

Salvation Blues

ONE HUNDRED POEMS, 1985-2005

Rodney Jones



A MARINER BOOK

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REMEMBERING FIRE

Almost as though the eggs run and leap back into their shells
And the shells seal behind them, and the willows call back their
driftwood,
And the oceans move predictably into deltas, into the hidden
oubliettes in the sides of mountains,

And all the emptied bottles are filled, and, flake by flake, the snow
rises out of the coal piles,
And the mothers cry out terribly as the children enter their bodies,
And the freeway to Birmingham is peeled off the scar tissue of fields,

The way it occurs to me, the last thing first, never as in life,
The unexpected rush, but this time I stand on the cold hill and watch
Fire ripen from the seedbed of ashes, from the maze of tortured glass,

Molten nails and hinges, the flames lift each plank into place
And the walls resume their high standing, the many walls, and
the rafters
Float upward, the ceiling and roof, smoke ribbons into the wet cushions,

And my father hurries back through the front door with the box
Of important papers, carrying as much as he can save,
All of his deeds and policies, the clock, the few pieces of silver;

He places me in the shape of my own body in the feather mattress
And I go down into the soft wings, the mute and impalpable country
Of sleep, holding all of this back, drifting toward the unborn.

SWEEP

The two Garnett brothers who run the Shell station here,
~~who are working separately just now,~~
one hunched under the rear axle of Skippy Smith's Peterbilt tractor,
the other humming as he loosens the clamps
to replace my ruptured heater hoses,
have aged twenty years since I saw them last
and want only to talk of high school
and who has died from each class.
Seamless gray sky, horns from the four-lane,
the lot's oil slicks rainbowing and dimpling with rain.
I have been home for three days, listening to an obituary.
The names of relatives met once,
of men from the plant where he works,
click like distant locks on my father's lips.
I know that it is death that obsesses him
more than football or weather
and that cancer is far too prevalent
in this green valley of herbicides and chemical factories.
Now Mike, the younger brother,
lifts from my engine compartment
a cluster of ruined hoses,
twisted and curled together like a nest of blacksnakes,
and whistles as he forages in the rack
for more. Slowly, the way things work down here,
while I wait and the rain plinks on the rims of overturned tires,
he and my father trade the names of the dead:
Bill Farrell for Albert Dotson,
Myles Hammond, the quick tackle of our football team,
for Don Appleton, the slow, redheaded one.
By the time the rack is exhausted,
I'm thinking if I lived here all year I'd buy American,
I'd drive a truck, and I'm thinking
of football and my father's and Mike's words
staking out an absence I know I won't reclaim.
Because I don't get home much anymore,
I notice the smallest scintilla of change,
every burnt-out trailer and newly paved road,
and the larger, slower change
that is exponential,
that strangeness, like the unanticipated face
of my aunt, shrunken and perversely stylish
under the turban she wore after chemotherapy.
But mostly it's the wait, one wait after another,
and I'm dropping back deep in the secondary
under the chill and pipe smoke of a canceled October
while the sweep rolls toward me from the line of scrimmage,
and Myles Hammond, who will think too slowly

and turn his air force jet into the Arizona desert,
~~and Don Appleton, who will drive out on a country road~~
for a shotgun in his mouth, are cut down,
and I'm shifting on the balls of my feet,
bobbing and saving one nearly hopeless feint,
one last plunge for the blockers
and the ballcarrier who follows the sweep,
and it comes, and comes on.

FOR THOSE WHO MISS THE IMPORTANT PARTS

The year Truman fired MacArthur
my uncle returned
from the hospital at Decatur,
his left hand torn
from the wrist, milled
into a ghostly bin
of Martha White Self-Rising Flour.
While Oscar Garrett ranted,
"We ought to get the bastards
before they get the bomb,"
and his wife, Mildred, went
to the kitchen for more custard,
the blue stump slipped out
of its flannel sleeve,
puffy and knuckled
like the head of a cottonmouth.
I didn't know pain had a phantom,
a thorn, like frostbite,
that ran long and clean
to the bone of emptiness.
I don't know yet whether
the coal stove or shame
flushed my father's face
with roses. While important
history went on elsewhere,
while the tough March wind
punched the window frames
and kicked at the glass bulb
in the heel of the thermometer,
my father and uncle were
almost as old as I am now.
Now I wish I were Li Po
with a Yangtze and plum blossom
to praise, with a poem

hard as jade to lay
on the threshold of annihilation.

