OF POETRY AND POWER

Poems Occasioned by the Presidency and by the Death of John F. Kennedy

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Excerpts from the speech the late President, John F. Kennedy, recorded at Amherst College, October 23, 1963

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INTRODUCTION

Three months after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, a large memorial anthology composed primarily of newspaper verse was compiled. None of the now-famous Lincoln elegies found their way into that book. A poem by William Cullen Bryant did appear, but so did poems by "Mrs. F. W. Hall, 70 years of age," and "May" of Sparrow Bush, 13 years of age. The best anthology of poems about Lincoln—which included Melville's "The Martyr," Lowell's "Ode Recited at the Harvard Commemoration," and Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"—was not published until thirty years after Lincoln's death. And yet, all three of these enduring poems were actually written in 1865, the year of the assassination.

Immediately after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, poems began to be written about him and the man it had taken. The New York Times, the Saturday Review, and even the London Times Literary Supplement were inundated with them. For the most part, these poems were more notable for their sincerity than for their quality. It was after seeing a few clearly excellent poems that appeared in December, 1963, that we thought of writing to poets of recognized accomplishment to ask whether they, in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, written anything which might be appropriate for such a volume as this. Some of these poems were known only to other poets; others were of national and international reputation. In our letters, we promised to publish a book only if the response indicated that our assumption was correct—that a large body of fine poetry on this subject did, in fact, exist. We wanted the poems to be available to the generation that had lived with John F. Kennedy and must now live with the fact of his death.

The response to our inquiries was overwhelming. Kathleen Raine, for example, wrote from England:

I am glad to have an opportunity given me by your letter of expressing, if not publicly, at least not quite privately, the profound sorrow I felt at the death of President Kennedy. It was like a personal bereavement, the loss of one of the family made up of one's dear friends. I am as a rule utterly unmoved by public events, and cynical about politicians, but this was altogether different. I mourned when France fell to the Germans, but not again over anything in that way until the death of Kennedy. I had been in Washington during that flowering of poetry, music and all the arts that made his presidency seem like a renaissance (or renaissance) and was present at the dinner given for Robert Frost's 70th Birthday, New Frontiers, and John Kennedy, and Pope John XXIII; and one realizes that even now great men, and above all good men, can change the world of manners and anonymity. But what a year of bereavements—. Only, of course, death immortalizes. One never associated Kennedy with tragedy, with his youth and idealism and the joyfulness of his moment. He raised the United States to a great height; and I feel, as many do, that the tandem of the national mourning was begun upon this level to which he had tried to raise his nation; even in spite of the fearful depths the assassination revealed. But they are always there, the heights perhaps not. . . .

Miss Raine's letter eloquently stated feelings expressed in much of the mail received. Most correspondents acknowledged the appropriateness of such a book, and many immediately sent poems that they had written shortly after the assassination. Some, however, were skeptical. They argued that the uses of poetry had changed irrevocably since Lincoln's day; its manner and manner had become far more private; it no longer assumed a wide audience; nor could it properly attempt a public voice and a public responsibility. Therefore, the prospects of such a book succeeding as a collection of contemporary poetry rather than as a curious document of historical interest seemed to them slight.

The number of good poems we received after week after week, however, made us feel that these widely held views of the nature and uses of contemporary poetry ought to be re-examined. There certainly had been changes in poetic styles during the past hundred years, but can they be so easily equated with a complete change in the uses of poetry? After all, if traditional elegiac forms are no longer available, elegiac feeling and expression still are. If admiration and love, grief and fear, are still felt, poetry and art—though not, of course, as they were in previous ages. If poetry is now more persistently personal in its techniques and concerns than it once was, it nonetheless still reveals and informs human experience. The issue, then, is not whether such feelings can be expressed in modern poetry, but whether a public figure and a public event can inspire them. The answer, we think, is that this president and this event did.

Why this was so worth pondering. John F. Kennedy's youth, energy, and grace; his intelligence, wit, and evident pleasure in using words skillfully; his political shrewdness that did not depend on casuistry; his rare ability to seem solemn about oneself—all, doubtless, served to distinguish him for the poets. Miss Raine's letter, for example, speaks of grieving as though for a close friend. Mr. Kennedy's ability to be a successful political figure and at the same time a credible and attractive human being was closed, for some, at least, the gap which had developed between public and private experience. And then, too, there was the event of the assassination itself.

It was more than a matter of merely historic and journalistic significance. As it unfolded, an almost-forgotten range of human emotions, from the solemnity to the most noble, was revealed. At those unforgettable days of late November, 1963, drew relentlessly on, it became clear that we had all witnessed one of the dark, random gestures by which chaos reasserts itself in the universe, tearing through the bright patterns we weave about ourselves and call our civilization. Youth, beauty, noble aspiration (those words revolved because he lived) were struck down before our eyes. It was, most properly, a matter for art, for art has met with it before—and will again.
Robert Frost's mutual admiration; the Dallas motorcade in the telescopic sight; the military funeral and the eternal flame; and Mrs. Kennedy's incredible courage and dignity. Much is made of the Wild West (distorted in many of these poems) and of such symbols of America in the 1960's as supermaters, helicopters, and, of course, television. There are echoes of Whitman's elegy and evocation of a traditional image of evil in American writing, the spider. Reference is made to classical patterns and to figures of Shakespearian tragedy. Repeatedly, poets chose for their titles "November 22, 1963"—a date now frozen into American history.

The title, Of Poetry and Power, is from the penultimate line of the first poem in this book. In it, Robert Frost hailed John F. Kennedy's inauguration as "the beginning hour" of "A golden age of poetry and power."

"Though not composed exclusively of tributes to the late President, this book pays tribute to him. It does so, we believe, in the honesty, verity, and achievement of the individual poems it contains. President Kennedy valued individuality and skill, and he charged poets with a great responsibility. This book, then, in its way, aspires to bear witness to his faith in 'a world which will be safe not only for democracy and diversity but also for personal distinction.'

With the exception of Abraham Lincoln, no president has inspired us so much good poetry. Whether any of the poems in this book will endure for others to determine. We hope that this book will be a beginning, that more fine Kennedy poems will be forthcoming, and that they will be widely read. For, as John F. Kennedy said of Robert Frost: 'A nation reveals itself not only by the men it produces but also by the men it honors, the men it remembers.'

August 1964

Ewun A. Cleaves
Paul Schrainer

IRENE DAILEY

Irene Dailey created the role of Nettie Cleary in the Pulitzer Prize Play "The Subject Was Roses". It was called the "most magnificent realization of the season" by both the New York and Canadian drama reviewers. Just a few seasons before Miss Dailey had been very warmly received in London's West End when she opened in "Tomorrow With Pictures" at the Duke of York's Theatre. The English drama critics wrote "Every imitation rose of an English actress should be dragged by the hair of the head to see Irene Dailey."

