous set,
on the breakneck pace he set himself.

One afternoon, though, my friend came out of the showers and said to me, "Did you see that?"

"See what?" I said.

"Bill's cock!"

"For Christ's sake, I don't stare at guy's cocks -- what do you take me for?"

"Gerry, pretend you're looking for your shampoo and go back in and look at it."

"You're crazy," I said, and I continued to resist, but he continued to insist, until finally I decided that the simplest thing would be to conform with his ridiculous demand.

It was the eighth wonder of the world, a meathook, a king cobra, an inverted replica of George Foreman's
forearm.

What havoc the guy must have wreaked upon his lovers.

We still speak of it,
that banyan root, that howitzer, that missile silo,
that bludgeon, John Henry's hammer,
the creature from the black lagoon.

We speak of it loudly but reverentially
on drunken evenings in crowded silken cocktail lounges,

and, within minutes,
we find we have the place to ourselves.

Have they left us from embarrassment,
or are they racing down the freeway,
hellbent for Long Beach?

THE NASTIEST GLAND

Nearly all my friends have prostate trouble.
There is absolutely no reason why I shouldn't also --
I'm obese, have bad posture and a frequently sprained
sacroiliac, drink to excess, and have bad attitudes
toward sex.

But I don't have prostate trouble,
and it has begun to affect my comradely relationships.

I see them whispering to each other behind inverted
palms,
"What's fat-ass's secret? Why doesn't he share it
with us?"

Who does he think he is anyway?

and having read at an early age a biography of dylan
thomas,

he decided it would be sexy as hell to be a poet.

as other men do a hundred pushups,
he wrote a hundred poems a day.
he submitted them to magazines
in batches of two hundred.
at first his attempts to become published
met with disappointment.
but after he founded his own mimeo press,
which specialized in the publication of other editors,
that all changed overnight.
he also wrote essays which redefined poetry
as precisely the sort of stuff he wrote himself.
he wanted to give the school of verse he had launched
(although the terms "school" and "verse" were customarily
anathema to him)
a name, but most of the good names were taken.
he settled for "prong poetry."

soon he had published hundreds of thousands of poems
in tens of thousands of chapbooks.
practice only makes perfect
if it has something promising to start with,
but he did improve a little.
it was no longer possible
not to take him seriously.
he had become a poet by attrition.
he disposed of his scattered critics
with ad hominem volleys: they were fairies
or stuffed shirts or jealous or profs.
young poets who were bad to begin with
became even worse in imitation of him.
he became the token entry from the avant-garde
in trade anthologies.

he figured prominently in contemporary literary histories.

now all he had to fear was the judgement
of readers he would be too dead to manhandle.

ATRIUM-SCHMATRIUM

my girlfriend tells me that colette
said too great a concentration of human beings
makes plants suffocate.

i find the converse to be likewise true.

POEM COMPOSED MARCH 24, 1977

I was reading just now
a summation of the 1960's,
the sort of four-fold list of generalizations
which since they are more or less true
as well as easy to remember

appeal to me as a teacher

although less so as a writer

and which I would certainly hate to be a victim of

but anyway it suddenly occurred to me
that it is almost 1980!

Soon everyone will be composing
poems, newspaper articles, and special features
for network television magazines
in summation of the 1970's, replete with hedged
predictions for the 1980's.

As usual I will be scooped.

I mean, I've been so busy trying to make sense
out of the 1960's
that I hadn't really noticed that the '70's were
taking place.

But I do want to jot down the title of this poem
in testimony that I was the first person to notice
that it was almost 1980.

P.S. My prediction for the 1980's
is we will stop worrying about the violence on t.v.,
whether grades are too high,
and if, at Cana, Christ changed water into wine or
grape juice.

FATHER CONFESSOR

Don't ask me why,
but this young guy came to me for advice:
"You won't repeat this, will you?"
"No," I said.
"And you won't ever write about it?"
"I might if it's interesting," I said,
"but I'll leave your name out of it."
"But I don't want you to write it!"
"Then don't tell me."
"But I want to tell you,
but I dōn't want you to write about it."
"You're a spoiled only child," I said;
"unfortunately I'm one also."

