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Age of Bone | Poems and stories

Andrew Grossbardt
The University of Montana

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THE AGE OF BONE

POEMS AND STORIES

by

Andrew Grossbardt

B.A., Brandeis University, 1972

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1974

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A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

Some of these poems have appeared in the following magazines:
"I'Ching's Revenge" in Cafeteria; "This Time" in Cut Bank; "The Man
from Spoon River" and "Sort of an Ode to the Charles" in Nantucket
Review (forthcoming); and "Rumors of Snow" in Zahir (forthcoming).

T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S

I.	DAY: TAKE ONE	1 - 18
II.	BLESSED ARE THE DAYS	19 - 27
III.	THE AGE OF BONE	
	POEMS.	28 - 55
	Manet's Kansas Period	28
	Window Shopping	30
	Other Lovers.	32
	The Man from Spoon River.	34
	Rumors of Snow.	36
	Fallen Priest	37
	Sort of an Ode to the Charles	38
	The Age of Bone	40
	Another Field for the Loonies	41
	Other Moons	42
	This Time	43
	The Old Man in the Center	44
	I'Ching's Revenge	45
	Heat.	46
	Unheard Sounds.	47
	A Carrot, A Plate, A Child.	49
	Poem.	51
	The Uninvited	52
	Counting.	53
	Save the Last Dance	54
	Finally	56

For Jerome and Honora --
the folks who made the whole show possible

I. DAY: TAKE ONE

Day: Take One

Me was awakened by the alarm. Me awake. Push de button of de alarm. Ring-a-ring-a-ring-a-ring. Off noise. Silence. Morning musings. On radio. Morning newsings.

Bridges down
All around
Today we'll get to New York Town.

Raising cover, Me exposed nakedness to the unknowing world. Get up, times-a-wasting. Four deep breaths. Three touch toes. Knee bends. Re-repose.

Scanning the room. How to describe? Unimpressive save mention of the overstuffed, overflowing laundry bag in the right corner. Brief soliloquy on the subject of laundry.

(Plain room. Light fairly dim suggesting early morning. Frameless bed, rear and slightly right of center next to which is located, on small table to left, a small, red, automatic alarm clock with illuminated dial. Also large portable Emerson radio. Rest of stage empty except for laundry bag. Decor expresses functionality. Laundry bag is front left. Incredibly stuffed with clothes sticking out from partially opened mouth. Area surrounding bag is strewn with soiled garments, towels, linen. A yellow box of Drive detergent is situated extreme front right.)

Lying naked on the bed, Me. A large blue quilt is half-way-on, half-way-off the foot of said bed. He is undistinguished looking. Light brown hair, longish; moderate amount of body hair on well-developed slim torso. Phallus medium. Toes crossed. His voice is basically even though slight agitation is present. Other voice, emanating from KLH6 speakers above stage is deep, resonant, suggestive of divinity.

Me raises himself to a sitting position. Looks at laundry bag for ten seconds. Sighs. Continues staring.

Me: Wish I had less fucking clothes

Voice: Then thou wouldst have to do thy laundry more often.

Me: Or stay in the house more.

Me realized that the time that was a-wastin had already wasted. He went over to the laundry bag and quickly sorting through the newest laundry (newness being distinguished by the relative nearness of item to the top of the bag or, better yet, the item's complete absence from the bag, i.e., its flooriness) chose what seemed the least soiled undergarments. Me put these on and returned to the bed. He reached into the pillowcase at the head of the bed and took out a crumpled pair of jeans, a green polo-shirt and a worn pair of tennis sneakers. These he put on over the undergarments. Lastly Me picked up the alarm clock, wound it up, folded it neatly down, and placed it in the back pocket of his jeans. Dressing had gone well.

Emerging onto Avenue ~~Manhattan~~, Me inhaled a lungful of air, savoring its not-so-freshness as it mixed with his frisky corpuscles. He walked loosey-goosey-languid through the already-moistening, eight A.M. Brooklyn summer air. Brooklyn: New York's largest borough and unofficially, the fourth largest city in the United States. Brooklyn: half a home to the Verrezano Narrows Bridge, largest some-sort-of-bridge in the Free World, but not nearly so large as the Great Wall of China. Brooklyn?

Me stranded in the listless air, motionless, finally continues down M towards the subway. He stops in front of the station thinking great egg creams too early but. Newsstand glutted with papers, magazines, medicine, cigars, cigarettes, tiparillos. A fan in the back,

rotating, whirring. Me picked up a copy of the News and rapidly reading the headline -- SEIZE WOMAN IN B'KLYN BABY KIDNAP -- took a coin from his pocket and handed it to the greasy-aproned man behind the counter. He started to walk away. "Hey buddy, you use des for the subway." Me looked up from the paper and saw, in the newsstand man's nicotined fingers, a copper subway token. Me re-reached into his pocket and traded the token for a dime. An honest man, he could have cheated Me twenty cents.

Me headed down the subway station steps to the D train reading the News. "Fast moving police" step "concerned citizens" step "and an alert cab driver" step "combined forces in Brooklyn" step "yesterday to nab an alleged" step "kidnapper and return" step "two month old victim" p l a t f o r m "to his distraught mother -- all within forty-five minutes" step "Police described the alleged" step "kidnapper as" 'Hey fella, watch your step.' 'Sorry,' Me. step "a childless fifty-one-year-old" step "woman who was quoted" step "as saying she took the" step "unattended child from in front" step "of a Bay Ridge drugstore" train platform crushofbodies "to teach the mother a lesson."

The D pulled in. Me squeezed on and found a stand. Lucky Me. He surveyed the jammed car. Mini-skirted secretary reading jacketed-paperback probably dirty. She could teach him. Everything Me Always Wanted to Know About Sex. Me stared at her, waiting for her to glance up, not afraid to ask. She looked up. Seducer! Me turned his Medusa-gaze to the man sitting directly opposite his stand, just visible between two rear ends, four cheeks. Medium length brown hair receding

slightly up a narrow forehead, indented at the temples. A face, on the whole, rather small, completely hairless. Nothing disturbs the smallness. Not the thin nose or small mouth. The green-tinted sunglasses hide the eyes, certainly small. Every few moments he raises a thin-fingered hand to his mouth as if to stifle a yawn or perhaps a belch. The train jolted to a screeching stop, rear ends merged and the man disappeared from sight.