Miss Dailey was among those honored to perform at The White House Festival of The Arts this past spring. She is Artistic Director of the school of The Actor's Company in New York City where she continues her studies and is a member of the teaching staff.

ROBERT FROST
FOR JOHN F. KENNEDY
HIS INAUGURATION

 Summoning artists to participate
 In the august occasions of the state
 Seems something artists ought to celebrate.
 Today is for my cause a day of days.
 And his poetry: Our old-fashioned praise
 Who was the first to think of such a thing.
 This verse in that acknowledgment I bring
 Goes back to the beginning of the end.
 Of what had been for centuries the trend;
 A turning point in modern history.
 Colonial had been the thing to be
 As long as the great issue was to see
 What country'd be the one to dominate
 By character, by tongue, by native trait.
 The new world Christopher Columbus found.
 The French, the Spanish, and the Dutch were downed
 And counted out. Heroic deeds were done.
 Elisabeth the First and England won.
 Now came on a new order of the ages
 That in the Latin of our founding sages
 (Is it not written on the dollar bill

OF
POETRY
AND
POWER

THIS ALBUM OF POEMS IS AN ATTEMPT TO MAKE REASONABLE A GHOSTLY REALITY, TO GIVE A RATIONAL ACCOUNT OF AN EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE TO UNDERSTAND.

Side I: Fact
To realize how splendid a man can be: straight, intelligent, strong and then observe another commit a terrifying incomprehensible act and to somehow reconcile both.

We carry in our purse and pocket still)
God nodded his approval as of good.
So much those heroes knew and understood,
I mean the great four, Washington,
John Adams, Jefferson, and Madison,—
So much they knew as consecrated men.
They must have seen ahead what now appears,
They would have been doing down about our ears.
And by the example of our Declaration
Make everybody want to be a nation.
And this is no aristocratic joke
At the expense of negligible folk.
We see how seriously the race swarms
In their attempts at sovereignty and form.
They are our wards we think to some extent
For the time being and with their consent,
To teach them how Democracy is meant.
"New order of the ages" did we say?
If it looks none too orderly today,
'Tis a confusion it was ours to sort
So in it have to take courageous part.
No one of honest feeling would approve
A ruler who pretended not to love
A turbulence he had the better of.
Everyone knows the glory of the twin
Who gave America the aeroplane
To ride the whirlwind and the hurricane,
Some poor fool has been saying in his heart
Glory is out of date in life and art.
Our venture in revolution and outlawry
Has justified itself in freedom's story.
Right down to now in glory upon glory.
Come fresh from an election like the last,
The greatest vote a people ever cast,
So close yet some things taken away.
It is no miracle our mood is high.
Courage is in the air in breathing winds.
Better than all the stalemate an's and 's.
There was the book of profile tales declaring
For the embalmed politicians daring
To break with followers when in the wrong.
A healthy independence of the throne,
A democratic form of right divine
To rule first answerable to high design.
There is a call to life a little sterner,
And braver for the earner, learner, warmer.
Less criticism of the field and court
And more preoccupation with the sport.
It makes the prophet in us all preasure
The glory of a next Augustan age
Of a power leading from its strength and pride,
Of young ambition eager to be tried,
Firm in our free beliefs without dismay,
In any game the nations want to play.
A golden age of poetry and power
Of which this moonday's the beginning hour.

'THE GIFT OUTRIGHT'

The land was ours before we were the land's.
She was our land more than a hundred years
Before we were her people. She was ours
In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
But we were England's, still colonies,
Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
FOOTNOTE TO LORD ACTON
While in the Convention they were nominating the Next President of the United States,
I thought of death.
Not merely that ambition is a skull
And all microphones handles of a coffin,
Not merely that those former public speakers Socrates and Caesar
Are less than the moth's foot,
That grass is all power,
And only the absolute worm corrupts absolutely—
Since on the rostrum they know this,
In the galleries where they clout clots and banners
they know this,
The Next President of the United States knows this,
Having for an example
If not Kohlesch
Then the Past Presidents of the United States.
The forgotten speaker,
The alternate delegate,
The trampled demonstrator,
The shoved and shunted eldest statesman with his honed war
unheard,
How irrelevant is death to the pieties of men
Death the dark, dark horse.

July 1960

DAVID IGNATOW
BEFORE THE SABBATH
The man is gone on a Friday.
Good father of silence,
give us peace of the Sabbath
with promises you grew in our blood.
Gone on a Friday before the Sabbath
of rest, his blood on stretchers
and on surgical instruments,
nowhere growing a promise,
the instruments cold, the forehead mute.
Good father of emptiness,
you keep saying over and over
in the birth of children
that we are not born to die,
but the mind is skilled,
for the man is gone on a Friday
before the Sabbath of the world remade.
Smiling, he is dead,
too quickly to explain.

By a hand in defiance
the fine, warm sun has been extinguished,
by one of us, talking of anger
and frustration. In the sudden darkness
the structures going up stand agape.
In unfinished corners we huddle,
growing cold.

DECEMBER MILES
FRONTIER
Daniel Boone stepped up to a window
(What a window?) with his trusty rifle,
And he shot his bear.
This was some bear.
It was a millionaire.
A Harvard, London, and a South Sea bear
A French, a football bear.
A corporate family
And incorporate party
Thoroughly transmuted
Into his rocking chair
Built and bureaucratized,
Dulled and desired and dared,
Indomitable bear.

What an investment
Of time, of love too,
All in one body,
A computation
Of maximal purpose,
A one-man world.

Daniel is angry
That after the eighth grade
This bear should travel
So far ahead.
Unfair
That a bear
Should rock so big a chair.
So gets him, and as he is got
Shows him

How many incarnations?
Fifty times it changed
Fifty times until this
Still it kept changing
And still it stayed there changing
Coveting inside of itself
In hideous suffering
This self-slaughtering thing

July 1962

JONATHAN WILLIAMS
DAVENPORT GAP
The tulip poplar is not a
poplar it is a magnolia:
liodendron tulipifera.
the young grove on the eastern slopes of
Mt. Cammerer reminds me
of the two huge trees
at Monticello, favorites of
Mr Jefferson;
and of the Virginia lady
quoting Mr Kennedy:
the recent gathering of
Nobel Prize Winners at the
White House—the most
brilliant assemblage
in that dining room
since Mr Jefferson
dined there
alone...

a liodendron
wind, a liodendron
mind

November 1962

CHARLES WRIGHT
NOVEMBER 22, 1963
Morning; the slow rising of a cold sun.
Outside of town the suburbs, crosshatched and wan,
Lie like the fingers of some hand. In one
Of these, new, nondescript, an engine starts,
A car door slams, a man drives off. Its gates
Banded, streets flagged and swept, the city waits.