If MacArthur had marched into China,
the map would still be yellow,
or I would not remember
so much my uncle's good hand
cold on my brow, and how my eyes
fell then, out of shyness,
running along the floorboards,
passing over his brown shoes,
over the knots
with their difficult wings.

I FIND JOY IN THE CEMETERY TREES

I find joy in the cemetery trees.
Their roots are in our hearts.
In their leaves the soul
of another century is in ascension.
I hear the rustling of their branches
and watch the exhausted laborers
from the Burgreen Construction Company
sit down in the shade,
unwrapping their ham and salami
and popping open their thermoses.
Apparently, they too are enamored
of the hickory and willow
at the edge of our cemetery.
They are stretching twine, building a wall
as though this could be contained.
Probably they do not think
of our grandmothers who are pierced,
and probably they do not want
to hear about Thomas Hardy,
who, if I remember, has been dead
longer than they have been alive,
and who gave to the leaves of one yew
the names of his own dead. Anyway
the only spirits I can call in this place
are the stench of a possum
suppurating in secret weeds
and the flies, who are marvelous
because their appetite is our revulsion.
Let the laborers go on. Right now
I wish I could admire the trees simply

for their architecture. All winter
~~the dying have set their tables~~
and now they are almost as black
as the profound waters off Guam.
A few minutes ago, when they started
in a slight breeze off the lake,
the many and patient sails,
I could see in those motions
a little of the world that owns me—
and that I cannot understand—
rise in its indifferent passion.

THOREAU

It is when I work on the old Volvo,
lying on my back among the sockets,
wrenches, nuts, and bolts,
with the asphalt grinding the skin
over my shoulderblades, and with the cold grease
dripping onto my eyeglasses,
that I think of Thoreau
on his morning walks around the pond,
dreaming of self-sufficiency.
I think of the odometer that shows
eight circuits of the planet.
I drop the transmission and loosen
the bolts around the bellhousing.
I take it in both hands, jerk,
and it pops like a sliced melon.
Carefully, so I won't damage
the diaphragm, I remove the clutch
and place it on a clean cloth
beside the jackstand. I look
at the illustrations in the manual
and I think of the lists that Thoreau made.
By the time I get to the flywheel,
grease is clotted in my hair,
my knuckles are raw and bleeding
against the crankcase, and I am thinking
of civil disobedience. I am looking
up into the dark heaven of machinery,
the constellations of flaking gaskets,
and I am thinking of Thoreau's dry cow,
of his cornstalks splintered by hail.

THE FIRST BIRTH

I had not seen before how the body opens,
the petals of liver, each vein a delicate bush,
and where something clutches its way into the light
like a mummy tearing and fumbling from his shroud.
The heifer was too small, too young in the hips,
short-bodied with outriggers distending her sides,
and back in the house, in the blue *Giants of Science*
still open on my bed, Ptolemy was hurtling toward Einstein.
Marconi was inventing the wireless without me.
Leonardo was secretly etching the forbidden anatomy
of the Dark Ages. I was trying to remember
Galen, his pen drawing, his inscrutable genius,
not the milk in the refrigerator, sour with bitterweed.
It came, cream-capped and hay-flecked, in silver pails.
At nights we licked onions to sweeten the taste.
All my life I had been around cows named after friends
and fated for slaughterhouses. I wanted to bring
Mendel and Rutherford into that pasture,
and bulb-headed Hippocrates, who would know what to do.
The green branch nearby reeked of crawfish.
The heavy horseflies orbited. A compass, telescope,
and protractor darted behind my eyes. When the sac
broke, the water soaked one thigh. The heifer lowed.
Enrico Fermi, how much time it takes, the spotted legs,
the wet black head and white blaze. The shoulders
lodged. The heifer walked with the calf wedged
in her pelvis, the head swaying behind her like a cut blossom.
Did I ever go back to science, or eat a hamburger
without that paralysis, that hour of the stuck calf
and the unconscionable bawling that must have been a prayer?
Now that I know a little it helps, except for birth
or dying, those slow pains, like the rigorous observation
of Darwin. Anyway, I had to take the thing, any way
I could, as my hands kept slipping, wherever it was,
under the chin, by tendony, china-delicate knees,
my foot against the hindquarters of the muley heifer,
to bring into this world, black and enormous,
wobbling to his feet, the dumb bull, Copernicus.