Me grabbed a seat across from her but the dirty-book-girl was gone with unanswered questions in search of Doc Rubens. Me thought, "Can there be misery loftier than mine. I'd have worshipped her. Loved her. Locked loins with her."

The train continued on towards the Manhattan Bridge. Each stop saw the train's seemingly limitless capacity tested further. Some joker mooing at the other end. Hoof it fella. Emerging from tunnel-darkness to bridge-shadowed-lightness. Reemerge into tunnel. Lights flicker on off on. Smell of perfume. Press of leg on Me's knee. He knew before glancing up of leg's futile promise. Matronly black woman in plaid summer shift, a shopping bag in one hand. Other hand screwed on plump arm reaching for hanging loops overhead. Unshaven armpits. Me closed his eyes and returned the pressure.

Me looked down. The unquestioning New York Daily News answered: Court Rules Nudity Isn't Free Speech.

The Supreme Court left standing today an Iowa Court's decision that stripping naked in public is not a form of protest protected by the Constitution. The Court refused to review the conviction of indecent exposure for eight Grinnell College students -- four men and

four coeds -- who took off their clothes during a public lecture by an official of Playboy magazine. The students who remained undressed for about ten minutes singing a folk song, were there protesting against the magazine's commercial exploitation of sex and the human body.

Me closed the paper as the train slowed to a halt. The next stop would be West 4th. Change for the local. He got up to make his way across the car to the other side where the doors would open to the West 4th Street platform. Hoofing it slowly. Careful not to step on anyone. Progressing poorly. Station lights in distance getting closer. Might not make it to the other ... Someone pushing. Me resisted. Little fists pounding on Me's back. Littler voice barely audible above the hoofing herd. "I have to get out. Move. Mooove. I have to get off." No room to turn and see as doors open. Small female creature rushes off tackle. As Me attempts to follow, the hole closes and he is engulfed. A three yard loss. Time is running out. No huddle. HIKE. A sudden surge pushes him through the closing doors. Me slams the News to the ground and raises his arms aloft acknowledging the frenzied cheers of the crowd.

Once upon a time... the doors closed. Me on the outside. Johnny and Bobby and Calvin and Curt and Me. Five small boys. Johnny the smallest then me. Out on the town. "Let's get off here," Me said.

"Nah," said Curt. "Let's go to Coney Island. I wanna jump off the parachute. Betchyour scared."

"I'm not," said Me. "I just wanted to stop for pizza."

"I'm for pizza, Let's give it a try," said Calvin, Me missing meanwhile, the winks. The train stopped at 23rd Street.

"All off! All off! All off!" Loud shouts from little boys. They all ran out, Me first. They all ran back, Me not. The doors closed. Me alone. Four small boys, Johnny the smallest, then Bobby -- laughing, pointing, slapping each other, waving, making small boy's faces. Then the clowning faces moving, slowly at first, Me running alongside, then faster, much faster. Me stopped running, more faces, must faster, fasterfasterfaster----- Two faces very slow, un moving, belonging to two bodies. On the bench. Across an empty expanse of subway track.

Me on the local. Rockefeller Plaza, Me's stop. No crush here. He casually strode through the opening doors and walked through the noxious odors of the sub-city. Stale puke, wet newspapers, melted chocolate. He tried to use as little energy as possible. No sense in perspiring yet. Still, a slight rivulet began its meandering trickle down his side. Icky trickle.

Me emerged onto 48th Street and the relatively cooler outside air. Walking down 48th, he felt a wetness, not his own, emanating from above. The buildings were, as was their habit, discreetly urinating on him; Me attempted, as was his habit, to dodge the unsteady dribble of deadly fluid dropping twenty or more stories from huge air conditioning units onto his person. Sometimes it was a mere sprinkle, sometimes great wet globs to be avoided at all costs. There was no foolproof strategy to employ in dodging building-piss. There was one rule, however, that Me followed. Avoid The Wet Spots On The Sidewalk.

Me entered the office building at 44 West 48th Street, between 5th and 6th Avenues. The Watson Building, a thirty-story cock with deadly

aim. The elevator took its time descending from the eighteenth floor. Me noted its progress on the lighted board above. Stops at fourteen, nine, six. The door slid open and the elevator belched out its lone occupant. An old Hassidic Jew, paysis, hat, great coat. The gnarled hand held dearly the roller-skating-suitcase, filled to the brim with jewels. To build anew the great Temple. His old-world smell lingered in the elevator. Me pushed twelve. Ascendez-moi.

Me got off at the twelfth floor greeted by Irene's frozen-bitch-smile. Like too...Then see how the icewoman cometh. Probably lose it. Cunt full of teeth. She buzzed him into the front office. "Nice to see you made it." Me glanced up at the clock, five minutes removed from ten.

"Any calls?" Me said, ignoring her remark.

"Who'd call you?" Maybe the dirty-book girl asking Me for tea and... Irene dissolved Friday's fantasy. "Mr. G. wants ya ta take this package to Meyer Brothers, toity-seven west forty seventh. And hurry, there's a customer waitin for it." Her voice hinted of exotic places: Bayside, Levittown, East Flatbush. Me picked up the package.

"Certainly, dalink." Me left the office. The trip down differed little from the trip up. On the fifth floor, a janitor, sixtyish, Spanish, janitor's clothing, got on. Smile. On the third floor, he exited briefly, grabbed a large trash barrel just outside the doors and re-entered with it. Both he and Me and the garbage exited on the ground floor.

Decision time. Sixth Avenue or Fifth? Sixth Avenue route slightly closer, however, by cutting through Brentano's, one cut the eastern

route sufficiently to render the difference negligible. Equidistant. Me reached into his pocket and pulled out a dime. Heads-east; tails-west. Tails it was. Me headed east on 48th Street. Into Brentano's. Calder litho hung upside down. Modern art requires new ways of seeing. Protean nature of art and all that. Ineluctable modality of the visible. Who said that? Know that Moreze Louize fellow? Drips paint from one side of the canvas to the other and and and. And calls it furls. And calls it painting. As Me a plumbner, he a paintner. Twenty thou for an original Me Plunger. Du Champ's signed urinal. Me kingdom for a/an... Nice boobs on that cashier. Saks-suited businessman ho-hum thumbing his way through The Sensuous Male. "More graphic than the Sensuous Female." ---Grinnell Record.