DALLAS

RICHARD O'CONNELL
NEKROS
It drenched at the window changing
Changing its shape and its skin
It clung at the window changing
It seemed like a centipede
It seemed like a huge centipede
Or serpent or strange dragon

NEKROS

52

EASTON MANSEFIELD
THE ASSASSINATION OF
JOHN F. KENNEDY
... the Good, this Dazzel, the Kindly man...
I hear things crying in the world.
A nightmare congress of obscure
Delusions uttering overbear
The tilt and jingle of this death.
Who had a sense of world and man,
Who had an apt and antic grace
Lies lamented, lapped and large beneath
The tilt and jingle of this death.
The world goes on with what it has.
Its reasoned, right and only code.
Coasting, with military faith,
The tilt and jingle of this death.
RICHARD F. HUGO
KENNEDY UCCISO
Don't scare at me you God damn, sogs, sogs at nine at night. I know what the headline says. Blasted by some creep in Dallas. Don't ask me who Johnson is. Don't ask racism, communism? I don't know. That fountain lit and flowing over naked ladies, fish, animals, and birds, is blazed. You and words in giant print keep banging at my head.
I voted for him, not my kind of man. My kind could not be president, just a target for the cold. You dip in noisy knives of why. On whom some? Certamente. I know, here this very year. Yes, a Catholic. Yes. Yes. Very rich. A man who put same sixty million lives on some vague line and won. I'd vote for him again. But here in the piazza where the fountain makes wet love to ladies and stone swans. I want your questions and my hate to end.
The fountain runs in thighs of lovely stone, Ladies do quite well, nonbusine swans and lizards, giving in to fish. You Romans, quite simpatico. Someday we'll be you. I weep in the piazza, perfect wor. Take your questions to a painted star. My Italian fails. Come si dice? He was not afraid of what we are.'

C. S. FRASER
INSTEAD OF AN ELEGY
Bullets hit our the Life-Time smile, Apollo of the picture-page, Blunt-faced young lion Caught by vile Death in an everlasting cage.
And, no more young men in the world, The old men troop to honour him. The drums beat drum, Slight snow is swirled
In dazzling. pale requiem. And pale dark-veiled Persephone, A golden child in either hand, Stands by white pillar; Silently. It seems she might for ever stand.
In bright grey sun, processionals Of pomp and honour, and of grief, Crown that dead head With coronals.
Some stones hearts feel some relief: But not your heart, America, Beating so slow and sure and strong. Stricken in his Triumphal car,
Guard Caesar's bitter laurels long

With soldiers' music, rites of war; He had proved bravely when put on! The soldiers shoot. Rage echoes far Above the grave at Arlington.

MICHAEL Goldman
THE SPONTANEOUS MAN, THE GIFTED ASSASSIN
The spontaneous man, the gifted assassin lies down in our sleep tonight. In nervous weather, a cold nation settling inward, meets hate rising like an athlete from his pool, Smiling, flicking the water from his chest. On the stone steps the water smears like oil. He is naked; we are impressed.

WILLIAM BUTLER
NOVEMBER 25, 1963
Drums, drums, I too am dead. I breathe no breath, but only dread. I have no soul, but lay my head Upon his soul, and on that bed I stop.
Drums in heartfelt cadence drill His life away. My life is still. My heart drums down my wit, my will, And with his cadence, mounts the hill And stops. He stops. I stop. He ends. I end. He will not heal. I will not mend. He goes alone. I take no friend. His God is mine. He kneels. I bend. All stops.
And that is all of me tonight. I do not want tomorrow's light. I do not want the sound or sight Of time. No more. These words I write, And stop.

Side B: Chaos
When life seems absurd and hopeless, and reality becomes too bitter we must seek refuge somewhere -- we then have need of the poet.

JOHN SHERMAN
FORMAL ELEGY
I
A bundle of water, and O these waters are cold (warm at outset) in the dirty end. Murder on murder on murder, where I stagger, whiten the good land where we have held out. These fires were not for loot, however Byzantium hovers in the mind; were matters of principle—that's worst of all—
& tear & crazed mercy.
Ruby, with her mad claim he shot to spare the Lady's testifying, probably is sincere.
No doubt, in his still calm, his mind sits pure.

II
Yes. It looks like a wilderness—a pacem appellant.
Honour to Patrolman Tippit. Fugue to the rafter's widow.
Seven, I believe, play fatherless.

III
Scuppered the yachts, the choppers, big can, jets. Nobody goes anywhere. lengthened (days) into TV. I am four feet long, invisibly. What in the end will be left of us is a state, underworld.
If you want me to join you in confident prayer, let's not.
I stifled in & past, Marx, upon it, the bier.

IV
Too Andean hopes, now angry shade.— I am an automobilist. Into me climb many, and go their ways. Onto him climbed a-many and went his way.
For a while we seemed to be having a holiday off from ourselves—ah, but the world is wags, as sudden we came to feel and even his splendid hair kept not wholly real fumbling & fishing in & out of the Bay of Pigs, the bad moment of this excellent man, suffered by me as a small car can. Faithful to course we stayed.

V
Some in their places are constrained to weep. Stunned, more, though. Black foam. A weaving snake. An invulnerable sleep. It doing have to come so. All at once, heartless, in the tide of applause & expectation. I write from New York where except for a paraplegic exterminator— a gracious & sweet boy—nobody has done no work lately.

VI
It's odd perhaps that Dallas cannot after their crimes recognize, the President. Fat Dallas, a fit set. I would not perhaps have voted for him next time. Imagine Mr Kennedy blue the air, who is little now, with no chance to grow great; but who have set his touch across the State, true-intended, strong
VII
My breath comes heavy, does my breath.
I feel heavy about the President's death.

VIII
I understand I hear I see I read
schoolgirl in Dallas when the white word came
or slammed, cheered in their thoughtful grudges,
brought up to a loving tone.
I do not sicken but somewhat with shame
I shift my head an inch; who are my own.
I have known a loving Texas
woman in parades
and she was breastful & treacherous.
That borginest of words, whereas here I blush,
"education," peters to a mailing of us.

IX
An editor has asked me in my name
what wish or prophecy I’d like to state
for the new year. I am silent on these occasions
steadily, having no love for a fool
(which I keep being) but I break my rule:
I do wish the bullets swim astray
sent to the President, and that all around help,
and his heart keep sound.
I have a strange sense
he’s about to be the best of men.
Amen.

X
It is quiet at Arlington. Rock Creek is quiet.
My primroses, with Mount Auburn. Everybody should
have his sweet honeybeads. Yet let the young not go,
our apprentice King! Alas,
muffled, he must. He seemed good:
daisy in riot, daring, cool.
So
let us abandon the scene of disorder. Drop
them shattered bodies into tranquil place,
where moulder as you will. We compose our faces
cold as the creting waters; ready again.
The waters break.
All black & white together, stunned, survive
the final insolence to the head of you;
bow.
Overwhelmed, live.
A rifle fact is over, pistol facts
almost entirely are too.
The man of a wise face opened it to speak:
Let us continue.

