

wesleyan poetry



my vocabulary did this to me

The Collected Poetry of
JACK SPICER

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It has meaning
Look
It can give us
Hope against the very winds that we batter against it.

For Billy

That old equalizer
Called time by some
Love by others
Cock by a few
Will come to meet you at the door
When you go
(Knowing that death is as near to you as water)
Go to fuck and say goodbye to your Mexican whore.
They will be waiting in the same room for you:
Time with his big jeans
Love with his embarrassed laugh
Cock with his throat cut wearing a bandana.
They can equalize anybody
January, February, March,
April, May, June, July, August, September,
October,
November,
December,
I love you, I love you,
Scream when you come.
There is not another room to go into
But hell, Billy,
It was hell when they shot you.

Dear Robin,

Enclosed you find the first of the publications of White Rabbit Press. The second will be much handsomer.

You are right that I don't now need your criticisms of individual poems. But I still want them. It's probably from old habit—but it's an awfully old habit. Halfway through *After Lorca* I discovered that I was writing a book instead of a series of poems and individual criticism by anyone suddenly became less important. This is true of my *Admonitions* which I will send you when complete. (I have eight of them already and there will probably be fourteen including, of course, this letter.)

The trick naturally is what Duncan learned years ago and tried to teach us—not to search for the perfect poem but to let your way of writing of the moment go along its own paths, explore and retreat but never be fully realized (confined) within the boundaries of one poem. This is where we were wrong and he was right, but he complicated things for us by saying that there is no such thing as good or bad poetry. There is—but not in relation to the single poem. There is really no single poem.

That is why all my stuff from the past (except the *Elegies* and *Troilus*) looks foul to me. The poems belong nowhere. They are one night stands filled (the best of them) with their own emotions, but pointing nowhere, as meaningless as sex in a Turkish bath. It was not my anger or my frustration that got in the way of my poetry but the fact that I viewed each anger and each frustration as unique—something to be converted into poetry as one would exchange foreign money. I learned this from the English Department (and from the English Department of the spirit—that great quagmire that lurks at the bottom of all of us) and it ruined ten years of my poetry. Look at those other poems. Admire them if you like. They are beautiful but dumb.

Poems should echo and re-echo against each other. They should create resonances. They cannot live alone any more than we can.

So don't send the box of old poetry to Don Allen. Burn it or rather open it with Don and cry over the possible books that were buried in

it—the *Songs Against Apollo*, the *Gallery of Gorgeous Gods*, the *Drinking Songs*—all incomplete, all abortive—all incomplete, all abortive because I thought, like all abortionists, that what is not perfect had no real right to live.

Things fit together. We knew that—it is the principle of magic. Two inconsequential things can combine together to become a consequence. This is true of poems too. A poem is never to be judged by itself alone. A poem is never by itself alone.

This is the most important letter that you have ever received.

Love,
Jack

For Joe

People who don't like the smell of faggot vomit
Will never understand why men don't like women
Won't see why those never to be forgotten thighs
Of Helen (say) will move us into screams of laughter.
Parody (what we don't want) is the whole thing.
Don't deliver us any mail today, mailman.
Send us no letters. The female genital organ is hideous. We
Do not want to be moved.
Forgive us. Give us
A single example of the fact that nature is imperfect.
Men ought to love men
(And do)
As the man said
It's
Rosemary for remembrance.

For Judson

El guardarropa, novedad, dispersar.
There are little fish that are made angry
At all that we do. No one can look at us better
Than their mouth. Little mouths
That eat anything.
Ale, automatization, scattering.
I could not invent a better skeleton
That you could
Like a pumpkin on wet Halloween
Flicker into.

For Robert

The poet
Robert D.
Writes poetry while we
Listen to him.
Commentary—follow
The red dog
Down the
Limit
Of possible
Quarterbacks.

On nobody else's shoulder.
Love them.
Go to sleep. Every color
Our bodies are made of."

A Postscript for Charles Olson

If nothing happens it is possible
To make things happen.
Human history shows this
And an ape
Is likely (presently) to be an angel.
If you dream anything
You are marked
With a blue tattoo on your arm.
Rx: Methadrine
To be taken at 52 miles an hour.

A BOOK OF MUSIC (1958)

With words by Jack Spicer

Improvisations on a Sentence by Poe

"Indefiniteness is an element of the true music."

The grand concord of what
Does not stoop to definition. The seagull
Alone on the pier cawing its head off
Over no fish, no other seagull,
No ocean. As absolutely devoid of meaning
As a French horn.

It is not even an orchestra. Concord
Alone on a pier. The grand concord of what
Does not stoop to definition. No fish
No other seagull, no ocean—the true
Music.

A Valentine

Useless Valentines
Are better
Than all others.
Like something implicit
In a poem.
Take all your Valentines
And I'll take mine.
What is left is better
Than any image.