A HISTORY OF SPEECH

That night my sophomore date wanted kisses.

I talked instead of the torn ligaments
~~in my ankle, crutches and Ace bandages,~~
parading like any arthritic
the exotic paraphernalia of my suffering
and, that failing, went further, bobbing
in the thesaurus of pain: the iron lung,
the burn, torture with water and bamboo.
She twisted a frosted curl around one finger.
It was then she touched the skin along my neck.
It was then I noticed for the first time
the strange wing beating in my mouth
and kissed her in a kind of flight
that plummeted and searched for branches.

Ah, but Tahiti of a thousand Tahitis!
Among the suckling cars of the drive-in,
trays of pomegranates, lingerie of surf.
Days I hurled papers onto the porches of invalids.
June nights I only had to open my mouth,
out came a flock of multicolored birds,
birds of all denominations and nationalities,
birds of nostalgia, the golden birds of Yeats,
birds trained in the reconnaissance of exclusive buttons.
Before I knew it I was twenty-two.
I was whispering into the ear of Mary,
the mother of Jesus. I was dreaming
in two languages I did not understand.
I was sitting in the bar of the Cotton Lounge,

railing against George Wallace, when the fist
rang in my stomach and I looked up
to a truck driver shouting down at me,
"Talk too much!" Talk too much into greasy
footprint, linoleum stinking of beer,
the thigh of that woman rising to leave.
Talk too much and understand I'm not to blame
for this insignificance, this inflation
in the currency of language. Listen:
whenever I hurt, the words turned their heads;
whenever I loved too much, they croaked and hopped away.
At my luckiest, I'm only saying the grace
the hungry endure because they're polite.
Learning speech, Demosthenes put pebbles in his mouth,

but my voice is haunted by softer things.

THE LAUNDROMAT AT THE BAY STATION

When the separation hit me with its tonnage, self-soiling, guilt,
I used to go there, having no other choice, void of the machinery
of renewal,
carrying a pillowcase of spoiled shirts slung over one shoulder, bundling
in a mildewed towel my knot of blue jeans, underwear, and dirty
sheets, my legacy, my impossible dowry.
I think I had never been so lonely, and the girl Shirley, acned,
leafing through a magazine of teenage stars, who gave change
in the Kwik-Mart next door when the change machines were broken,
seemed either
contemptuous or flirtatious, hot-tempered, feigning an incredible wound.
I could hear the cycles kick on and off and, underneath, the
continuous roar
of water surging up from the valves, and I remember, once I was inside,
how the dark outside would grow rigid, as though I had entered,
after all of Oklahoma, the green and narcotic light of a truckstop
restroom—
the rubber dispensers on the wall, the mirrors that magnify the pores.
Most of the customers I don't remember, but I can't forget
the divorcées in tight black stretch pants, cautiously sorting their lace
panties, talking too loud
and pulling their stringy, cotton-headed kids out of the garbage pails,
whole families, sallow and almost retarded, and improbable younger
girls,
big blondes who seemed to leap out of the rain, their hair frosted and
piled high on their heads,
their spike heels clicking on the linoleum tiles gummy with diet soda.
It hurts me, that separateness, and how I lived then, mostly in one
room, my bed a delirium of books,
everything else on the floor—dishes, fishing tackle, wadded sheets of
typing paper,
the bedsprings leaning against one wall wired to a black-and-white TV.
Through the wall I heard arguments, then thuds, something heavy,
maybe chairs
being thrown, doors slamming, then the bass throbbing over the weeping.
That year filth was the ledger I kept, marking each shirt, each towel.
Now that I'm happy, I need illness or blows before the laundromat
rises from the ashes
of my fever and confusion, and I can tell my wife how I looked at this
one's thighs
or that one's enormous and floppy breasts as she knelt to take her sad

underthings
~~from the dryer; how much I wanted their vulnerability, their poverty~~
and hatred still to be there
once I was happier; and how much I wanted happiness then, even there,
smelling the faint and artificial odors of lemon blossoms, searching
the wire baskets
for the mates to mismatched socks, the crude angels of
embarrassment.

