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| Poems by Rodney Jones   **ON THE BEARING OF WAITRESSES**Always I thought they suffered, the way they huffedthrough 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 sisterpregnant and petulant at her manicure, the motherwith 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 faintdecorum of women and, when they had shuffled past us,settled in that realm where the brain approximatesnames 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 broughtand sent them, hovering and pivoting as the lateorders turned strange, *blue garden, brown wave.* Spitin 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 waitresswith hair dyed the color of puffed wheat and mulberriessingled me out of the crowd of would-be bikersand drunken husbands guzzling coffee to sober upin time to cart their disgusted wives and childrendown the long street to the First Methodist Church.Because I had a face she trusted, she had me waitthat last tatter of unlawful night that hung thereand hung there like some cast-off underthingcaught 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 wantedin 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 lookback across one shoulder, as though she were neededin the trees, but waxing her slow paragraphs intochapters, 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 agreedThat Manuel Lawrence, who drankThrough the side of his mouth, squintingAnd chortling with pleasure, was hooked;Furthermore, Aunt Brenda,Who was so religious that she madeHer daughters bathe with their panties on,Had dubbed it "toy likker, fool thing,"And so might I be. Holding the bottleOut 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, breathingBolt, the green muscles in his armsStrained at the chair's black straps,The little finger of his right hand leapt up,But the charge rose, the four minutesAnd twenty-five hundred volts of his death,Which in another month will beThirty-five years old. So the drink fizzedWith the promise of mixtures to come.There it was. If the Hard-ShellBaptists of Alabama are good and contentThat the monster has died, so am I.I swallowed. Sweet darkness, one thingLed to another, the usual life, wakingSometimes lost, dried blood in the ear,Police gabbling in a strange language.How else would I ever gaugeHow pleasure might end, walkingPast midnight in the vague directionOf music? I am never satisfied. **Brains** When I moved in with her, I thought nowI won't have to look it up:rubidium, Calvin Trillin, the fourth-longest river in Brazil.The lunar mountain rangeszoomed in. Zygotes and parameciamade themselves known. Shecould cook a mean boeuf bourguignon,then rank the leading authoritieson the aspiration of the *h*or mystical tenses of Latin verbs.But you are so creative, there'snot a creative bone in my body,she would say, when I insistedbefore friends we had recently metthat not I but she was the brain.Now that she is gone,now I can feel secure, oneof my thoughts sending anotherdown through the foggydatabases, 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 chantand 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, accidentalintelligence. With that samebrain now I hold our ill-starred,incompatible visionsof happiness and tragedy.Yet when I need to knowhow spinnerets workor the distance to Alpha Centauri,I think of her, not for longor at any depth, or whatshe was, but the lastcompliment that means anythingis the compliment to memory. **The Language of Love**  It has taken thirty-five years to be this confidentof 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 hearbefore they see. Sacred vows. Dropped shirts.Women do not speak to men. They are overheard. Sadness mounts people. Around the burn-scar highon 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 storythe troth two lovers pledge to one another is noneof 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 manI 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 pulledThem each up a tree, which was not the tree of lifeBut a stooped Alabama willow, flew three timesFrom the edge of that narrow bridge as thoughFrom the selfless shore of a miracle, and came backTo the false name of a real man, Arthur Peavahouse.He could sink a set shot from thirty feet. One nightI watched him field a punt and scat behind a wallOf blockers like a butterfly hovering an outhouse.He did not love the crashing of bodies. HeDid not know that mother and her three childrenBut went down one huge breath to their darkness.There is no name for that place, you cannotFind them following a white chain of bubblesDown the muddy water of these words. But I sawWhere the rail sheared from the bridge—which isNot 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, menSaid he was afraid. I remember him bestAt a laboratory table, holding a test tubeUp to the light, arranging equations like facts,But the school is air over a parking lot. YouAre too far from that valley for it to comeAll the way true, although it is not real.Not two miles from that bridge, one afternoonIn 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 threeStickups in that creek—though the creek is notReal and the valley is a valley of words. You Would need Clyde Maples to find Arthur Peavahouse,And you would need Clyde Maples’ side yardOf roadgraders and bulldozers to get even partOf Clyde Maples, need him like the crappiesNeeded those stickups in the creek to tell themWhere they were. Every spring that creekDarkens with the runoff of hog lots and barns,Spreading sloughs, obscuring sorghum and corn.On blind backwater full schoolbuses rollDown buried roads. Arthur Peavahouse was smartTo run from the huge tackles and unthinkingTo throw himself into that roiling waterAnd test the reality of his arms and lungs.Many times I have thought everything I saidOr thought was a lie, moving some blame or creditBy 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 momentUpward toward light and the country of wordsWhile the other child, the one he could not save,Shrugged behind him in the unbreakable harness.