Outside. A moist warm wave deluged him. Ought to air-condition the whole damned city. Small elderly man walking just ahead. Me followed. The street was not particularly crowded and the man soon sensed that he was being stalked. He slowed his pace. Me did likewise. The man stopped walking and looked across the street. Me, undisturbed by the small disturbances of man, feigned interest in the synthetic diamonds filling the windows of the Diamond Exchange. The man turned and stared at Me. There was no fear in his eyes, only puzzlement. Me waved and walked back up the street.

Me entered the building at 37 west 47th Street. He glanced at the directory -- Meyer Bros. 3rd floor -- and walked into the open elevator. The elevator operator, an elderly Black, seemed in no hurry to fly Me to the moon or the third floor.

"Third floor, please." The man ignored Me and stepped outside to wait for more passengers. Oughta take the steps. Too hot for that. He coughed several times and finally the operator returned. He glared at Me as he closed the iron gate. Me smiled back. He enjoyed the short rides the best. The sudden lurch, the stomach rising momentarily then sinking back to its rightful place in the abdomen.

Me exited at the third floor and walked over to the window in the wall. He looked in. A middle-aged, unattractive woman was typing on an old standard model. The office was decidedly dingy. Me rang the buzzer. The woman seemed startled at first, then regained her composure and slid open the window. "Yes."

"I have a package."

"Someone will be with you in a few minutes." She began to close the window.

"Listen, I just want to drop it off."

"Someone will be right with you." She closed the window and resumed typing. Me resisted the temptation to ring again. He sat down on the hard-backed chair against the wall and waited. And waited. And waited fifteen goddamn minutes.

Me rang the buzzer. The secretary came to the window looking quite contrary. When she opened the window, he stuffed in the package and ran to the steps and down into the streets. He strolled over to Berger's Deli at the Sixth Avenue end of 47th Street. Red-eyed Rose, check pad in hand wellwhat'llitbefollowing him. "Rosealie, my dear," Me intoned, "I would greatly appreciate a cup of your finest java and" (looking in

the pastry-filled counter windows) "and a cheese danish." Rose brought the items over and Me gazed momentarily at his humble repast. He took a bite out of the cheese danish and followed it with a zip of coffee. A nize zlow zip. He farted, Wonder why your own never seems to smell. It's too hot. Sudden urge to scream. Bet Irene never cut one in her whole life. Cork up rectum. Not going back. Me reached down and raised the cup of coffee to his lips draining it in one fell swoop. No, not going back.

Me left the empty cup and once-bitten danish along with fifteen cents for RoRo Rosey on the counter, paid the cashier and walked out onto 47th Street. The sun had disappeared behind a cloud. A cloudular eclipse? The first lunch wave was descending from the office buildings lining the sky. Me passing each girl as he walked toward Fifth, assessing her virtues or lack of. To bed or not to bed? Three for sixteen. .187. The Met's team average. Excuse Me Miss. In considering your graceful carriage, ample bust, slender waist, spacious thighs and calvely calves, not to mentionⁿ your delicate demeanor -- Not to mention it, why good Sir -- All right, your delicate demeanor, I have decided to accept that which your voice was too humble to advance, but which your eyes so licentiously prrropoz-ed. Ah, do not blush fairest maiden. Quench thy fears bred from folly. They do not become thy more prurient interests.

Meet Me at eight,
Don't be late.
Oh baby, you know what I like.

Me walking. Pounding the pavement with worn tennis sneaks. Ponder-

ing the meaning of above. Am Me meaningless of perhaps meaning less. Meaninglessness of phantasmal mirth. Mirthlessness of phantasmal meaning. A flippant fly meandered by in fluid flight. Ah, sweet gibberish.

At the corner of 47th Street and Fifth Avenue, Me was attracted by a crowd, halfway down the block toward 46th. Voluntary retirement well under way, Me mosied over. Two thirtyish Blacks performing on homemade bass and drum for crowd of Fifth Avenue-Madison Ave. execs and secretaries on their lunch breaks, SaksBonWits in their summer finery, the Korvette crowd and just passingbuyers. The crowd kept a distance from the curious duo, but nonetheless, a spirit of good humor pervaded. The band had just finished a song. Several coins tossed into a small, overturned garbage can cover. Clink clink. "Thank you." The musicians huddle, whisper, begin again. "I'm gonna sit right down and write myself a letter / then send it to the one I love..." Straw-hatted, bearded bassist wearing a short-sleeved islander's shirt plucking single string attached to center of upside-down basin and top of narrow stick. Animation total. Eyes alive, head bopping to the music á la Sugar Ray in prime. Foot tapping the pavement. During drum solo, his hands slap the dark blue tiles of the Chock Full of Nuts Restaurant at his back. The drummer deftly applies his wire brushes to an overturned bucket on a lengthwise wooden crate. Black leather cap and hoary, holey black sweater. Seldom moves. Eyes bloodshot and unalive -- high on that heavenly coffee. Yet from his throat a voice so rich, better a millionaire's money can't buy.

From behind, "Hey you." Who Me? Turn to see two of New York's finest. "I told you guys before, now git."

Gathering the tools of their trade, the bassist mumbled disconsolate, barely audible, "First Sixth Ave, now Fifth. Hope you dudes got your kicks." The musicians sauntered off as the crowd dispersed leaving Me watching the two smiling cops stroll away. Why aren't you administering mouth-to-mouth to some poor kid. And some call him pig.

Me continued down to 45th Street where he turned west. Reaching into his shirt pocket, Me withdrew a book of matches. Now Me never smoked, or rarely, now and again, so that a casual observer might well wonder, as wonder he might, whether Me was a pyromaniac or other perverted criminal such as, for instance, a kleptomaniac or a megalomaniac, bibliomaniac or monomaniac, Anglomanic or erotomaniac or merely demoniac. Luckily for Me, no such observer casualed by. Me carefully detached a match from the batch, and wetting the unsulfured end with a bit of saliva, cautiously probed his ear. Now Me preferred Q-Tips to matches, as would any sensible fellow, but matches were much cheaper and worked nearly as well. Well, not nearly as well, but almost as well. Well, not almost as well, but nearly almost as well, or almost nearly as well. THERE! Me had met other individuals blessed with a similar fetish, but never had he met a one who could claim the intensity of experience that prevailed while the match or Q-Tip, pencil or pen, football or elbow was deftly maneuvered around first one ear, then the other. With wetted tip, Me explored each crevice and fold of the auditory canal, lingering delicately, oh deliciously at the pleasure-

pain threshold of the middle ear. Me prided himself on his clean ears.