ANSELM HOLLO
UNTIL DEATH
DO US PART

To think of them
from afar
To think of the distance, that air
Its broken voices

thousands of miles, the sea
and the rivers, returning
the sun also rising
but then
it was less: the distance
two hundred yards. They are moving
into the eye, wide open,
opened in the earth
the earth, to let him in
the suddenly opened eye
the windshield meshed
into a honeycomb of light—

To think of them
as close: as he was
his head in her lap, her arm
across his chest

as they were floating, floating
wherever it was
we were going, we cannot stay
on the road

yet must drive on
and out of their sight who try
who tried to think of us, as we entered
the dark city

to be excised in a light
of diamonds and death,
death center of stillness
where there is
no fear
out of their sights
each into his
her night, now shared
forever.

RICHARD BAKER
NIGHT OF THE
PRESIDENT'S FUNERAL
Sixty thousand faces go dark on the Strip
I come home 3 strangers in whiteface
are smashing my walls &
there's blood on my pillow
splinters of glass!

Dead Verlaine
haunts in the closet, fingers
trail from his wings. His
unlovely bald head
is a dirty vermillion
& he eats the hawk's rite leavings.

A rain of crutches outside the window
Janet throws knives at her husbands.
These are the others
they are your brothers
of course he was killed.

Is not a harp at all. Or maybe
A monstrous bird inside the warehouse
Must be fed by everything—ships, poems,
Stars, all the years of our lives.

THOMAS WHITBRAD
NOVEMBER 25, 1963
The assassination of the President,
Among its many effects, confers upon
The slightest act a clarity of precision.
The sharpening of a pencil with a knife,
My old Scout knife, twenty years old; today
Sharply resem of its invented self.
The cutting of my nails with old small scissors,
Try, as always, not to lust the quick.
Then encountering, taking up the pencil,
Tooth marks, not mine, and breaking it in half
In the frustration of rage, despair, and grief
At life not being as it ought to be.
She hit it. Our love should be alive, as he
Much more should be, and stupidity is not.

MARJORIE MIR
FOUR DAYS IN NOVEMBER
In late autumn sun,
This coldness without season.
Strangers asking how.

A long rain today,
Cold against the face, has quenched
Final disbelief.

No movement of hours
Disturb this room or betrays
The sly leap of pain.

Once restless as wind,
His quickness borne in slow march.
Nothing in its time.

RICHARD BAKER
NIGHT OF THE
PRESIDENT'S FUNERAL
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I come home 3 strangers in whiteface
are smashing my walls &
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A rain of crutches outside the window
Janet throws knives at her husbands.
These are the others
they are your brothers
of course he was killed.

X. J. KENNEDY
DOWN IN DALLAS
Down in Dallas, down in Dallas
Where the shadow of blood lies black
Lee Oswald nailed Jack Kennedy up.
With the nail of a rifle crack.

The big bright Cadillacs stumped on their brakes
And the man in the street fell still
When the shattering gun like a tooth of sin
Coiled back from the window sill.

In a white chrome room on a table top,
Oh, they tried all a scalped knows
But they couldn’t spell stop to that drop-by-drop
Till it bloomed to a rigid rose.

Down on the altar, down on the altar
Christ blossoms in bread and wine
But each asphalt stone where the blood dropped down
Is burnt to a cactus spine.

OH DOW IN DALLAS, DOWN IN DALLAS
Where a desert wind walks by night
Lee Oswald nailed Jack Kennedy up
On the cross of a rifle sight.

GEORGE CUOMO
THE MAN OF MY DREAMS
The wild man that last night I dreamed
Now sleeps to dream of me.
This morning in my fantasy
I do not bother him:
Nothing deters this confessor.

And which is worse—to watch
His simpering acrobatics
Or prance for him the way
He dreams me to, balancing globes
On my nose and whipping
Plesk that perhaps awake I love?

Last night his shots were raw as glass;
Though he sweats and stinks, flares
Red with riot, I know
He is armed, and cool, and can aim.

I, assured by the morning news,
Scrape jars for daily fare,
While he, random as a lobster,
Writes our history.

RUTH LANDSHOFF YORCK
IM JFK
We may stop worrying.
Our best man died.
We know of no one now we can not spare.

Our man was BADLY shot.
The marksmen hit the mark:
a straightshooter.

Still
The trigger was not triggered by a thought
nor by the shooting pain of high ideals
but purifying faith's anathema.
Widow
And so she took a ring from her finger and placed it in his hand.
—EMILIE MAHLER

Let her take his blood on her tongue, his being wine at her green altar, the sacrament of summer in her veins. Heal her, her children with books and duties, with winter land for walking, a child in her arms, and no office except the natural care of fall woods bending, left, driven. And may she be fall, weeds, all beauty’s luck and fullness. Heal, make her well with my country’s bloom. Let her have to know and not learn again.

Supplication of the Poor
Bipartisan committee of the Congress hall the hearse into Pennsylvania Avenue Men in the Congress who were blinded by your vision and refused your living acts pave the long route of your cortege with sanctimonious lies—always the machinery for plunder and blood, not yours then or now. The market rises and falls. Rich men pay little taxes. Lack-law rules. The substance is eaten. The husks drift in the wind. My President, where can we go? Into what country where the white poor and the black poor do not have to barter dignity for bread?

The Post-Christian Era: an Oration
But the wise prayers of children in the dark must ebb into silence. The eunuchs of Rome and New York must burn their robes. The violent and guilty boyhood of nations carrying thorns and crosses must end and be forgotten. All the sacred emblems of religious awe, of tribal arrogance that have killed you must be laid down: the plowshares that were beaten into swords, the sacred wine-drops molded into bullets, the blinding coils of atoms that have killed you—must all be buried.

The creation of gods to forgive the evil in men, the organs of guilt and expiation, must be left behind in the same way men once shed the long hair from their bodies and lost their fangs. Let them lay all their rings and weapons, with their archaic beauty and terror, on your grave.

Light at Arlington
At Arlington the fall sunlit dies. Across the dark Potomac, Lincoln sits, hands on stone knees. At Arlington no steel or silver, no sword or chalice will remain clear as your eyes.

President I love as my grandfather loved Lincoln, in the silence after the bugle, lie down. Lie in your forest of stone. Lie close to Lincoln.

On the dark hill a flower of light is blooming clear as your eyes were.

JACK MARSHALL
ELEGY FOR THE NEW YEAR

1
Dulled by the news, all day I keep behind The curtains of my room. They will have to do In keeping my dried-out self From falling through the air like a leaf As the year tapers to a close. This is the legendary season When the young die sooner than the old.

2
Calm as a hurricane’s eye, My T.V. set in black and white Stares unblinking at Washington— Pearly, spacious, dazzled with shock— Where under a sky of cold Lingering Confederate grey, A stallion, Black Jack, tosses And snorts, spiritied as your soul Gone from this world, ours by default.