Cantata

Ridiculous
How the space between three violins
Can threaten all of our poetry.
We bunch together like Cub
Scouts at a picnic. There is a high scream.
Rain threatens. That moment of terror.
Strange how all our beliefs
Disappear.

Orfeo

Sharp as an arrow Orpheus
Points his music downward.
Hell is there
At the bottom of the seacliff.
Heal
Nothing by this music.
Eurydice
Is a frigate bird or a rock or some seaweed.
Hail nothing
The infernal
Is a slipping wetness out at the horizon.
Hell is this:
The lack of anything but the eternal to look at
The expansiveness of salt
The lack of any bed but one's
Music to sleep in.

Song of a Prisoner

Nothing in my body escapes me.
The sound of an eagle diving
Upon some black bird
Or the sorrow of an owl.
Nothing in my body escapes me.
Each branch is closed
I
Echo each song from its throat
Bellow each sound.

Jungle Warfare

The town wasn't much
A few mud-huts and a church steeple.
They were the same leaves
And the same grass
And the same birds deep in the edge of the thicket.
We waited around for someone to come out and surrender
But they rang their church bells
And we
We were not afraid of death or any manner of dying
But the same muddy bullets, the same horrible
Love.

Good Friday: For Lack of an Orchestra

I saw a headless she-mule
Running through the rain
She had the hide of a chessboard
And withers that were lank and dark
"Tell me," I asked
"Where
Is Babylon?"
"No," she bellowed
"Babylon is a few baked bricks
With some symbols on them.
You could not hear them. I am running
To the end of the world."
She ran
Like a green and purple parrot, screaming
Through the sand.

Mummer

The word is imitative
From the sound mum or mom
Used by nurses to frighten or amuse children
At the same time pretending
To cover their faces.
Understanding is not enough
The old seagull died. There is a whole army of seagulls
Waiting in the wings
A whole army of seagulls.

The Cardplayers

The moon is tied to a few strings
They hold in their hands. The cardplayers
Sit there stiff, hieratic
Moving their hands only for the sake of
Playing the cards.
No trick of metaphor
Each finger is a real finger
Each card real pasteboard, each liberty
Unaware of attachment.
The moon is tied to a few strings.
Those cardplayers
Stiff, utterly
Unmoving.

Ghost Song

The in
ability to love
The inability
to love
In love
(like all the small animals went up the hill into the
underbrush to escape from the goat and the bad tiger)
The inability
Inability
(tell me why no white flame comes up from the earth
when lightning strikes the twigs and the dry branches)

In love. In love. In love. The

In-

ability

(as if there were nothing left on the mountains but
what nobody wanted to escape from)

Army Beach With Trumpets

Rather than our bodies the sand
Proclaims that we are on the last edge
Of something. Two boys
Who cannot catch footballs horseplay
On the wet edge.
Or if the sight of the thing ended
Did not break upon us like a wave
From every warm ocean.
We call it sport
To play on the edge, to drop
Like a heartless football
At the edge.

Duet for a Chair and a Table

The sound of words as they fall away from our mouths
Nothing
Is less important
And yet that chair
 this table
 named

Assume identities

take their places

Almost as a kind of music.

Words make things name

 themselves

Makes the table grumble

I

In the symphony of God am a table

Makes the chair sing

A little song about the people that will never be sitting on it

And we

Who in the same music

Are almost as easily shifted as furniture

We

Can learn our names from our mouths

Name our names

In the middle of the same music.

Conspiracy

A violin which is following me

In how many distant cities are they listening

To its slack-jawed music? This

Slack-jawed music?

Each of ten thousand people playing it.

It follows me like someone that hates me.

Oh, my heart would sooner die
Than leave its slack-jawed music. They
In those other cities
Whose hearts would sooner die.

It follows me like someone that hates me.

Or is it really a tree growing just behind my throat
That if I turned quickly enough I could see
Rooted, immutable, neighboring
Music.

A Book of Music

Coming at an end, the lovers
Are exhausted like two swimmers. Where
Did it end? There is no telling. No love is
Like an ocean with the dizzy procession of the waves' boundaries
From which two can emerge exhausted, nor long goodbye
Like death.

Coming at an end. Rather, I would say, like a length
Of coiled rope
Which does not disguise in the final twists of its lengths
Its endings.

But, you will say, we loved
And some parts of us loved
And the rest of us will remain
Two persons. Yes,
Poetry ends like a rope.



SOCRATES

Because they accused me of poems
That did not disturb the young
They gave me a pair of glasses
Filled with tincture of hemlock.
Because the young accused me
Of piles, horseradish, and bad dreams
They gave me three days
To burn down the city. What dialogues
(If they had let me)
Could I have held with both of my enemies.