After finishing, Me often felt the need to sit down or better yet, to stretch himself out full length on the nearest comfortable place. Unfortunately for Me, no likely place afforded itself at this juncture of the time-space continuum .

Crossing Sixth Avenue. Me felt the sun-poisoned street moving slightly under the pressure of his sneakers. Funny feeling, that. Like wet sand. He stepped onto the curb, trying to think loud enough to shut out the construction drills. Oblivious to the bleached, exposed prostitutes. Me continued west on 45th. Two junkies nodding on the steps of the Peerless Hotel. First class establishment. Best of clientele. The variety of experience offered there was certainly unmatched. Emerging onto Broadway, Me peered through sun-glare at the big Bulova Clock mercilessly ticking off the day, tenth of a second at a time. The Allied Chemical Board, towered above, flashed its headlines to the unconscious world scurrying at its feet:

BRESHNEV TO VISIT EAST BERLIN. TIGHT SECURITY IN EFFECT
EAST PAKISTAN BRACES FOR CIVIL WAR -- MILLIONS HOMELESS
LINDSAY REFUSES COMMENT ON PRESIDENTIAL PLANS
SEAVER TRIES FOR TWENTIETH TODAY AT SHEA
LETTERS FALL FROM ALLIED CHEM BOARD ONTO BROADWAY ---
SIX KILLED SCORES INJURED

Too late to catch the 12:34 to East Pakistan. Me opted for the ballgame. Cubs in town for big series. Better hurry. By the time he reached the Times Square Station, Me was sweating profusely. He waited

uncomfortably for the Shea Stadium Special. After ten minutes, the train pulled in. Me entered the half-empty car. Wonder of wonders, the train was air-conditioned. Me had read recently, somewhere, that over ten thousand of the city's subway cars were air-conditioned, but he was hard pressed to recall ever having been on one before. As the train neared the ballpark, Me was inundated by the inane chatter of twelve-year-old Midget Mets. "Kranepool'll hit one. Agee's a cub killer." Wonder if they ever heard of Pee Wee Reese. Duke Snider. Dad at old Ebbets Field, yelling "hit a Bedford blast, Duke." For Me. More interested in bathroom graffiti than games then. Big one today though. A win and we tie.

"Pretty good crowd for an afternoon game, huh buddy?" Me nodded unenthusiastically to the man sitting in the seat next to him.

"There's Cleon, dad. There's Cleon."

"Quiet Tommy, can't you see I'm talking to this young man. Here, read the yearbook...Sorry you know how kids are."

"That's alright," said Me not intending to defend the boy. He studied his program, anxious to avoid any further conversation with daddy.

The game begins in routine fashion. However, it is soon evident that Seaver and Cub pitcher Ferguson Jenkins are wrapped in a classic pitcher's duel. For seven innings, the game remains scoreless as each side manages but two hits. In the top of the eighth, Billy Williams hits a tremendous home run into the upper deck in right, his twenty-

ninth of the year, to give the Cubbies a one run lead. The Mets tie in their half of the eighth as Grote walks, is sacrificed to second on Foli's beauty of a bunt, and scores on Kenny Singleton's pinch-hit double, just fair down the right field line. Seaver is at his best in the top of the ninth. He retires the side in order getting Beckert on a roller back to the mound, then striking out Jim Hickman and the always dangerous Ron Santo.

Harrelson leads off the bottom half with a ringing double up the alley in left center and the crowd roars its approval. Agee bounces to Beckert, but the fleet-footed Harrelson moves to third on the play. A base hit, error or long fly will score Buddy. Me screams along with the thirty thousand faithful for Cleon to hit one, but Jenkins, bearing down under pressure, fans Jones on a high hard one. Art Shamsky, who owns two of the three Met hits, steps to the plate. Over-anxious, he hits the first pitch weakly and sends a high pop-foul a little way down the right field line. The crowd groans as aging Ernie Banks, the Cub first baseman, hustles over near the seats and camps under the ball, waiting to make the play that will retire the side and send the game into extra innings. Banks stands patiently by the railing next to Me's seat. Like Banks, Me watched the small white sphere gradually growing larger as it plummets groundward, toward Banks' waiting glove. The noise of the crowd is stilled by his heavy breathing. His face is etched with the intense concentration of the professional as he waits for the ball to come down, waits to do what he does best, what he is paid to do. The strange fish-like appendage of his black arm reaches toward the exact

space the ball will occupy in a millimoment. With a violent effort, Me wrenches Banks' arm away. The ball drops, untouched, at Me's feet.

"Hey, not so hard," Me protested to the rough hands that grabbed him as he tried to flee the park. He had almost escaped the clutches of the burly stadium cop who now held him in a tight hammerlock, but two miniscule Met fans in their late pre-teens had blocked off Me's only exit allowing the cop to reach him.

"C'mom sickie," he growled disgustedly. "We're gonna take a little trip to the station. Oughta put guys like you in the nut house." Sick he called Me. Not them. Those fools in pin-striped pajamas. Hope they all slit their necks with Gillette.

Two of cop numero uno's compatriots joined him as he ungraciously escorted Me out to the parking lot. "Got him good, huh Sal."

"Yup. This is the loony bird grabbed Banks' arm. It's bums like dese --- no fucking respect for the athletes a today. Mans jus tryin to make a decent livin. You punk. Ya know how old Ernie Banks is?" Me shrugged. "Forty-one. Forty-one years old. The man's been playing the game since before you wuz born."

"You think they'll give Me the chair?" Sal's clenched fist threatened imminent danger.

"Take it easy, Sal," one of the other cops warned. "Listen kid, you better shut up. Sal was raised in Chicago an he's been a Cub fan all his life. Take some friendly advice."

"That's right, kid, keep em closed real tight soas I don't gotta

ruin my fist on your crummy teeth. You'll have plenty to yell about tonight when some horny nigger buggers your rump." Sal laughed with malice.

Harried Me was hurried into the police car. The cruiser quickly sped onto the Grand Central Parkway. Me noticed the exit sign for the Utopia Parkway. He felt a sudden urge to beg Sal to take that exit and follow it forever.