3
America stops turning over her conscience, Halved these hundred years like Hamlet’s, And clutches her flag’s reopened wound Running red through the bandages. In a sky swept clean of cherry blossoms, She seems to see a future drained Of all color but black and white, alternatives. White Christmas comes, The Union will twinkle Like a child, her arms full of gifts, Pretending all is well.
Her conquest of Versailles
And Athens. Downturns
You praise the Spartans.

II. At the Funeral
Let all those who would stop a war
Sit in a chair and rock,
And stare at a woman with flowered hair;
Have her chef prepare
A banquet for all the heads of state:
Let them advance between the Spartan guards,
And past the print and past the poet.
Let the music play, have them dance,
And rocking in your rocking chair,
Point to a state of possibility:
The fragile arts of peace
Shatter the weather of war.
Now six gray horses draw you to where you are,
Not to Versailles, Sparta, or Athens.
The seventh horse is wild and black
And rideless and paws the streets of Washington
Where you are rocking and will always rock.

John Fitzgerald Kennedy,
You could not stop the shells,
The drowning of your boat in war;
You could not stop the snow the sky dumped down,
The cold, the leech smoking when your priest invoked
The Lord, your poet stuck blind, the bullets in your head,
The six gray horses drawing you to where you are
Rocking and will always rock.

The seventh horse is rideless, wild and black.

GRAY BURR
A DEATH BEFORE KILLING
Raw ulcers and his aspirin signify
Love lost and sins as a cannon splintering
A hull, as, decks awash, and founding,
He staggered to the sheer of a wave as high
As childhood’s surge to shores he never reached.
And he hungered for a speech that might sway
The flesh marooned, the ghost forever beached
On a small uncharted island of dimay.

Round him shod waters weave and crash.
Birdflights cut hieroglyphs in a sky
He may not read. At night reefs gnash
And rip the bottoms out of dreams, and the Dry
Tortuga of his day drain all his leaf
As the sail, forgiveness, thinks to a handkerchief.

RICHARD FROST
ON NOT WRITING AN ELEGY
My friend told me about kids in a coffee house
who laughed and celebrated the killing. Another friend
didn’t care, sick at his own divorce,
drinking martinis with a delicate hand,
saying he couldn’t care when I said I cried
like everybody. Still, I am the vain one,
a bullet in my shoulder, six seconds to go
before another burns in my head. Trying
to write about the thing, I always end
by feeling I have been shot. My brain, my spine
gone, and with time winding foolishly,
I am raced, tabbed, cleaned out, bored, bown,
carried and lowered in. I have had this done
on a shiny day with my wife and bodyguards
and everyone there to cry out, and I have cried
without trying and without a clear thought.
This death has had me where I cannot write
or hate or love, numb as a coined face
fallen where all flames have only to burn
down. Lost where I must only lose my place,
I mourn the glories of our blood and state.

H. L. MOUNTZOURER
THREE NIGHTS OF MOURNING:
JOHN F. KENNEDY
I. The Night of the Murder
The sea begins, far out beyond the light,
His stalk in iron boats,
Spitting foam, slobbering shells of teeth,
Green-black rage spinning from his eyes—
Advances, nearly swoons, begins to run,
Arch, screams, pounds upon his victim’s throat—
Long, white, exposed and soft, blood beating
Blue within:

Asleep, stretched out with veins torn,
Sandy mouth mumming Forgivne,
Sandy hair washing in the bloodhungry
Arms of his petrified lover.

And run, my heart says, watching.
No one walks on water here.
No salvation, leaves of wondrous feeding,
No nets of splendid fishes. Only the victim
And the cold discarded spear.

II. The Night of the Burial
The light flashes, two whites, one red,
In pulsing affirmation of our cycle’s
Real stability.
And the sea walks slowly, calm,
Takin’ the air at twilight time.
He wears white spats, green corderoy,
Holds a double violet umbrella.
He meanders absent from his dotage,
Although the fun’s at hand of counting sky,
Breeze, and all the lovely swarming elements.
For somehow as he wanders, mumming,
He seems to see in as a liquid dream
The fact of his antiquity:
As he not a stadified king sitting on a throne
Beneath a million tons of swirling conscience,
Conscience eddying through magnesim
Jagged holes that were his eyes and mouth,
And, stone-struck, does not hear with awe
Innocent fishes whispering through the socket
Of his heart:
Yeu killed your son, you mangled
The child, then threw the sword
Upon the silver sand.
But no. He is a dandy prince meandering.
He steps lightly, meets one of his girls
Wreathed in cloud, periwinkle earrings, sunset eyes:
He sibilation her long white throat with jeweled hand.

I am not afraid.
The sun sinks in melded rage.
A single star memories
All the bitter glory of this day,
I wonder at the calmness of the sea.

ROBERT WATSON
LINES FOR A PRESIDENT
I. The Inauguration and Shortly After
You could not stop the snow the sky dumped down,
The cold, the leech smoking when the priest
Invoked the Lord. Did the Lord in answer jibe
Your poet blind? Was that your high silk hat
They held against the sun for Robert Frost?
And still he could not see his words for you.
Courtless, then, as if winter were not here.
You blow cold words, your hand chops air.

Your wife’s French chef breaks skulls
Of eggs. Ushers an attendant
Gardens in her hair.
A maid brings scented pearls,
The world of Louis and Molibs,
III. A Night One Month After

The sea is brave.
He wears no coat, no boots
This stinging night of wind and sleet.
He holds his curvy head up high defiantly,
His white teeth exposed in perfect laughter.
The vast hole of his mouth is zinned
With whiskly incense of the sky.
He knows he cannot die.
He has forgotten death and what a murder
Is or may become. His brawny hands curve
Skeletons of ship dangling on the rocks:
He's broken a brass and uses it
To pick his teeth.
His business goes on. He is full
Of holy passion: rising, puff.
Shooting on the moon's horn of sensual time
And falling, empty, on her whim.
Whether he creeps, wild, or dances, pranced,
Or merely cowers in drunk at three o'clock
To the dingy hollowness of busy—id bold
And unimportant now. He sleeps.
He is master. He must arise tomorrow,
Feel the bottom of his bed to find what bone
To no avail tried to irritate his sleep,
His long childish dream.

I neither run away nor acquiesce.
I stand and button up my thick black coat
Against the wind and hail and try not hard to cry.
Tonight I wish to feel my own self-pity,
To mourn the profligate technic of this life.
But I see the sea torch,
Cry out and die, then come once more alive
(Murderer and murdered, concomitant). Always
attempting conversation with the living.
I know the crush of all of us
Beneath our floating salt indifferent death,
And what is my small sorrow,
What grain of sand abiding.
Moving in mercy at the mercy
Of a power not mine nor yet its own?