"It's about sex," he said.
"My field is Modern Lit," I said.
"The girl I'm living with can't get an orgasm."
"Use your imagination," I said,
"and if that doesn't work try your finger."
"That seems like masturbation," he said.
"It's love," I said. "All of it is love."

"Well," he continued, "she wants to come
with me in her and she says I don't last long enough."
"How long do you last?" I asked.
"I have trouble lasting much more than a couple of hours."
"Excuse me," I said, "but I've been drinking to excess
of late and I'm afraid my hearing is failing.
Do you think you could repeat that?"
He did.

At that moment I knew how the Red Sox scouts must have
felt
the first time they saw Ted Williams swing a bat.
"Kid," I said, "I just might be able to arrange
some business opportunities for you
that would help you put yourself through college."

But he was head-over-heels in love
with the broad who wanted mutual orgasms,
so I sent him back to her
with an admonition to try a little harder.
Whenever I see him now,
his face is a bit more drawn.

TOAD'S LUCK

She's the most beautiful girl I've seen
since Gramma et Uncle Willie's underalls,

and the night she left to join
her brand new husband in the London Hilton

she didn't seem in any rush for either.

But tonight, a year later, she brings him in the bar

and he is the best America has to offer,
handsome as oak, smart as whiplash,
schooled in the practice and appreciation of wit,
with original political opinions,
too modest to mention that he once played pro football,
a thirty-year-old unspoiled success story
who has held positions of responsibility
from saudi to antartica, seychelles to spain.

In short, the sort of guy
you want immediately to be friends with.

Neither interrupts the other.
They accept compliments graciously on each other's behalf.
Beneath the table, their hands
roam each other's thighs constantly.

Just my luck, to be foiled
by the only perfect marriage in America.

THE ROMANTIC POETS

"Oh, yeah," he tells me,
"I remember her. She was married
at the time, but she was making it
with my roommate. What he didn't know
was that she was making it with me
whenever he went off to work.
She gives good head."

There are some things about a woman
that you'd just as soon learn for yourself
and others that
you'd rather that you didn't know at all.

THEY ARE IN LOVE WITH THE INEVITABLE

I read in Robert Lowell that Carl Jung once told Lowell's mother
that her son was "an incurable schizophrenic."

A girlfriend of mine once told me that her former lover
had been labelled by the family psychiatrist
"an incurable schizophrenic."

Then a friend of mine informed me
that his own psychiatrist had assured him
that his former girlfriend was "an incurable schizophrenic."

All of them, psychiatrists and lovers, loved saying it.
You could tell it made them feel authoritative
and relieved them of further concern.

You hear a lot about "incurable alcoholics" too.

Since I am living proof
that "incurable romantics" can be cured,
I hope someday both schizophrenia and psychiatry
will also be.

NOT ONLY CAN'T YOU GO HOME AGAIN, BUT YOU CAN'T GO ANYWHERE
ELSE EITHER

he gets the divorce
and now he is presumably no longer responsible for her.
but when he calls to make sure everything's set
for his weekend with the kids
she says, "by the way,
when did you say i should stop using the health insurance?"

there is a second of astonishment
and then he says, "august 1st. i told you
three different times that you weren't covered
after august 1st. if i could have kept you
on the policy i would have. it wouldn't have cost
me an extra cent, but they assured me it was
strictly illegal."

"i was sure you said i could use it through september.
anyway, i had some tests done ... back in july
... and now they're calling me to come back in
because my pap smear came up positive."

his mind is shaken blank
as by a sonic boom.

"do you think they'll be able to tell
whether or not i'm covered?"

"they'll catch it somewhere along the line;
you've got to go someplace else."

"oh. well, i guess i'll have to put it off then."

so he hangs up and goes to the bathroom
and sobs into a towel

and the girl he lives with is pissed now
because she thinks he's still in love with his wife

and all he can see are the faces of his kids

who love their mother

whom he cannot just let die.

THE GENERATION GAP

(i)

his idea of a vacation
is to hire a chauffeur
and to spend the summer
drinking on the nation's highways.

(ii)

his kid is among the very few
ever to be arrested for possession of marijuana
by the magic mountain security guards,
but he must have inherited
some of his father's instinct for survival
because he got sobered up enough
the last day of his drug abuse class
to go pick up his certificate of rehabilitation.