Almost a year and a half of my life has been blocked out, washed
clean, the disease
of the self quarantined, checked there, and I don't want to think
about the laundry spinning in each washer, the dryers stationed like
robots,
and the rejected people waiting, as though for a simple resurrection.
I don't want a new life spun clean of its dirt and chaos. The day my
wife's mother,
my wife, and I came down the mountain from Santa Tecla to La
Libertad,
I had been waiting for the river that runs through that place, even
with the war there,
the way the women, some with their blouses off, were sitting on the rocks
with baskets of laundry to be knuckled and scrubbed, the children
splashing in and out of the shallow green pools left in the dry season,
and stretched beside them the shirts for labor and the shirts for
dancing, the shirts for God
and the shirts for dying, all were whitening, were slowly drying
around their stains,
and the laughter and the Spanish came up to me through the almond
trees,
purely and without reason, rising on the small wind like birds.

THE MOSQUITO

I see the mosquito kneeling on the soft underside of my arm,
kneeling
Like a fruitpicker, kneeling like an old woman
With the proboscis of her prayer buried in the idea of God,
And I know we shall not speak with the aliens
And that peace will not happen in my life,
not unless
It is in the burnt oil spreading across the surfaces of ponds,
in the dark

Egg rafts clotting and the wiggletails expiring like batteries.

~~Bring a little alcohol and a little balm~~

For these poppies planted by the Queen of Neptune.

In her photographs she is bearded and spurred, embellished
five hundred times,

Her modular legs crouching, her insufferable head unlocking
To lower the razor-edge of its tubes, and she is there
in the afternoon

When the wind gives up the spirit of cleanliness
And there rises from the sound the brackish oyster and squid
smell of creation.

I lie down in the sleeping bag sodden with rain.

Nights with her, I am loved for myself, for the succulent
Flange of my upper lip, the twin bellies of my eyelids.

She adores the easy, the soft. She picks the tenderest blossoms
of insomnia.

Mornings while the jackhammer rips the pavement outside my
window,

While the sanitation workers bang the cans against the big truck
and shout to each other over the motor,

I watch her strut like an udder with my blood,

Imagining the luminous pick descending into Trotsky's skull
and the eleven days

I waited for the cold chill, nightmare, and nightsweat of malaria;

Imagining the mating call in the vibrations of her wings,

And imagining, in the simple knot of her ganglia,

How she thrills to my life, how she sings for the harvest.

FOR THE EATING OF SWINE

I have learned sloppiness from an old sow

wallowing her ennui in the stinking lot,

a slow vessel filled with a thousand candles,

her whiskers matted with creek mud,

her body helpless to sweat the dull spirit.

I have wrestled the hindquarters of a young boar

while my father clipped each testicle

with a sharpened barlow knife, returning him,

good fish, to his watery, changed life.

And I have learned pleasure from a gilt

as she lay on her back, offering her soft belly

like a dog, the loose bowel of her throat

opening to warble the consonants of her joy.

I have learned lassitude, pride, stubbornness,

and greed from my many neighbors, the pigs.

I have gone with low head and slanted blue eyes
~~through the filthy streets, wary of the blade,~~
my whole life, a toilet or kitchen,
the rotting rinds, the wreaths of flies.
For the chicken, the cow, forgetfulness. Mindlessness
blesses their meat. Only the pigs are holy,
the rings in their snouts, their fierce, motherly indignation,
and their need always to fill themselves.
I remember a photograph. A sheriff had demolished
a still, spilling a hundred gallons of moonshine.
Nine pigs passed out in the shade of a mulberry tree.
We know pigs will accommodate
demons, run into rivers, drowning of madness.
They will devour drunks who fall in their ways.
Like Christ, they will befriend their destroyers.
In the middle of winter I have cupped my hands
and held the large and pliable brain of a pig.
As the fires were heating the black kettles,
I have scrupulously placed my rifle between pigs' eyes
and with one clean shot loosened the slabs
of side-meat, the sausages that begin
with the last spasms of the trotters.
O dolphins of the barnyard, frolickers
in the gray and eternal muck, in all your parts
useful, because I have known you, this is the sage,
and salt, the sacrificial markers of pepper.
What pity should I feel, or gratitude, raising you
on my fork as all the dead shall be risen?