The stay at the station was shortlived. In spite of Sal's protestations, the Sergeant-on-duty could think of nothing concrete to charge Me with. He was released after an hour. Me walked to the Flushing Meadows subway station, exhausted suddenly from the day's events. Rush hour had passed and the Brooklyn bound trains were empty. He found a vacant seat, stretched out and immediately fell asleep. A beautiful girl wearing a loose-fitting gown and a lei around her neck urged Me to the Utopia Parkway.

Almost missed the stop. How could I have slept... Me climbed the long steps to Avenue M. He paused at the newsstand for a chocolate egg cream and tomorrow's News. The back page contained no surprises.

CUBS WIN 2-1 IN 12

Banks' homer wins pitcher's duel as
Jenkins outlasts Seaver bid for 20.

In the bottom left hand corner, there was a picture of Banks reaching into the stands for a pop foul as someone reached toward him. Me could not identify the other figure.

The trudge home was unpleasant for Me. Try as he might, he could

not help perspiring in the dank evening air. He entered his room much as he and it had left each other. Me removed his tennis sneakers and placed them in the pillow case at the head of the bed.

Ring-a-ring-a-ring-a-ring. Evening musings. No new newssings. Me reached into his pocket and removed the vibrating alarm clock, pushed in the button (off noise) and placed the clock next to the large, portable Emerson radio. It was time. He removed his clothes, returning the outergarments (jeans and green polo shirt) to the pillowcase and the undergarments to the area surrounding the laundry bag. He carefully ripped the back page from the News and put it also in the pillowcase. He stuffed the remains of the paper under his mattress. Me lay down naked on his bed and pulled up the cover.

(Lights dim. Voice from above with vague oceanic sounds in background.)

Voice: See you tomorrow, Me.
Me: I would prefer not to.

II. BLESSED ARE DAYS

Blessed Are The Days

The boy remembers the land as if from another life. He does not remember coming to the forest though his father and brothers speak of it often. The boy likes to hear them talk of how they worked the small plot by the stream, gradually enlarging it until it took in the hillside covered with juniper and white cedar, and the meadowland to the south. Sometimes he thinks that he must have helped feed the cattle and horses.

He remembers when the rain began and mostly he remembers his mother though even that memory has begun fade and it is mostly in dreams that he sees her. He is happy when his brothers share their memories with him. Their memories fill the empty spaces in his dreams. He refuses to share these dreams. Even when his brothers abuse him and smear his face with animal excrement, he remains silent. He has learned to live with their cruelty and he does not blame them. They do not understand that dreams are more real than his life or any life he can imagine. At night, the waves rock him to sleep and his dreams fill with dry places.

His mother is young and beautiful. She is sitting motionless, staring open-eyed at the brilliant sun turning red over the distant mountains. The air is clear and the sky is a dark blue, almost black. The woman's shadow is stretched taut and reaches back over ripples of sand which end in a series of prominent dunes a hundred yards to the east. She does not hear the boy approach over the dunes, but she stiffens when his bare feet intrude on her shadow. His steps leave pock marks on the sand. A sudden breeze fills them as soon as they are made. When he reaches the spot where his mother sits, he stops and

looks back across the stillness which shows no trace of his coming. The desert reminds him of an enormous beach he has never seen, the dunes, great waves crashing silently.

The woman turns to him. His mouth curves in a slight smile. His naked body glows red from the sun and his eyes are the color of the sea. She rises to him and her hair which has never known scissors falls to her ankles. She takes the golden strands in her hand and wets them with her tongue. Then she wipes the desert from his body. She has the boy cup his hands and fills them with her tears. The boy drinks for a long time until he is sated with her love. When he is finished, the sun has gone down and the sky is streaked with orange. He sees the snow, cool and inaccessible, rimming the mountains, gray fists jutting vulgarly into the western sky. A cold wind rushes across the desert. Small funnels of sand form and move with the wind obscuring even the dunes. The boy shudders. He reaches out for his mother but she is gone.

Nausea sweeps over the boy as he shivers in the dampness. He has not been sick for several days but the urge to vomit is strong now. He lifts the wool blanket, wet from his own sweat and the dampness of the sea, and rises to his feet. His brothers and their wives are sleeping soundly. He knows his father is praying on the deck above. The boy steadies himself against the lurching and walks over to the steps which lead to the deck. He climbs the steps and pushes open the wooden hatch with his shoulder.

The frigid sea air clears his head as he steps onto the deck. The sky is thick with rain and meets the sea in an area defined only by the

white caps seemingly far below. He thinks momentarily of the gray mountains and their snow slipping from his grasp. He wonders vaguely if it is still night. As he has lost count of the days, so, in the absence of light, he has lost the ability to distinguish between day and night. He sleeps when he is tired or when the urge to dream becomes a fierce longing he cannot suppress.

The boy shields his half-closed eyes with his hand and gazes at his father who is kneeling just beyond his reach, oblivious to the rain and his son. The old man has been acting strange the boy thinks. He cannot remember when his father last ate. He speaks to no one and sleeps only for short periods of time, hunched on the steps which the boy has just come up. The rest of the time, he kneels on the deck, praying silently. He is far too old to help the boy's brothers maintain the ship. There is not so much to do anyway. Each day, the brothers check the vessel's cedar planks for cracks. From time to time, they re-seal sections of the ship with pitch. The ship has been caulked, top to bottom, many times. The wives can easily tend to the animals that are left.

Neither the boy nor his brothers know that the old man's prayers have become blasphemous. "Blessed were the days when You cursed us, for then we were as men." This refrain fills the old man's prayers.

The boy wishes that his father would stop praying and play sweet tunes on the ocarina that he had fashioned from terra cotta. The soft, hollow notes which came from the instrument were beautiful. When his father played, the boy could dream without closing his eyes. The first

few weeks on the ship were made bearable by the knowledge that his father would play for him several times each day. One day, the boy missed the lovely songs. He had taken the brown-red instrument from his father's chest and gone with it to the old man. His father had been standing on the deck, staring at the sky torn by the silent flashes of lightning which accompanied the storm's beginning. The boy had stood quietly by his side. It had seemed to him that the sea was swallowing the great bolts of light, then spitting them back at the sky. He could imagine nothing so powerful as the sea then. He had touched his father's hand lightly and given him the ocarina. His father had held it in his hand for several moments, then turned full to the boy and said, "No." The old man has not played the ocarina for a long time and the boy knows he will never hear its sound again.