RICHARD EBERHART

THE SPIRIT OF

POETRY SPEAKS

Each man must suffer his fate,
Whether it comes by love, or by hate.
Kennedy lies in Arlington,
Who loved mankind, who strove for peace.
The killer has no redemption,
Shuffled into his grave by the police.
None can escape the crack of doom.
Alone, all come to a sorrow room.

RAYMOND ROSELIEN

FOR JOHN KENNEDY, JR.

Stand at attention
For a moment
Let as birthday candle
Or bullet
This is your father
And our brother
In outer space
Weather

Be straight with
Your man's
eye on dark
providence
Cows. You have a flag
And scrap
Of black
crepe

OSCAR MANDEL

WE WHO DO NOT GRIEVE
IN SILENCE

1
First came the special issues of the magazines
With loyal photographs: the old rich times, the rocking chair,
The wife who knew who Dahl is, the muscular war,
The politics retooched and smiling, the happy hammer
Of his power, the idocy of death. Fifty cents.

The president was dead, tears fell and incomes rose.
Wait, brothers, wait,
My grief has gone to market too.

2
The pictures books cost more but they were meant to last,
They used the most caring words, like strong ideals
And dedicated heart and faith in our democracy,
And those who sold the plaster statuettes (one dollar each),
Their right hand mortgaged, their left rang up the cash.

The president was dead, laments and incomes rose.
Wait, brothers, wait,
My grief has gone to market too.

3
Congressmen deplored into the camera, the voters saw
Their simple, manly sorrow. Foreign crowds were caught
Bowing usefulness toward the poor man's grave.
All were shocked; what's more, they really were, alas
One could not keep one's honest sob sobs untethered.
The president was dead, tears fell and reputations rose;
Wait, brothers, wait,
My grief has gone to market too.

4
Next came the records, and his voice was heard again
To make flesh creep from shore to shore. A publisher
Withdraw a luckless expost, a sensitive biography
Recoup the loss. Three journalists retold the terror
Irresistible. We shuddered, covered up our eyes, and bought.

The president was dead, laments and incomes rose.
Wait, brothers, wait,
My grief has gone to market too.

5
When great men breathe their last, their expiration
Swell's our sails. Films shall be turned, sermons released,
Memoir composed and statues erected. Pure grief is silent, yes,
And yet pure hardens is too hard for us as well. We are
Our comedy: the standards we betray, we made.
The president is dead; my poem goes to press,
Grief, brothers, grief
Is my profit, but all the same I grieve.

ALAN ANSEEN

THE DEATH OF NEARCHEUS

A Threnody in the Form of a Pastoral Dialogue

Melampus. This death is timely.

Moipus. Most uneasily. There on the heights of life
Looks and manner gave a momentary unfamiliar
Grace to power, power that brawly sticks
In the throats and the ways of the arithmetical mass.

Melampus. A cipher can vote No
With his trigger finger
Against the idleness
Of pretensions to charm and good will
On the part of the already gifted
With what ought to make charm and good will
Unnecessary.

Moipus. On the contrary. Every act of force supplants
Some countervailing smile, some interceding dance
to deny
What the devil and gravity incubate all too
Intimately.
That what can be measured is altogether joyless.

Melampus. Let us keep that illusion.
The fear of the assassin
Is wholesome for nymphs and demigods;
And the hope of the assassin,
Balm to a tugloide folk.

Moipus. Nearcheus and Nearchus were not floating
The shiffless and independent submerged
But quickening their brutish lymph
With shows of features, with aspiring sounds,
To share with their leaders an unregulating delight
In all excellence in the manifold of fields
American hospitality unfreces for talents.

Melampus. And that anarchy generosity
Rewards the untaughted too
With a liberal target
For their discontent.
And among the discontented papers vented
Was a cartridge.

Moipus. So new to state, so eager in their child bearing,
Their feelings toward one another and the world,
The play of mind and feature that united them
And them to what quickens, what grows
And exfoliates in life
Blanked by the spur and drip of ever more
Meanless blood!
The team of an ungrateful people require

An adequate inadequacy for this high negation's agent.

Melampus. Sir, he lacked advancement.

W. H. AUDEN

ELEGY FOR J. F. K.

Why there? Why there?
Why thus, we cry, did he die?
The Heavens are silent.

What he was, he was:
What he is fate to become
Depends on us.

Remembering his death,
How we choose to live
Will decide its meaning.

When a just man dies,
Lamentation and praise,
Sorrow and joy are one.

ROBERT SWARD

FIVE POEMS FOR J.F.K.

Reading Buber

Words escape me, I face a loss
Feel absences, the moon's weight.
I am chalk, the skies behind me;
Growth of it, catastrophe, the world's fate.

I am silent, at ease. Trust only, I pause.
"History," one says,
"Is an approach," the succession of sounds—
Myself at that point in it that I know,
Holding the breath in the dark.

That It That Thing Light

Night, light and the night, light
Sails that were not clouds but sails—
The wind was who a thing I believed
Sails, that is thing

Light, that wind, gave rise
Itself, to Night, light and the night, light,
I, O stone. The world is fast, light
Who ever more holy sails I dream.

Celebration

Outside, the snow on a low
Black stock car. Its side collapsed,
There is the outline
Of a numeral, rusted 8 or 9.
Across from us an old man
Reads Gray's Anatomy.
Christmas bells on the P.A. system,
Cars gliding on packed ice,
Sounds of the Short Line buses.

Dec. '63

The talk is of Johnson and a Congress
Which has done nothing. The accents are
Of Virginia, Maryland, the whining
South. I sit in the back booth of a Chinese
restaurant,
Washington, 1963. Before me lie
The New York Times, some old coursework
And a journal I carry everywhere.
I am bemused, distracted even.
All over things fly in and out of windows.
Rouches run up and back across the floor.
What is there to object to? I drink beer
And eat Chinese fortune cookies.
I am heartened. The revelation is at hand.
Old coursework, objects on a table.
All landscapes, the murals and tapestries—
It is time to go home now. The new snow,
Shush, the dark. Our seven children, my three wives
Wait for me. Already I am embracing them,
The snow upon me, pockets full of presents,
Certainty, groceries. I am, on the whole, in step with the new Administration.

Poem
The rocks dark, green as leaves. Moss clings
To them, as to a belief in them.

Breathes.

Side IV: The Phoenix
A type of thinking quite prevalent today is that of the absurdity of existence and the folly of human striving. It is easy to lose faith in man, and hope in the future of his kind and to state these pessimistic ideas. However we are not only body but soul, not only matter but spirit. To exclude either in our thinking would be to negate half of life's potential.

EDWARD POLS
A tumult of images insist, repeat, repeat, traverse, and re-traverse, until the dreadful Sunday's counterpoint—She with your children pacing to the drum, while bare the prisoner comes, and dies under the blind regale of violent Dallas—Is on the night screen one more time released, and we believe at last what on the Friday we so feared to know.

