

Norm Sibus/TWO POEMS

BREAKFAST AT GUENTHER'S

Here, at Guenther's, he looks out of place.
My friend has this problem everywhere.
He smiles at the old drifter, and so, comforts him.
He calms us all down, letting us know, that, like Villon—
keeping the weight of his ass in line,
sweating off the pounds by rhapsodizing—
he counters the effects of the hangman's noose.
A young woman recites from a notebook—
Her lover, bending his ear, is hungover.
'Why this place,' my friend asks.
Ex-cabbie, he says that pushing a hack
was like driving a Womb-For-Hire—
So there's no longer any reason
to drag the extra history along.

He still reads the high-brow stuff—
I still comment on his sweaters—
Familiar with my tactics, he says,
'Why shouldn't I look good—?'
I picture him in a spaceship,
a man dazzled by the controls—
As some ungodly wrenching
begins to cleave him from the streets,
his mind grows dull from the effort
of getting away, escaping death at the hands
of hungry, out-of-work thieves.
Then, gliding pleasantly in space,
he lets out his pent-up breath,
silent and in awe of his destination.

And now he shrugs, 'I've qualified.
What else can I get my teeth into?
Your poems are as messy as this event
of grease and scrambled eggs—'
Up in the mother-ship he's thinking
that a poet who eats in Guenther's
couldn't handle the vast expanses out there—
'What about lunch and dinner,' I answer,
'The ingredients of which we ransacked
all of civilization for—?'
'Ridiculous,' says my friend,
'I see no gods and sorrows hanging around—
just endless exploitation.
Care to buy a slightly used mobile home—?'

'What's it like to drive,' I ask.
'I don't know—It doesn't have a meter.
I flick a switch and pretend
I'm drawing a pail of water.
I fool around in the abyss—
Then I beat it back to the ship.
Mechanisms don't need our dances—
just our intent to move from A to B
in the story of the world.
What's your response—?' I answer:
'I spend my life among strangers.
And history rejuvenates all of them.
Eventually, you'll send out your novel
from a pretty cottage in the south of France—'

Not everyone will care to join him—
His silence up there is bigger, quieter,
less cluttered than my word: Desire.
But call out to an old drifter
taking a crap in the alley—
his thin grey butt resembling rags—
he'll wave the opportunity of a space-ride away.
His privacy as intact as anyone else's,
he'll scorn what is not of this earth.
The poetess might buy the lemon.
She's tired of roses and shit:
The alpha and the omega of her experience—
her notebook becalmed by the light of a rainy day.
Her boyfriend dangles from every word.

'Look,' my friend will insist,
once he realizes I can't make him
look good anywhere, 'I'll write
the hard-core stuff. You stick to beauty,
duty, and local politics.
And we'll split the difference.
As I leave the solar-system
I'll make Cleopatra laugh
long before any old wound says "ouch"
with the salt you rub into it—'
He talks logic to save my poor ass—
his cupped hand a seminar in the art of bitterness,
his lips sprinkled with breadcrumbs,
his face pale with abandoned devotion.

Soon I will submit a damage report,
and my friend will scrimp where he can
to drive a better make of word one day.
The earth begins to believe a poet's lies—
taking stock of herself, pushing for Spring.
A social worker wouldn't know to recall—
like my friend would in a pinch—
Rilke's roses and Mengele's experiments
and the traffic in images between them,
but she'll primp her hair, gird up her courage—
She'll check out a nearby room to see
if some old bugger is still alive in it—
The poetess re-applies her lipstick, and no one
escapes the springtime struggle for order.

AN EVENING IN THE PARK

Superstitious, I can't help but see
potential disaster in every new leaf,
in every blossom's season-opener.
I like the way you've done your hair,
but we have no business cruising around
like privileged jailbirds, forgetting
the dishes, the cats, and the rent,
driving ourselves proudly to the park.
It's too easy for us to imagine
that roughly half of the world approves
of all the pathetic little details
the great liquid night claims as life.
We leave the car, and something in the air
tastes like blood, our share of splendor.

