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| Poems by Rodney Jones      **ON THE BEARING OF WAITRESSES**  Always I thought they suffered, the way they huffed through the Benzedrine light of waffle houses, hustling trays of omelets, gossiping by the grill, or pruning passes like the too prodigal buds of roses, and I imagined each come home to a trailer court, the yard of bricked-in violets, the younger sister pregnant and petulant at her manicure, the mother with her white Bible, the father sullen in his corner. Wasn’t that the code they telegraphed in smirks? And wasn’t this disgrace, to be public and obliged, observed like germs or despots about to be debunked?  Unlikely brides, apostles in the gospel of stereotypes, their future was out there beyond the parked trucks, between the beer joints and the sexless church, the images we’d learned from hayseed troubadours— perfume, grease, and the rending of polarizing loves. But here in this men’s place, they preserved a faint decorum of women and, when they had shuffled past us, settled in that realm where the brain approximates names and rounds off the figures under uniforms. Not to be honored or despised, but to walk as spies would, with almost alien poise in the imperium of our disregard, to go on steadily, even on the night of the miscarriage, to glide, quick smile, at the periphery of appetite. And always I had seen them listening, as time brought and sent them, hovering and pivoting as the late orders turned strange, *blue garden, brown wave.* Spit in the salad, wet sucks wrung into soup, and this happened. One Sunday morning in a truckstop in Bristol, Virginia, a rouged and pancaked half-Filipino waitress with hair dyed the color of puffed wheat and mulberries singled me out of the crowd of would-be bikers and drunken husbands guzzling coffee to sober up in time to cart their disgusted wives and children down the long street to the First Methodist Church. Because I had a face she trusted, she had me wait that last tatter of unlawful night that hung there and hung there like some cast-off underthing caught on the spikes of a cemetery’s wrought-iron fence. And what I had waited for was no charm of flesh, not the hard seasoning of luck, or work, or desire, but all morning, in the sericea by the filthy city lake, I suffered her frightened lie, how she was wanted in Washington by the CIA, in Vegas by the FBI— while time shook us like locks that would not break. And I did not speak, though she kept pausing to look back across one shoulder, as though she were needed in the trees, but waxing her slow paragraphs into chapters, filling the air with her glamour and her shame.    **WHERE I WAS A KING**  Maybe a sin, indecent for sure--dope, The storekeeper called it. Everyone agreed That Manuel Lawrence, who drank Through the side of his mouth, squinting And chortling with pleasure, was hooked; Furthermore, Aunt Brenda, Who was so religious that she made Her daughters bathe with their panties on, Had dubbed it "toy likker, fool thing," And so might I be. Holding the bottle Out to the light, watching it bristle. Watching the slow spume of bubbles  Die, I asked myself, could it be alive?  When they electrocuted Edwin Dockery, He sat there like a steaming, breathing Bolt, the green muscles in his arms Strained at the chair's black straps, The little finger of his right hand leapt up, But the charge rose, the four minutes And twenty-five hundred volts of his death, Which in another month will be Thirty-five years old. So the drink fizzed With the promise of mixtures to come.  There it was. If the Hard-Shell Baptists of Alabama are good and content That the monster has died, so am I. I swallowed. Sweet darkness, one thing Led to another, the usual life, waking Sometimes lost, dried blood in the ear, Police gabbling in a strange language. How else would I ever gauge How pleasure might end, walking Past midnight in the vague direction Of music? I am never satisfied.    **Brains**  When I moved in with her, I thought now I won't have to look it up: rubidium, Calvin Trillin, the fourth- longest river in Brazil. The lunar mountain ranges zoomed in. Zygotes and paramecia made themselves known. She could cook a mean boeuf bourguignon, then rank the leading authorities on the aspiration of the *h* or mystical tenses of Latin verbs. But you are so creative, there's not a creative bone in my body, she would say, when I insisted before friends we had recently met that not I but she was the brain. Now that she is gone, now I can feel secure, one of my thoughts sending another down through the foggy databases, the fractures, and the unions. Here boy, I whistle to the dog of my thoughts. I am thinking how, before I lived with her, I was known as the brain, but I valued the heart more than the brain, and more than the heart, the flag of the erogenous zones— loving me was like patriotism, but I was not fit to live with her. I knew, when she began to chant and burn incense to the Asian saints,  I did not know her secret anything. Still, I had ideas, insights, a brain like the world's mute, lightning-soldered, accidental intelligence. With that same brain now I hold our ill-starred, incompatible visions of happiness and tragedy. Yet when I need to know how spinnerets work or the distance to Alpha Centauri, I think of her, not for long or at any depth, or what she was, but the last compliment that means anything is the compliment to memory.    **The Language of Love**    It has taken thirty-five years to be this confident of what happens between the noun and the verb.  Eventually, love goes. The image. Then the thought. No? Then you are still alive. Only a little. And then,  I do not mean to depress you. Men have to hear before they see. Sacred vows. Dropped shirts.  Women do not speak to men. They are overheard.  Sadness mounts people. Around the burn-scar high  on one thigh, the body of the beloved will vanish. And the come cries and salt hair-smells of lovemaking.  Secret fiction, holy matrimony, longest short story the troth two lovers pledge to one another is none  of the president’s business, let him say what he wants.  He is no good with words. Ask any true lesbian.  He should take a poetry workshop with Adrienne Rich. He should try using the world less and words more    **THE BRIDGE**  These fulsome nouns, these abbreviations of air, Are not real, but two of them may fit a small man I knew in high school who, seeing an accident, Stopped one day, leapt over a mangled guardrail, Took a mother and two children from a flooded creek, And lifted them back to the world. In the dark, I do not know, there is a saying, but he pulled Them each up a tree, which was not the tree of life But a stooped Alabama willow, flew three times From the edge of that narrow bridge as though From the selfless shore of a miracle, and came back To the false name of a real man, Arthur Peavahouse. He could sink a set shot from thirty feet. One night I watched him field a punt and scat behind a wall Of blockers like a butterfly hovering an outhouse. He did not love the crashing of bodies. He Did not know that mother and her three children But went down one huge breath to their darkness. There is no name for that place, you cannot Find them following a white chain of bubbles Down the muddy water of these words. But I saw Where the rail sheared from the bridge—which is Not real since it was replaced by a wider bridge. Arthur Peavahouse weighed a hundred and twenty pounds. Because he ran well in the broken field, men Said he was afraid. I remember him best At a laboratory table, holding a test tube Up to the light, arranging equations like facts, But the school is air over a parking lot. You Are too far from that valley for it to come All the way true, although it is not real. Not two miles from that bridge, one afternoon In March, in 1967, one of my great-uncles, Clyde Maples, a farmer and a commissioner of roads, And his neighbor, whose name I have forgotten, Pulled more than a hundred crappies off three Stickups in that creek—though the creek is not Real and the valley is a valley of words. You  Would need Clyde Maples to find Arthur Peavahouse, And you would need Clyde Maples’ side yard Of roadgraders and bulldozers to get even part Of Clyde Maples, need him like the crappies Needed those stickups in the creek to tell them Where they were. Every spring that creek Darkens with the runoff of hog lots and barns, Spreading sloughs, obscuring sorghum and corn. On blind backwater full schoolbuses roll Down buried roads. Arthur Peavahouse was smart To run from the huge tackles and unthinking To throw himself into that roiling water And test the reality of his arms and lungs. Many times I have thought everything I said Or thought was a lie, moving some blame or credit By changing a name, even the color of a lip or bush, But whenever I think of the lie that stands for truth, I think of Arthur Peavahouse, and not his good name, But his deciding, as that car settled to the bottom, To break free and live for at least one more moment Upward toward light and the country of words While the other child, the one he could not save, Shrugged behind him in the unbreakable harness.  **GROUND SENSE**  Because I have known many women Who are dead, I try to think of fields As holy places. Whether we plow them  Or let them to weeds and sunlight, Those are the best places for grief, If only that they perform the peace  We come to, the feeling without fingers, The hearing without ears, the seeing Without eyes. Isn’t heaven just this  Unbearable presence under leaves? I had thought so. I had believed At times in a meadow and at other  Times in a wood where we’d emerge No longer ourselves, but reduced To many small things that we could  Not presume to know, except as my  Friend’s wife begins to disappear, He feels no solvent in all the earth,  And me, far off, still amateur at grief. Walking the creek behind the house, I cross to the old homeplace, find  A scattering of chimney rocks, the Seeds my grandmother watered, the Human lifetime of middle-aged trees.  **A DEFENSE OF POETRY**  If abstract identity, philosophy’s silhouette, authorless, quoted, and italicized, governs by committee the moments of a mutinying, multitudinous self, then I’m lost.  But let a semi loaded with bridge girders come barreling down on me, I’m in a nanosecond propelled into the singular, fleet and unequivocal as a deer’s thought.  As to the relevance of poetry in our time, I delay and listen to the distances: John Fahey’s “West Coast Blues,” a truck backing up, hammers, crows in their perennial discussion of moles.  My rage began at forty. The unstirred person, the third-person void, the you of accusations and reprisals, visited me.  Many nights we sang together; you don’t even exist.  