He is standing beside his father now. He bends so that his face is directly in front of his father's, nearly touching the old man's. His odor is stronger than even the sea. The boy looks into his father's eyes and sees nothing. The old man's lips move to his silent prayer. The boy wants to speak but knows it would be pointless, knows that the most he can expect would be punishment.

The boy's brothers are working on the second deck. They are busy sealing a small crack in one of the ship's futtock. Their hands are stained from working the bituminous pitch into the curved timbers which form the ribs of the boat. They see their young brother standing to the side, but they do not stop to acknowledge him. He watches them work for

awhile though he has seen them repeat this process many times. He would love to help them, if only to stir the tar-like substance to prevent it from lumping. He knows how well he would perform the task, talking with his brothers and asking them about his mother while he shared in the work. He does not let them know this and responds to their neglect with his own stubborn silence.

The boy grows tired of watching his brothers. He goes over to the steps and descends into the ship's hold. The stench of dying animals and excrement is a familiar one and he actually welcomes it. He is most happy when he is in this part of the ship and much of his day is spent listening to the mournful tunes of the songbirds. The songs seem to lift the boy into the airy spaces the birds have never known. It is not with pity that he listens. He feels his confinement is much like their own and somehow senses that their end will be no different from his.

The boy notices the wife of his oldest brother feeding the cattle a mixture of alfalfa, timothy and millet. She sees him and smiles. The sea has not been kind to her once pretty face. Her skin is rough and discolored. Her husband has been angry with her lately and the sounds of their lovemaking no longer compete with the boy's dreams. He feels sorry for her but decides against going over. He knows his brother would not like that.

The boy sits down on the damp floor and feels his back conform to the sloping curve of the ship's hull. He relaxes as the songs of the linnet and pine siskin mingle. The siskin is his favorite bird. Its great plumage with the black and yellow markings provide relief from

the somber tones of his life.

He listens to the birds for a long time before closing his eyes. The siskin has stopped singing and the song of the linnet is hollow in the enclosed space. His father is playing on the ocarina once more. The boy hears the notes from a long way off. He comes over the hill breathing deeply the fragrance of myrtle and juniper. The land has been saturated by the colors and odors of spring and the sun pours from the sky like honey. As the boy comes down the hill's western slope, he feels the fullness of the sun in the warm, dry earth crumbling easily beneath his feet.

He can see his father standing by his tent, drinking from a goat-skin wine flask. The boy watches as his father takes a long drink before he resumes playing on the instrument. Near the bottom of the hill, the shrubs thicken and the boy can no longer see his father. The sounds of the ocarina become sporadic and finally cease. As he emerges from the grove of bald cypress, the boy notices clouds moving quickly from the west. Already the sun has grown hazy. His father is no longer outside as the boy hurries toward the tent. He passes his brothers, busy crushing sumac leaves into a fine powder they will use for dyeing.

There is a silence in the tent when the boy pulls aside the canvas flap. His father is sleeping naked on the floor. The lower part of his face is stained purple. The boy watches as dark liquid oozes from the corner of his mouth, collects, and finally spills down his chin. The boy gazes at the old man's decrepitude. The sight of his genitals, shriveled like fruit left to dry in the sun, fills him with revulsion.

He hears the sound of rain, heavy against the tent's roof. He turns to leave, but the ocarina, lying on the floor by the entrance, stops him. He picks up the instrument and holds it, feeling its smooth curves. He puts it to his lips and the bitter taste of his father's wine is in his mouth.

The boy's hands are small and he fingers the holes with difficulty. He blows hesitantly at first, then with increasing intensity. The notes are shrill and loud but the boy continues. Suddenly his father is stumbling towards him, feebly attempting at the same time to hide his nakedness with his hands. His brothers block the entrance. Averting their eyes from the old man, they cover him with a cloak. They drag the boy from the tent and throw him to the ground. A wall of water sweeps over the hillside and then there is only water and he is carried along by its great force.

The linnet is dying and the boy has not left the ship's hold since he noticed the bird's songs growing fainter. His brother's wife has told him how one day the old man was no longer found kneeling in his customary place on the deck and how the same day the rain had begun to slacken. Even this news cannot shake his will. He does not believe her. The sound of the rain is still loud in his ears.

The woman has come down into the hold to feed the cattle. He watches her graceful movements knowing that when she is finished, she will bring him milk and perhaps some dried beef. She has begun to remind the boy of his mother and he no longer regards her frequent trips to the hold as intrusions.

Done with the feeding, she comes over to the boy and hands him a jug of warm milk. As he drinks, she sits down beside him and strokes his head. When he has finished, she takes his hand and places it on her thigh, beneath her loose fitting gown. She moves his hand back and forth along the inside of her leg. Her hand is rough but the skin on her legs is smooth and warm to the boy's touch. She lies down and brings his head to her breast as she guides his hand through the thick tuft of hair between her legs. He relaxes against her warmth and breathes deeply her woman's smell. She pushes his hand deep inside her. The boy feels the dampness close around his hand as she moves against him. He closes his eyes. The woman moves his hand for a long time and her sighs are music to the boy.

The boy is looking across a great body of calm water. A school of porpoise is playing on the surface. Osprey, their beaks filled with offal, swoop to the water, then fly straight up into the blinding sun. In the distance, the boy sees mountains pushing up through the sea as water pours from their slopes. Everywhere he looks, the land is rising, shattering the still mirror of the sea's surface. The earth soaks up the water like a sponge, returning it to its subterranean origins. The sea has become a lake surrounded by low mountains, then a pond and he is walking on its surface. A woman is standing on the far bank. Beads of water glisten on her skin, each drop a prism refracting the sun's light. The boy walks on the smooth rock of the stream bed and then he is encircled by her arms.

From above, the sound of shouting has stirred the woman. Smiling,

she lifts the boy to his feet and pulls him towards the steps. He barely notices the linnet, lying dead on the floor, as he follows her up. On the deck, his brothers are laughing and shouting in a language he does not understand. The oldest brother grabs the boy and shakes him. He points across the water and shakes him again. The boy looks into the dark sky. It is raining forever.

