

Americana

poems

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Black
Lawrence
Press

And one day we will die
and our ashes will fly
from the Aeroplane over the sea

But for now we are young
Let us lay in the sun
And count every beautiful thing we can see

—Neutral Milk Hotel

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1. OCCASIONS

AN AUBADE FOR THE AFRICAN QUEEN AND ITS BIG BANG

Rose: I'm all turned around Charlie—which way is the east shore?

Charlie: The way we're swimming old girl!

Had I not been zooming through the Cosmos, as yet unfettered by material forms, I could have told Bogey: It's always the detonators that take some doing. Everything's a powder keg: a ratty vessel taking on water or a thimble-sized universe. No matter—it's all waiting to combust. The trick is the tinder. The spark. The thing that transforms potential to kinetic. Could be, yes, cartridges, nails, boxes of soft wood—a makeshift torpedo at the water line. But why think small? After all, something touched off the exponential cosmic explosion we're all swimming through. What're the odds it was a broken boat, floating in wait? Billions and billions to one. It had to be something like a Rose: sharp-tongued, chiseled, gorgeous with a dirty face, obvious in her catholic charms. In the face of such a face, even Kaiser's doomed navy men would freely choose to do the deed, dutifully pledge to let no man put it asunder, even as the impregnable world they know erupts.

UPON THE THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF HANK AARON SURPASSING BABE RUTH AS ALL-TIME HOMERUN KING

The sky opened in the ten minutes it took to fete Hank Aaron after he hit #715. Hank says time paused as he was rounding the bases: the college kids patting him on the back between second

and third might as well have been gnats or rain-drops...O, the rain! Who was the first to think the unthinkable?—*Wait, if this gets called, do we go back to 714?* Tomorrow is another day, indeed.

Hank, the Buddhists say it is raining everywhere. The greatest Zen masters proclaim their impotence: *I cannot be a good Zen master; I have seen good Zen masters.* As for me, I can't be a good homerun hitter—

that's no false modesty. Some things we just can't do. But I've seen a lot of homeruns, Hank, and now I suspect each one is nothing special, a single ball socked into the night. Yes, they can be washed off

the books, even the momentous ones. Nothing to do but wait and see if what we've seen is real. We sit in our hard bleacher seats, hold the breath we share. We stare straight up into the spitting sky.

A SONNET IN REMEMBRANCE OF BEING
PROPOSITIONED DURING THE LAST
INTERMISSION OF A TOM STOPPARD PLAY,
BLACKSBURG, VIRGINIA, MARCH 18, 1995

By rights, I should've had a date that night,
with daisies in her hair. The kind of girl
who'd laugh at all the clever repartee:
when Rosencrantz tells Guildenstern that death

is just a boat, that every exit is
an entrance someplace else...That night, alas,
guffaws were few. Just mine to punctuate

the room. Curtain: *Enter HARVEY, right.*
He eyed me, smiled, and said, "You look neglected."
Dear Harvey, tell me this: Why are our hearts
so eager to connect? I'll hold my breath

for something witty. No—don't. My exodus—
(I stumbled off just as the house lights fell)
—confirms it: Blink and we evaporate.

UPON CHARLEY'S MARRIAGE TO A GIRL FROM IDAHO

My friend Charley cleans up real
nice and is handsome in his red
silk shirt. We are on the beach.
It is March and that means wind
and a smudged, slate sky. The bride
wears green. She shimmers. Her babies
toe the sand. They don't wear shoes.
It is almost cold. The Officiate
gathers us in a circle. A circle means
things. Charley reads Neruda in his
red shirt. She reads Rilke. *Letters
to a Young Poet*. She is green and Charley
is red. At the end, they vow to each
other: Christ said, "I commit my
spirit unto you." They say this.
They join hands. Charley has rolled
the Neruda up like a racing program.
She takes his hand, rolled poem and all.
The circle parts for them.

UPON THE BIRTH OF MIKE'S DAUGHTER, SOME UNSOLICITED ADVICE REGARDING LOVE AND OTHER SUCH VAGARIES

1. The Underworld.

I will tell you this, dear little girl,
there is a Hades and it can be found
everywhere. I imagine your course:
there will be places you go. Just as
important, there will be places you
never go. To wit: Apalachicola,
Florida. Its own kind of Underworld.
I shudder at the memory—a pea-soupy
night in March after eating succulent
oysters from a bed gone bad. Teens
in pick-ups tear down the quiet streets,
whine through their gears. If you do
not end up there on what, God willing,
will be your long, strange ride, know
that you are lucky, that it is a hell-hole.
Know, too, that it's just as hellish to love
and lose as it is to have never loved
at all. That night in Apalachicola, I saw
a thick-necked, tattooed man.
His back was rigid, his hair clipped
tight. I was afraid of him because
I believed he was ignorant. He retrieved
a woman, a barmaid with floppy
breasts. She, too, had tattoos. They

stumbled off to a Lincoln, their life together. Hell is tattoos and oysters, ignorance. Hell is unlucky geography. Hell is knowing the rest of the story.

2. Orpheus & Eurydice.

Once there was a nymph—
Eurydice. Nymphs are beautiful, so she was. Orpheus sang every chance he got. Saturdays was karaoke.
Eurydice came into the bar bearing her midriff as was the fashion then. The bikers dropped their jaws.
Orpheus put down his beer and sang her an Elvis song. They became lost in their mutual charms. Together they were young and pretty and in love. They smelled good and they tasted good and there was no place on their bodies that was not smooth and good. They spent blissful Apalachicola days. It was hell.

3. An Interlude.

What I am trying to say is that hell is. Much fruitless effort can be spent looking for places where it is not. But it is. Everywhere. Do you know that I am smiling? I am smiling. There are certain things you do not yet

know. That is probably best, but I will tell you a secret because I can, because soon enough you will figure it out for yourself:

4. The Rest of the Story.

Orpheus and Eurydice had many trials. They churned through life on the Panhandle. They loved and lost. It ended. Orpheus sang a sad song. And then, alone, he gave in. His music was full. Perfect. Ripe. It was midnight on a Saturday. No one in the bar but him. Eurydice long gone. Stolen by a mean old snake from Wisconsin. There was the ubiquitous pea soup. His throat warbled to nobody. Then he realized the secret in a flash: Wisconsin is just a bus ride away. Surely it is an iced-over hell, a nightmare worse than this. But it can be got to from here, and there I will find my beautiful nymph. I will be with her in the ice so our lips freeze together. Or we will flee that old man. We will scamper through the hellish landscape. We will melt and we will freeze. We will be wet, dry, thirsty, full as ticks, rubbed raw in the genitals from love. We will read too much and not enough. We will snort Ritalin, shoot up. We will abstain. We will know the word of God. We will do things our mothers cannot imagine. There will be unnamable

objects, acts, purity, peace. All of it is hell,
yes, but I will be singing and she will be
Eurydice and we will know everything
there is to know. Where is Wisconsin?
What if I don't remember her face?

Then he strikes out into the misty night,
blissful for the first time in days.