TWO GIRLS AT THE HARTSELLE, ALABAMA, MUNICIPAL SWIMMING POOL

Too much of the country in their walk—
as though each struggled
against a tree at the center of her body,
or their bare feet were shoes

that didn't fit, poverty in every step,
in every move, deliberate
as footsteps in plowed fields,
through clots of local boys, up

slippery rungs to the high board,
~~their bodies oiled, flipping away~~
casually the menthol cigarettes,
tossing back their bleached hair,

both twelve or thirteen years old:
like old houses, like mothers
pitched forward into the wind,
entering the cold, strange waters.

DECADENCE

1

In the junque store the idlers were talking about primitives,
how scarred wood can be steeped in dignity, how that subtle
patina

derives from hands, hands of the old, hands of the poor.

The hands of the dealer
were on the halltree, the cream separator, the set of burled,
chestnut tools, as he whispered, *Williamsburg, Jamestown,*
Monticello.

He was selling an incarnation of this country, not mere
furniture,
patched and splaying relics, like that pie safe, still hopeful
in its ugliness,
hewn crudely with a broadax, planed with bad iron for
temporary uses.

I could remember how, in my grandmother's attic, dirt daubers
would construct their nests along the pegs
of an unworkable loom, and how one residential cell at a time
would crumble,

dusting the human heirlooms stacked in boxes underneath:
delicate Japanese fans, mother-of-pearl combs, letters
from flung hamlets named for springs, groves, and crossroads.

Under the spectacles that I had found in a stray boot
a bleached calligraphy
yielded its covered-dish suppers, its gaggle of Sunday
visitations,

while time's odor, dull and implacable,
stirred from a sidesaddle hooked on a rafter—
redolence of an old horse as he is being led from his last
pasture.

Later, when the house was sold, the decadence broke out:
~~moths flopped sleepily from giant black trunks,~~
and spiders, those shrewd solicitors of corners, invaded
with light that leaked through shingle cracks,
gnawing the tablecloths, flawing the spokes of spinning wheels.

In the junque store
I could imagine the rage and falling away, the ordeal
of finishing and refinishing, the worship of smooth surfaces,
and the patient preservation of flaws. I could love things
for hands that touched them, before grace, setting the plain
tables.

In America there are many sacred places: improbable shrines,
Jerusalems of bed sheets,
dim synagogues where the spirit loiters, or sleeps, obsolescent
as that brakeman
I saw long ago on the L & N, waving his handkerchief from a
caboose.

And here on my front porch, midnight, in Jefferson's paved
Virginia,
all the good students are smoking dope and talking about God.
I watch them hesitate and plunge into history. They pass
the joint and I hear, in each voice, the blurred, icy dithyrambs
of Morpheus.

In each face I watch the moon that rises out of childhood,
largest light
against these small heavens resonating through
the wishful dark.

Here are our cosmic rose, our jockey of telepathy, our shaman
of the dime-store mantra.

The joint shrinks, passing from one to another, O orbital
communion.

When the spirit moves you, don't be ascaed, spake!

Summer revival, 1958, Church of God,
I was watching, Mrs. Morgan
was coming up like something partially
digested,

Mrs. Morgan was home from the nuthouse and she was
coming
out of her pew like hot shrapnel of bad corn blasting the
throat:

O Savior ... hare me, Lord!

I have in me the creak of the wheelchair

after the unsuccessful

laying on of hands,

the horror and beauty of it. I have belief rotting and going
bad in the stomach, old egg taste that comes to me like
postcards

from places I'd rather forget. On the porch at midnight
the students

will grow silent. They will listen for the wind, the sweet
summer evening,

a few stars diminishing slowly, darkening like the notes of a
lullaby.