III. THE AGE OF BONE

MANÉT'S KANSAS PERIOD

For Carl Belz

In the painting by Manét
the old musician is out of tune,
flat like a Kansas cornfield,
burnt somber by too much sun.
The boy in the corner did not know
the old musician before the painting.
A hundred years and they are still strangers,
still staring obliquely at us
from their shared canvas.

Does flat space flatten time?
Does Wednesday matter in Topeka?

The freeway does eighty for hours.
Now the Buick can relax from chasing rabbits
through Missouri. Contented it idles, purrs
like Lester your fat cat left for dead
in Biloxi while you idly read road maps
and tune in distant stations on the dial --
Oklahoma City, 50,000 watts and an hour sooner.
If you drove this stretch for fifty years
and the radio held out, you'd save hours,
enough for another life.

If Manét were born in Wichita
or Topeka he'd have painted
old farmers in 3-D, livened up Kansas
landscapes with soup cans and junked cars
then gone off screaming to join the Foreign Legion.

WINDOW SHOPPING

At one A.M. every street
is a canyon. Concrete walls
trap air in a ricochet off cement.
Sounds scatter like birds. Alone
again the city finds your empty pockets
burning thighs. Perched in front of Saks
you press your face to glass
stare at the manequin staring back.
If you catch the street lamp
just so and turn that right,
odd way, you can watch your face
crack like a joke.

Pretend that glass is mirror,
the pane polished till it blinds.
Never has the urge to enter
been so strong. When you break
your smile is fractured
your heart turns over
in your body like a grave.

Gypsy cabs roam these streets
late for strays. Your eyes
are mesmerised forever in their light.
Like a stunned animal you are frozen

by the sudden whine of wheels.

At nine A.M. they will find you inside
huddled in fur you never owned.

OTHER LOVERS

Four A.M. and the highway is yours.
Your Chevy pushes eighty. She performs
like a lover who can stay
all night. Her body thrusts dead center
and her tires straddle broken yellow lines
while the road fades fast.

The last car you passed turned off
for Hyannis. At Orleans, the rotary
spins you out by Rock Harbor and the bayside
where the water's warmer.

The Outer Cape opens like a wound.
Shrunken pine are jagged stitches
guarding local roads. Through the fog
you sense sand and salt. The roar of the motor
is the crush of waves at Nauset Light.

Last time here was with another lover.
You scooped clams by the handful,
laughed with gulls and lay naked
in the dunes. She gathered
wild roses and dune grass
and told you the moon laughed too.

The moon is frowning now and you know
drowning children tangled in the kelp.
Gulls are puking on the dunes
where you made love. Now the only things
that grow are sand and waves.
You stand on the beach while storms
with women's names, weird sisters of another sort
wade off shore. Wet sand forms pockets
around your legs and when you're trapped
the storms make violent love.

THE MAN FROM SPOON RIVER

planted a graveyard in his mind.
Words he sowed by the banks
grew poems that first season
and poems filled empty graves.

Even dead folk have a right to a little
space. But he'd crammed his mind too full.
Headstones clamored. Cacophony of letters
freed from chiseled rock exploded in his skull.
Faces he never knew floated down the river.
Only bottles flourished in his garden.

The man from Spoon River left the land
for an island of cement, turned
the color of cities. He hid rhymes
deep in pockets then forgot his name.

The man from Spoon River groped through trash
for sounds and claimed graffiti scrawled
on the walls of tenements. He stood hours
shouting names at the East River.
The wrong one always echoed back.
He listened to the ragtime rhythm
that he made on boots and car windows;
listened for the march of dimes
clinking on pavement;

listened mostly to himself
drinking from a paper sack.

RUMORS OF SNOW

In New York, they don't believe
I'm here. They write anyway,
zip codes wrong, of the weather
and the Mets. In Missoula
we stare west and wait.

Blue Mountain has turned white
with snow from Drummond. Cars
inched over MacDonald Pass
arrive with icy looks
as sharp winds rush through the Hellgate.
One kid plans a yard of snowmen.
Truckers mutter plows are out in Great Falls.

At the City Council, grave men
decide what must be done. The decree
is handed down. Everyone must stand around
and breathe. Citizens are appointed
to enforce the Melt. Somewhere else
snow is piling thick as down. In our banana belt
drowned snowmen float the Clark Fork
and snow always melts before it touches ground.

FALLEN PRIEST

All memories expire in a word.

The word is faith, also hope you tell us
we must have. But faith and hope die easy
here. Mere words like once. We held you once
in high esteem. Once means long ago.

The movie that was your life closed
last week. At its peak the crowds
stretched round the block. People
even came from other towns. We've torn
your other building down.

Take my advice and leave
this town to us. (Your wife
has chosen to stay here.) Go with the stream
upstream and leave it at the foot
of the mountain. The stream
will find its own way
from there. Then follow fallen timber
past the abandoned mine, till you reach
snowline. Others of your kind will be
there. Tell them of faith
like Job's and hopes like ours
once were. White will hide
the words. Then,
build your temple anew.

SORT OF AN ODE TO THE CHARLES

Rise early any fall and go
to some high place. A tall building
or castle will do. Watch trees hug
fog as the river smokes west.
See Lowells and Cabots swim.

Waltham Watch closed years ago.
Where time once thrived, three city blocks of brick
guard the river. Behind boarded windows
a man makes tumors from old clock parts
throws them in the river.

Downstream at Watertown, where bells lead
deaf over bridges, the cancer spreads.
Spreads past Brighton to Allston
the color of curdled coffee.
To Cambridge.

It's hard to keep the rhythm
when dead fish cling to oars. Coxswain shouts
and pretty girls edge closer
to the banks for a closer look
at Harvard muscles.

Victors smooth-stroke the dirty river.
For other crews, another victory --

not falling in. Typhoid lurks beneath
a surface so brown, reflection
is out of the question.

THE AGE OF BONE

Every day they change the sheets.
Pieces of face still cling to your pillow
faded yellow. I begin again
to paint my life inside these walls.
With the last two colors I stain
the canvas; red pigment for the blood
they never let me see, white
for your ageless bones. Broken light
enters through the bars
muting the tones like an old master.
At night I hear your chair
rolling down the corridors. Your
high child's voice blends
with the whine of wheels
driving small animals insane.
I listen for the dull thud
of your soft bones breaking
like rotten fruit on the marble tiles.
No summer this year. I am painting,
painting the snow very white.
Outside these walls I dream
a tidy grave where you can lie
pieced together like a perfect puzzle
held firm by the secret weight of dirt and flowers.