That Friday night St. Patrick's bells came to me in an old Maine house. The white against them spoke—spoke the final words each of us finds when moved and when a public voice exactly reply—Spoke the various accounts of the city. Some nonsense unmasked me yet again (Or was it the passing of my youth that struck?) So, lest the children see my tears, I walked awhile between the arbor and the barn and thought of you passing once in 'thirty-seven. In the spring of freshman year and of your life on the Yards walk past Widener's steps and up the slope towards Palmer House that was. There stood a Norway maple on that hill which every spring spread out a Cape of greenery gold upon the ground, and there we passed, Treading the bright minuscule blossom down, In the slant light of morning and of our lives.

Your smile held them—how shall I say—a thought too much assurance, and your walk a pride. To daunt a green and envision boy who'd wrought a manner but no ease for all he tried to be at home: you seemed to own the place I loved but did not set possess. But stay, there comes to mind the man of forty-five: A man who wore that humor in his face. Did not let youth or wealth or rank betray him to forget this truth: when we arrive who come here late, the place we meant to find, and win and love is altered out of mind.

So, much of worth in what we take is lost—That Harvard gone of Eliot and of James, That land of Arcady before the host Of yours and mine sailed here to stake their claims. Provincial places though (your smile concedes) And not perhaps as open to the world As we with myriad ties of blood and faith Have made them in your time; and this aside, For all the pride that's vanished with your wharf, For all that Camen's hamlet need be fueled: They changed to take us in, but we transformed them out of all they could foresee.

The tree is gone that once bestrewed the ground Each springtime with a green-gold grace: New buildings flank that place, while moved and turned around, Cropped Palmer House looks strange—So all things shift and change—
But though your life is gone and my youth I see you now in truth transformed, replendent in our rush. They say you were still half symbol, being given so little time; come, let us take you so, but in this sense: In that region of possibility you fill there, still, your bright inconstant essence inclines to its own completion, still shapes almost its own actuality, still contrives some reason, measure, humor in our lives.

BARBARA GUEST
VERBA IN MEMORIAM
How to speak of it when words today go rapidly downhill to hide under the grasses,
To let the stanzas on its miraculous wheels convey what was man and existed as the warm road we still ride and run after.
Deciding, after all, it is the land that goes on expanding, contracting, a place that is green or sandy, that is marsh or mountain very like words.
I am going to use these words they were always usable and useful to this man. He would not object to phrases hiding themselves under the grasses. He has found them there. The earth is now more constant to him than are we who need the upper air.
What he had planned had something of the classic in it i.e. to say he thought in marble we understood despite those turns of elegiac that he wished
Where he lived where he once lived to be consecrated to Demos despite his welcome to princes his reading of their scrolls.
This was youthful and proper for one who desired an heroic name Admiring the columns the temple still standing the grasses fresh as a cupful of light
The way a new word strikes the tender skin.

NEIL MYERS
KENNEDY POEM
The shot, the horse snaps open in the sky, the parts drift slowly down, the calf
with them, red & white, an arrow
in his head, into the gaps between pink domes,
panoply, soldiers, horses, drums, an astonishing emptiness love denied, "stunned" & meant just that, with something less official which possibly remains: pope & holy man on a mountain, bare trees, birds, sick, lame, stupid, dead listening avidly to nothing new but to which nothing is alien, a waterfall briefly clean for belief, the now we are watching the fights again.

To be inscribed on his tomb and so it was.
But the inscription must include our names. Who lived in his time. Who now can be said to be a lonely generation.
As if one more of our artists had died.
And there were only a few who remained.

GREGORY CORSO
LINES WRITTEN
NOV. 22, 23—1963
—in Discord—
Ah, the Disney dinosaur's light laughter & a little blonde girl's tears
What sad what sick what damned juxtaposition monster and child, punk and President society and poet, bullets and flesh
Bullets the size of Conoy Island fishing worms can obliterate bix pow-out the whole shebang
No man's the whole bit. But that young President was more than a little bit. The captain should go down when his ship goes down. But when the captain dies... the ship sails on—
O failure Christ
Come ye illiterate creepy dumbbells harken the cry of the true Assassin!
I damn I fail! I summon the Blessed Lord of the Ice Cold Nanook Country and eat raw seal meat with Him! I curse the earth in Space and in Time! I peer upon the Evolution of the Rocks! I weep upon the first living things! Bang my fists on the unknown age of the world! I vomit up Natural Selection and the Change of the Speciest! I laugh like a sick dinosaur o'er the invasion of the dry lands by Life! I smirk at the butterfly like a pimpily-faced stumble-bum! By the wings I yank by the wings the lovely wings. By the throat I smote the Age of the Reptile! So too the Age of the Mammt! So too O very much so the Ancestry of Man! Man descended from a walking ape! I awake the lazy greedy Neanderthal and spit in his big sad stupid eye! I pummel my Colt .38 into the iron skin of the Palaeolithic muralist! I look contemptuously down upon the screwed-up Neolithic creep! I beckon the coming of those early bastards much like ourselves today and blow a satiric breath of death in their hoary faces! O bows fortune! I shake your devil! So small am I to the proportion of so small a tree And a sun so small in that sunny sea called Eternity Insignificant sun lamp of life! Bright and not laked God! Conjurer of string beans! O so small am I and smaller the things I eat and believe O tiny Adam O tiny Eve So it is So it shall come to be The gap caused by my magnified midgery shall become someday like all great Chins on the China basin for the new China seat! And so Kennedy and so America and so I and so B and so C With a full arrow and Vs bow I'll lay em low O Lord of Death! O Fame of Death! When a captain dies The ship doesn't sink
And though the crew weeps the los
The stars in the skies
are still boss.

CAROL BERGÉ
PAVANE FOR THE
WHITE QUEEN
The Loved Wife Falling Slowly Awake

for JBK

I. In the Rooms of Music
Not as the word death. But
as confusion: memory of bells
into voices of broken bells,
round of torn strings: songs
into this silent scream. Not
the keening of the loverless,
the ugly in their disarrayed
skins. Who have not tasted
rooms of music shaped as eyes
through flesh: woman near man.
Not as the word death. But
as amnestic gone suddenly mute,
shut memory of night voices
into sharp shrieks: cracking,
as when eyes shutter. I move
forward your empty room. Begin
stopping the usual gestures.
To cease listening. The sound
of music in eye-shaped rooms
having stopped with one note.

II. In the Street of Eyes
Eventually, it happens. I move
into our streets, slowly, I see
his head; its shape is almost yours.
He is not you. At first I thought.
Or that man. Or that. A tall man
near the door. In that car. The
park yesterday. Shops. It is a
slow nightmare of wrong faces,
turn of cheek, memory of your jawline,
eye, the way your feet would
strike the pavement and pivot you.
Shadows of occasional bell, as
someone unconsciously inquires you.
I am supposed to know where you are,
that no city contains you whole.
Yet this odd stumbling over raw
or stumbling hints: this looking into
the sudden stranger's unloved face.