In print, a little later is the closest we come to now: the turn in the line ahead and behind; the voice, slower than the brain; and the brain, slower than the black chanterelle.  The first time I left the South I thought I sighted in an Indiana truckstop both Anne Sexton and John Frederick Nims, but poetry makes a little dent like a dart.  It’s the solo most hold inside the breath as indigestible truth. For backup singers, there’s the mumbling of the absolutes. Du-bop of rain and kinking heat. La-la of oblivion.  Sheep-bleat and stone-shift and pack-choir. There is a sense beyond words that runs through them: animal evidence like fur in a fence, especially valuable now,  self-visited as we are, self-celebrated, self-ameliorated, and self-sustained, with the very kit of our inner weathers, with migraine, our pain du jour, our bread of suffering.  If poetry is no good to you, why pretend it can enlighten you? Why trouble the things you have heard or seen written when you can look at the mandrone tree?    **BEAUTIFUL CHILD**  Because I looked out as I was looked upon (Blue-eyed under the golden corm of ringlets That my mother could not bring herself To have the barber shear from my head) I began to see, as adults approached me, That hunger a young woman must feel When a lover seizes one breast too long On the ideal nipple-balm of the tongue. When they lifted me and launched me Ceilingward, I seemed to hang there years, A satellite in the orbit of their affections, Spinning near the rainspot continents And the light globe freckled with flies. I could smell the week-old syrupy sweat And the kerosene of many colognes, Could see the veined eyes and the teeth Dotted with shreds of lettuce and meat. When I touched down, one of them Would hold me to the torch of a beard And goose my underarms until I screamed. Another would rescue me, but leave On my cheek the heart-mark of her kiss. So I began, at three, to push them away. There was no ceremony and few words, But like a woman who has let a man go too far And, in one night's moodiness, steps Out of a parked car and walks home alone, I came suddenly to my life, and they  Did not begrudge me, but turned back To the things they had done before-- The squeaking bed, the voices late at night. Mornings I'd crawl beneath the house, Dreaming how poignantly tragic my death Would seem, but, having thought about it, I happily took myself into the darkness Of the underground, where I was king.      **THE BOOMERS TAKE THE FIELD**  It takes a long time to forgive heroism or beauty. And then the young girl in the old song owns a plot in the memorial gardens, a brow full of Botox, and a lover with Viagra.  The laps of the mythical parents of World War Two and the Great Depression have lithified to granite, yet we remain childish. In our fifties, we study ourselves studying their violence.  Do they forgive us our graduations? They got dark early— so elegant in photographs, but thin from hunger as often as vanity. We were lucky, they said. We should have lived in the thirties.  No one could find a kid. Occasionally they'd find a little person and beat it for impersonating a kid. And if it cried, they'd beat it again, harder, and give it a pair of Lucky Strikes    **COMMON-LAW KUNDALINI**  A sudden loving settles into your own weight . . . click, then roll over onto your back and you are there above yourself,  the human spirit in full cloud-drift, a lust fieldstripped to eye and ambition which moves through walls and doors  and rises to the carnival of looking down with no power but that of seeing all of it momentarily unchangeable:  the shadow-tinseled moonlit fields and silvery water towers on stilts, the vole in the unblinking talon of the owl.  Even better, asleep, in dream-buoyancy, I have seen more than I ever saw pretzel-munching in some cloud valley  thirty thousand feet above the sorghum. Once a pelican stopped to question me. Once my friend Herbert McAbee  bumped into me out of the mist with a talking sheep under his arm. Often I have achieved much in basketball,  for many dream flights launched from the magic floor of some actual gym where old men smoked by a potbellied stove,  but removed from time, unblocked, and watched by sweethearts, cheered, I rose and dunked and hovered  with fear's iodine in my throat. When I am up there, it is not poetry. In the dream's onliness, it feels  wingless, bird-elegant, experimental, requiring the decisionless decision- making of dreams. But somehow,  why do I do this if not for the freedom? Sometimes I wish I had never heard of the name of Sigmund Freud.    **THE STATE-LINE STRIPPER**  I got lost. At a family picnic for the employees of Martha White Self-Rising Flour. Two lovers found me down by the Tennessee River, a little fat girl crying into the lichen on a stone's face, and took me to the grandstand—  Embarrassing— I got lost. And then I lost my fear. Strangers and high places and nightly publishing myself naked except for a fireman's hat. I danced and Jehovah's Witnesses came unglued in the parking lot.  My creation was like the earth's. In the beginning there was shame, then the body after shame, dangerous happiness— If I could remember how I got here I wouldn't be lost.  Yet my body recommends me. All that I promised that I would not do, I did. I got over my fear of darkness when it seemed to me anything out there would probably be better than what shone here in the light    [**back to 323 Homepage**](file:///D:\Users\Cindy\SITES\Classes\CreativeWriting\323\Homepage.htm) |