Barely able to breathe, I blame all history
on mankind's weakness for magic.
Feeling shy and strangely light-hearted,
I find these yellow tulips magical.
It's too late now to turn around,
and a hill, gently sloping, calls us to itself.
Housing roots, stones, industrious creatures,
it's probably some bequest, that,
put out to pasture, has life easy
overlooking no field in Genesis.
But I can't tell what old materials
tagged with the names of rich women
are available for a new life elsewhere—
to flourish again on meaning's substitutes.

And remember that when I kiss you
and you think the moment too pat or brief,
affection still serves us as melodrama—
When our mouths do finally meet,
and you have a name and I have one,
and it's not so tedious to say them
along with the rest of the empire's imperatives—
then we pucker our lips and form
a few opinions on how far we have come.
Disfiguring myself, I portray an old man—
I won't be mistaken for anyone's friend,
for another pretty face who tells the fortunes
of those who flaunt their privileges
by gliding here and there a foot above the ground.

One petty rebellion deserves another—If we
walk alone through splendor like this,
so what? At large, we satisfy the state
and ease the burdens that we place
on a few difficult or obliging friends.
The rain broke open the honeysuckle—
The darkness appears to be waking up—
And as we pass beneath these cedars
and you sink deeper into the best times of your
life, your lipstick glows like the new
petunias. My shoes are as faded as old dust.
As man and woman, you and I,
trying harder, flop everywhere, falling back
on our primordial fear of rejection.

A recent dream still bothers you,
and you ask for some interpretation,
unsure as to who or what, on trial these days,
complicates the city's nasty social climate.
I look among the coquettish flowers
for drunk and unruly soldiers—for lazy fires
that lick at your laughing emperors and their
thrones. The peacocks drag around paradise—
Their heads bob on their shiny necks.
They stride toward invisible jealous presences,
wailing like Christ on his cross. No empire
dies just once, and you wear this nightmare
as though it were a party dress.

An oriental girl and a young white male
stand beside a pool and speak—
Seals, raising their luminous heads,
clamber down from the rocks
and obediently fall into the water—
their dark eyes seeming to shine with gratitude.
Everyone will insist on a meaning other
than one that shimmers with the ages—
But this exquisite couple now approach us.
You feel the weight of your unwieldy flesh,
and transfixed by the girl, I look away,
only to follow the grin of her lover
along its warm and careless trajectory
as it rises with its native talent for fun—

So, if the girl weighs as much as a feather,
then, as stone, it suits me to pound
constant contradictions into the grief—
Two weeks too early for the roses?
You dear, a painter, could sketch them in—
you, who would bring a pillow and a beer
and sleep in the shadows of cathedrals
where flesh still has substance.
And now the couple pass beyond us.
Like well-dressed spectres late for dinner,
they swept through our thoughts.
You dig your nails into my arms—
more as a way of pushing your luck
than out of any impolite jealousy—

Nearby, the geese explode into a cloud,
beating their suddenly enormous wings,
and everywhere we walk arm-in-arm
the birds, the flowers, and the trees
break off their conversations on the fly.
Poets, sure of this earth at last,
will purge themselves of this lovely commotion,
agreeing that decent people belong here,
declaring that no command of theirs is good again
for a feather, an alphabet, a fall—
I plunge into something that has been human too long—
the hysteria that spreads in your eyes like pools—
and I sink negligently like a stone,
a parody of what purpose once more becomes.

Certain men would kneel on their sturdy knees
and begin to pray at once,
gathering in their bewildered voices
the cries of these birds in flight.
Sarah would embrace the grieving Abraham
before shutting down her cave,
before her bones grow dark and cold again
and gods, men, and animals grow distant
in the perpetually frozen light.
But you lead me back to the car,
taking hold of my arm as though it creaks
as part of a forgotten door. Hard to tell—
in our moment of impending florescence—
which of us needs comforting the most.