(iii)

it hangs now in his father's bar.

THE CRITIC

When I was a sophomore in college
and had moved back home for a couple of years
my mother had the living room painted
and then she came home one day with two paintings
from the department store and asked me,
"Which do you think would look the nicer
over the mantlepiece?"

I told her I thought the space above the mantlepiece
looked just fine without decoration
but she was dead set on having a painting there.
So I took a look at them.

One was an ersatz Utrillo
and the other a little girl with peaches-and-cream
complexion
in a flouncy, fire-engine-red dress.

I was not so completely ignorant
that I did not know Utrillo was already a living-room
cliché,
but I guess I loved Paris long before I ever got there
because I've always had a weakness for Parisian street
scenes.

And anyway, the girl in the fire-engine dress
was just out of the question.

So I gave my mother my emphatic opinion
and the next day, sure enough,
the Utrillo was back in the store
and the fire-engine girl on the wall.

Over the years we have failed to improve
our aesthetic rapport.

THAT'S LIFE

My daughter is explaining to her eight-year-old brother
the rating system for films,

and when she gets to " ... and X means
that kids can't get in at all,"

he says, "I bet those are the only good ones."

THE UNDOING

She didn't try to bother him while he was writing, but her simply being there would give him an excuse to interrupt his work.

So he told her he wanted her out of the house on the days when he was at the typewriter. When she asked where she should go, he said, "Go to museums."

She went to the Huntington and the Simon and the Getty and the County, to the dinosaur one, the one with cotton gins, the one with all the Indian baskets. She fed the elephant peanuts at the zoo and glued her eye to the observatory telescope, wrote letters to congressmen for The Sierra Club, sketched egrets in their eyries for the Audubon, haunted the galleries on La Cienega.

During this time her husband polished off the first two volumes of his trilogy, but one day inadvertently she dropped the name of a newly discovered asteroid, and a few days later that of a conceptualist,

and soon she was chattering about phylum chordata, art deco stemware, and the Tel Quel group.

He became so painfully aware of his inadequacies that he could no longer bring himself to demonstrate his ignorance in print.

FOUR MEN

Her first man was an aspiring writer.
He was militantly unfaithful to her.
He brought her children, words, sorrow.
He left her.

Her second man was an aspiring musician.
He was faithful for a time
and then relentlessly a cad.
He was good to the children.
He brought her songs and sorrow.
He left her.

Her next man was an aspiring painter.
He was sometimes unfaithful and often drunk.
The children loved him.
He left.

Her fourth man was a picture framer.
Although he was a schemer with the soul,
but not the tact, of a Dale Carnegie instructor,
he brought her little money.
Since he had fulfilled none of his early promise,
it was necessary to him that he continually prove,
in petty ways, his superiority to those who had.
He drove away her friends, replaced them with
his equally worthless cronies.
It was a source of irritation to him
that her children were more intelligent and charming
than himself.
His behavior towards them
kept her on the verge of losing custody.

He was faithful to her without blemish.
He did not even bring her sorrow.
In spite of the prayers of all who knew her,
her three former men by no means least of all,
it never occurred to him to leave her.

WHAT IS THE SOUND OF A SINGLE COOKIE CRUMBLING

There is no ethnicity of cuisine that I less enjoy
than that of the Chinese.
Ever since she discovered my aversion to essence of soy,
Chinese food has become my girlfriend's favorite.

At least the stuff is relatively soft,
which was just as well this particular night
because a sore left jaw
had left me barely able to chew.

So when the cookies arrived,
naturally her fortune read,
"A new romance will bring you great happiness,"
and mine, "You will talk less and listen more."

SHOOTING FOR TEAMS

As kids, if we arrived at the basketball court while a pick-up game was already in progress,

we just yelled, "Our challenge," and we got to play the winners.

Or if the gym was just opening, we all lined up at the free-throw line and shot for teams,

the first five to make a shot against the next five.

We had similar procedures for arbitrating first outs and jump balls.

No matter how much bigger or tougher some kids might have been than others, I can't remember these conventions ever being violated.

Guys my age who still play ball instinctively abide by these rules.

I wonder if the kids today do? Civilization may depend on it.

-- Gerald Locklin

Long Beach, CA

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