ANOTHER FIELD DAY FOR THE LOONIES

Try your skill at the penny arcade.

Dimes instead of pennies, but what the hell

you've money to burn. Careful aim

pays off dead bears and a buzz.

Points pile up

like irrational numbers and true division

can begin.

It's killing time again in Memphis.

This time reason's vague as fortune cookies.

Bodies coat the street: the ice cream man,

candy store girl, junk man, good policeman,

two others. A grin, a sickly cackle,

then a rifle cocks (something must have snapped)

and fires. Bullets burn the air

while hydrants self-destruct.

The bear stops dead, turns around

and back the other way. This is not

some kind of game. Another, dead five years,

turns over in his grave.

OTHER MOONS

Moonbeams watch your step. You walk
along forgotten shores, but whose
moon and what shore in this place where
12-pronged starfish sing their near
familiar tongue. Porpoise merely talk.
No one lives here anymore.

Worlds you travelled once had many moons:
Jupiter twelve, Saturn nine and rings.
But tides made you uneasy
and skeletons on the beach moved
with tides and asked you for fresh water.
Moonless Venus couldn't suit your fancy.

In other places you visit like a stranger
people know you. They know the starfish
and the porpoise. There is no danger
in this place. No mountains fall like
fallen timber to scar your landscapes
and the moons here seem like any other.

THIS TIME

This time I count the days in pairs.
Every car that doesn't bring you
brings the blood rushing back
bruising lifeless veins to blue.
My rusty heart sputters to a halt.

I collect the pages of unread letters
collecting dust. Friends lend me
ones I can pretend you wrote.
If the telephone should ring
I might answer in a squeaky
voice -- no one home.

I've decided to stay busy,
feed the cat
just enough, complain about
my cooking. The snow is melting.
I write silly poems
and show them to strangers.
Somehow this time really matters.

THE OLD MAN IN CENTER

For Willie

The years of summer games close.
Sodden March outfields suck
at ankles and night light glares,
the only stars you've known
play funny with the ball. Once stitches
meant curve or change-up, not scarred legs
and crowds were only there when wanted.

Games that matter don't, only that
they end. Not like innings end
to begin again; not eighteen times
the old horse jog back and forth,
back and forth. But end crisp, final
like October days.

I'CHING'S REVENGE

The neighbors' Siamese is on the prowl
again. His name is Oliver. She whispers
Ollie when she thinks she is alone
but I know better. I listen for his foreign howl,
never meow, call it I'Ching and hide behind
her porch flipping coins and sucking stones.

The cat disturbs me. That is clear.
It chooses to ignore the milk
touched with ptomaine by my door
and calls my bluff each night when I come near.
Seductive catnip mixed with belladonna
left untouched on shallow floors.

This cat's a god for worship. He makes
an altar to himself: chicken bones, spools of thread,
rare feathers from some feline atrocity.
His prayers fracture my nightmares. Wide awake
I search for coins and grope with shattered
hopes of Oriental diplomacy.

HEAT

Midwest

and Minnesota's like I dreamed.

Wind and heat. Even before dawn,
before the gray half-light of morning
heat comes. It comes dull and still
creeping ahead of day, staying low
before the wind has stirred smoldering ashes
from hidden places among the grain.

With first light,

streaks of orange flash west
toasting grains to gold.

Then heat taunts the wind rising
and swelling tall grasses.

Like some squatter, heat plants its dead weight
and refuses to move on.

UNHEARD SOUNDS

1

We count
the spider's footsteps
by the sound of its footsteps
a hollow sound
like the breaking of bread

2

Hardly anyone hears
the swallow's broken wings
but falling feathers
wake us from a deeper sleep

3

Listen
stars are telling tales of ancient kings
who smiled moons
and filled oceans with regal tears
waves of sound
are moving on their light
listen
sunspots share these secrets
how dust from shattered worlds
regrouped and formed systems
homes for aging stars
listen

4

Unheard sounds
await the appointed day
while still moments
dwindle to a close
startled oboes
play from memory
we converse with dolphin
and overhear trees breathing
as if for the first time

A CARROT, A PLATE, A CHILD

where does my carrot
quick before
the plate fills
something missing
where we found
the only man
the last one
can tomorrow
like a child
fill a plate
quick
before my carrot does
something
where the last man
the only one
found missing tomorrow
does the plate
where's the child
can the carrot
quick
quick
something fills
like a plate
like tomorrow

where we found
the last child
only quick
before my carrot does
something
like a carrot

POEM

There are women like this everywhere

I go among them

the sweet taste of ruin in my mouth

and from my boots

a certain dust

like salt

stains the earth's pale skin

it has not always been this way

THE UNINVITED

deep within

it hides

like a reptile

behind a stone

waiting

when she leaves

the doors open

to the night

something enters

like shadows of stars

like a secret

you've always kept

away

you pretend

not to hear the voice

you listen to

never has it been so hard

to stop

COUNTING

the wound in the clock grows larger
hours wither

as i watch

the hands clasp

i wind

and wind

nothing

the time it takes swings heavily against me

in the corner

the main spring

coils

like a snake

behind it

the last seconds

like eggs

SAVE THE LAST DANCE

The new regime has taken over.
From every pole, severed phone lines
dangle. All mail is opened: checks
and money orders kept; births,
engagements, weddings, deaths
kept secret; all else returned
to sender. Unfed dogs keep the streets
unsafe, thirty children eaten last week.

Ma and pa attend night classes to forget
the words. They cry for the lost embrace
as they babble. They babble, cry, embrace.
Nothing is left unsaid.

Junior turned thirty this year. Slowly
he grows younger. He's catching
on. His crawl's improving
and he comes to his bowl
twice a day. The silverware
collects... The silverware was collected
by the state. Nothing could be
further from the truth.

At electric time we gather. Clocks
chime, blenders blend, the TV

beams, the radio plays "save the last dance
for me" over and over.

The news is always good outside
the weather the same. There are tooth
marks everywhere. I've been hiding...
I hide under the stairs, armed
with the only fork. If they attack
first, I'll be ready.

FINALLY

i stop growing
the odd long muscles
hold to the edge of bone
the tendons at peace
at last

soon there will be room for all these things

i leave
my footprints
like two strangers
who meet
in the shadow of leather
and flesh