**GROUND SENSE**Because I have known many womenWho are dead, I try to think of fieldsAs holy places. Whether we plow themOr let them to weeds and sunlight,Those are the best places for grief,If only that they perform the peaceWe come to, the feeling without fingers,The hearing without ears, the seeingWithout eyes. Isn’t heaven just thisUnbearable presence under leaves?I had thought so. I had believedAt times in a meadow and at otherTimes in a wood where we’d emergeNo longer ourselves, but reducedTo many small things that we couldNot 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, findA scattering of chimney rocks, theSeeds my grandmother watered, theHuman lifetime of middle-aged trees.**A DEFENSE OF POETRY**If abstract identity, philosophy’s silhouette, authorless, quoted,and italicized, governs by committee the momentsof a mutinying, multitudinous self, then I’m lost.But let a semi loaded with bridge girders come barrelingdown on me, I’m in a nanosecond propelledinto the singular, fleet and unequivocal as a deer’s thought.As to the relevance of poetry in our time, I delay and listento the distances: John Fahey’s “West Coast Blues,” a truckbacking up, hammers, crows in their perennial discussion of moles.My rage began at forty. The unstirred person, the third-personvoid, 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 turnin 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 sightedin an Indiana truckstop both Anne Sextonand 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 writtenwhen 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 ringletsThat my mother could not bring herselfTo have the barber shear from my head)I began to see, as adults approached me,That hunger a young woman must feelWhen a lover seizes one breast too longOn the ideal nipple-balm of the tongue.When they lifted me and launched meCeilingward, I seemed to hang there years,A satellite in the orbit of their affections,Spinning near the rainspot continentsAnd the light globe freckled with flies.I could smell the week-old syrupy sweatAnd the kerosene of many colognes,Could see the veined eyes and the teethDotted with shreds of lettuce and meat.When I touched down, one of themWould hold me to the torch of a beardAnd goose my underarms until I screamed.Another would rescue me, but leaveOn 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 farAnd, in one night's moodiness, stepsOut of a parked car and walks home alone,I came suddenly to my life, and they Did not begrudge me, but turned backTo 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 deathWould seem, but, having thought about it,I happily took myself into the darknessOf the underground, where I was king.  **THE BOOMERS TAKE THE FIELD**It takes a long time to forgiveheroism or beauty.And then the young girlin the old song owns a plotin the memorial gardens,a brow full of Botox,and a lover with Viagra.The laps of the mythicalparents of World War Twoand the Great Depressionhave lithified to granite,yet we remain childish.In our fifties, we study ourselvesstudying their violence.Do they forgive us our graduations?They got dark early—so elegant in photographs,but thin from hungeras often as vanity.We were lucky, they said.We should have lived in the thirties.No one could find a kid.Occasionally they'd finda little person and beat itfor 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 backand you are there above yourself,the human spirit in full cloud-drift,a lust fieldstripped to eye and ambitionwhich moves through walls and doorsand rises to the carnival of looking downwith no power but that of seeingall of it momentarily unchangeable:the shadow-tinseled moonlit fieldsand 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 sawpretzel-munching in some cloud valleythirty thousand feet above the sorghum.Once a pelican stopped to question me.Once my friend Herbert McAbeebumped into me out of the mistwith a talking sheep under his arm.Often I have achieved much in basketball,for many dream flights launchedfrom the magic floor of some actual gymwhere old men smoked by a potbellied stove,but removed from time, unblocked,and watched by sweethearts, cheered,I rose and dunked and hoveredwith fear's iodine in my throat.When I am up there, it is not poetry.In the dream's onliness, it feelswingless, 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 heardof the name of Sigmund Freud. **THE STATE-LINE STRIPPER** I got lost.At a family picnic for the employeesof Martha White Self-Rising Flour.Two lovers found me down by the Tennessee River,a little fat girlcrying 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 placesand nightly publishing myselfnaked except for a fireman's hat.I danced and Jehovah's Witnessescame 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 hereI 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 darknesswhen it seemed to me anything out therewould probably be betterthan what shone here in the light [**back to 323 Homepage**](file:///D%3A%5CUsers%5CCindy%5CSITES%5CClasses%5CCreativeWriting%5C323%5CHomepage.htm) |