III. In the Dust House...
This furniture which was our
talks clumsily about our loving,
I thought we were bound by wood,
leather, cloth of our own skins.
now my dark will stop steps
before reaching our silk pillows.
How to move, to sleep, now that
your warm skull has become stoned
where marble dust congeals to
walls, rooms down which my feet
run noisily and melancholy
in thick night or sharp dreams
cushioning one shill red day:
God! that your feet are gone!
and mine, marking out the hour,
perform a mockery of minutes
amid the velvet and the marble.
Candles, sunlight that glazed
when your eyes shaped our days
turn now to flames of anguish,
all flutes go dull, the magic
slips through my fingers, marks
blood on parquet, on old satin,
the mourners note my vertebrae
pressed into my white cup.
It was this castle we once lit,
our lives parallel to love,
to deep sleep, gentle confidences.
With the same cry as that child
who bears your eyes, I am turned
forward the watchers, in their
terrible distance of armchair,
of paper: my cheeks and rips
blanched, insomniated beneath
a careful avalanche of pale powder
and papers: and am remembering
our hands, our feet, as it was
when we moved unaware in room
of careless laughter, banquet.
bed warm into a sleep of love
where you have gone without me.
The sounds, the rooms fragment
and drift, it is too quiet, the
love having stopped with you,
the castle flames like paint,
I became my own skin and turn
before their eyes into marble
lit from within by your face,
voice stillled by one red note.

PHILIP BOOTH
THANKSGIVING 1963
She walks a beach assaulted by the sea.
Gray waves horse the tide ashore.
He
sails far out, alone, beyond retract.
The muffled sea drums slowly on her heart.
She walks against a wind that never sleeps.
The sea originates and ends. She keeps
the beachhead, raining in an empty horse.
Her beachhead keeps long ships on their long course.
Now may she sleep by how the slow sea breaks.
And finally weep, this night of our dark thanks.

ANTHONY OSTROFF
INTIMATE PARTY IN
GUADALAJARA, DEC. 1963
Jorge Hernandez, architect,

Of the two lovely wives
Accorded for Señor Diaz.
And architecture. Add
The pure, sweet love
Of those two wives
Attending sorrow
Silently.
Their untranslatable smiles
Translated:
"Si."

BARRY SPACKS
BY THIS TO REMEMBER
By this to remember, this spring again
As we walk by the river, the tiled Chariot,
And the golden dome of the Statehouse glint
In the mm, and the cans on Storrow Drive
Glitter, rushing chrome sums before them:
A tangible world and the pride of life.
The urban seagulls drift on the sky
Like words upon silence; and needles of light
Striking the water, flash as they enter.

One dark November we lost a man
Who was like this day.

ALASTAIR REID
THAT DYING
As often as not, on fair days, there is time
For words to flex their muscles, to strut like peacocks,
Discovering what is in the act of saying—
The music of meaning emerging from the sound
Of the words playing.

Every now and again, however, the glass breaks,
The alarm shrills, the women hide their faces.
It is then that words jump to their feet and rush,
Like white-faced stretcher-bearers,
Tight-lipped, tense, to the unspeakable scene.
They grab air, water, syllables, anything handy.
There is blood. No nonsense. No adjectives. No time.

O that these words might have been
A tourniquet of a kind, to keep
That incredible life from spattering away,
Instead of as now, a drip, a bell
Tolling, a stutter, a sigh, silence.

There is nothing now for these words to do
But walk away aimlessly, mute, like mourners.

From the Address of President John F. Kennedy
At the Dedication of the Robert Frost Library,
Amherst College, October 26, 1963

In America our heroes have customarily run to men of large
accomplishments. But today this college and country honor a
man whose contribution was not to our size, but to our spirit;
not to our political beliefs, but to our insight, not to our self-
estem, but to our self-comprehension.

In honoring Robert Frost we therefore can pay honor to the
deeper sources of our national strength. That strength takes
many forms, and the most obvious forms are not always the
most significant.
The men who create power make an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness. But the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable, especially when that questioning is disinterested.

For they determine whether we use power or power uses us.

Our national strength matters; but the spirit which informs and controls our strength matters just as much. This was the special significance of Robert Frost.

He brought an uninspiring instinct for reality to bear on the platitudes and picnics of society. His sense of the human tragedy fortified him against self-deception and easy consolation.

"I have been," he wrote, "one acquainted with the night."

And because he knew the midnight as well as the high noon, because he understood the ordeal as well as the triumph of the human spirit, he gave his age strength with which to overcome despair.

At bottom he held a deep faith in the spirit of man. And it's hardly an accident that Robert Frost coupled poetry and power.

For he saw poetry as the means of saving power from itself.

When power leads man toward arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the area of man's concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses.

For art establishes the basic human truths which must serve as the touchstones of our judgment. The artist, however faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state.

The great artist is thus a solitary figure. He has, as Frost said, "a lover's quarrel with the world." In pursuing his perceptions of reality, he must often sail against the currents of his time.

This is not a popular role.

If Robert Frost was much honored during his lifetime, it was because a good many preferred to ignore his darker truths.

Yet in retrospect we see how the artist's fidelity has strengthened the fiber of our national life. If sometimes our great artists have been the most critical of our society, it is because their sensibility and their concern for justice, which must motivate any true artist, makes them aware that our nation falls short of its highest potential.

I see little of more importance to the future of our country and our civilization than full recognition of the place of the artist.

If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him.

We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda; it is a form of truth. And as Mr. [Archibald] MacLeish once remarked of poets, "There is nothing worse for our trade than to be in style."

In free society, art is not a weapon, and it does not belong to the sphere of polemics and ideology. Artists are not engineers of the soul.

It may be different elsewhere. But democratic society—in it—the highest duty of the writer, the composer, the artist is to remain true to himself and to let the chips fall where they may.

In serving his vision of the truth, the artist best serves his nation. And the nation which disdains the mission of art invites the fate of Robert Frost's hired man—the fate of having nothing to look backward to with pride and nothing to look forward to with hope.

I look forward to a great future for America—a future in which our country will match its military strength with our moral restraint, its wealth with its wisdom, its power with its purpose.

I look forward to an America which will not be afraid of grace and beauty, which will protect the beauty of our natural environment, which will preserve the great old American houses and squares and parks of our national past and which will build handsome and balanced cities for our future.

I look forward to an America which will reward achievement in the arts as we reward achievement in business or statecraft.

I look forward to an America which will steadily raise the standards of artistic accomplishment and which will steadily enlarge cultural opportunities for all of our citizens.

And I look forward to an America which commands respect throughout the world, not only for its strength, but for its civilization as well.

And I look forward to a world which will be safe not only for democracy and diversity but also for personal distinction.

Robert Frost was often skeptical about human improvement. Yet I do not think he would disdain this hope.

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