Once everyone was a Hemingway at the party where the girl
who painted penises stepped out of her clothes. Her pathetic
gosling neck of a body
clovered with goose bumps, and Christ! the luminous bad taste
of her art. I mean

banana penises rising from baskets of assorted fruits,
wienerwurst penises curled
in Dutch ovens, senile penises slumped in waterlogged dories,
symbolic dorks and phalluses
of men we knew. I mean the night she painted
her whole body purple

and crawled into a party
dragging two bowling balls, bobbing a prick-head of papier-mâché.
Now she teaches at the Y,
drives back and forth from the suburbs in the old
station wagon.

I love her, but it is not the same between us, her thighs
like ponds silting
from underneath and glazing over, blue-green with varicose
algae.

O aging mermaid of the suburbs, I shall teach you Prufrock
in Continuing Ed,
and I promise not to embarrass you, to touch you lightly
as the monarch comes to the leaf of the black locust
or the wand of the Channel 4 weatherman touches a distant
storm.

These nights I think you sleep as the wilderness sleeps beyond
your windows,
anaesthetized,
while the city's nimbus dilates, strewing light
by the ruined creeks.

See how the stag
deer leaps and hesitates and is frozen in the headlights,
the muskrat tunnels into a covert,
the rabbit works a pink sock into her nest of lespedeza and
sedge.

No wonder the undertaker plays the harmonica! No wonder
~~there are psychiatrists everywhere ashamed of their singing!~~

No wonder it is always Wednesday.

4

Old hands crusted over with eczema, otherworldly, cold
and blunt as potatoes
on the back of the pew Wednesday nights, where we would go
to pray,
and all the widows were hungry for God, like debutantes
at the end of a boyless summer,
or nun-poets of the Dark Ages singing the sensual body of the
church.

My grandmother, Mrs. Lyle, Mrs. Patterson, Viola Wilkins,
Mavis Kent,

and a few others who could still pray, weep, and sing
unabashedly,
each went down. Each languished in Bobby Summerford's
rest home

in the perversity
of extravagant leisure—game hour, story hour.

Near their deaths

not one of them believed
any man had walked on the moon. I am not concerned that
they rot
sealed away from us, distant as the death of grocery chickens.
On the news there is a fly-bait hand extending
from the rubble.

I know, a man's hand,
hand of a believer in Allah. Some nights I dream that I am
lost,
wandering among numberless houses, dangling like a root in a
sewer.

One of my hands is rotting; I keep it in my shirt like
Napoleon's hand.

This is that season, decadence in the leaf we look at. We sing
for the safe eggs,
sing with the iced fish in the Piggly Wiggly, the worms, the
pale grass,
and the moon seems, yes, to sing, and the water sings in the
spigot.

The old furniture sings mildew and mold, and I am happy
with my friends who remember a few jokes and are serious
at other times,
and with my friends who are at once joking and serious,

and with the most serious jokes, the music of Mozart and
Brahms.

5

I think of the mayfly, who in adulthood forms perfect genitalia
but no stomach,
who lives for a single day to fly up and lay her eggs in the
branches

TRANSPARENT GESTURES

There is in the human voice
A quavery vowel sometimes,
More animal than meaning,
More mineral than gentle,

A slight nuance by which my
Mother would recognize lies,
Detect scorn or envy, sober
Things words would not admit,

Though it's true the best liars
Must never know they lie.
They move among goodbyes
Worded like congratulations

We listen for and hear until
Some misery draws us back
To what it really was they
Obviously meant not to say.

And misery often draws us
Out to meadows or trees,
That speechless life where
Everything inhuman is true.

Mother spoke for tentative
People, illiterate, unsure.
To think of it her way is to
Reduce all words to tones

The wind might make anytime
~~With a few dead leaves. Our~~
Own names called in the dark
Or quail rising. Sounds that

Go straight from the ear to
The heart. There all the time,
They are a surface too clear
To see. Written down, no

Matter how right, they are too
Slow and vain as those soft
Vows we spoke in childhood to
Wild things, birds or rabbits

We meant to charm. When
Mother mentioned oaks,
They could be cut down, sawn
Into boards and nailed together

As rooms, and she was mostly
Quiet, standing in the kitchen,
Her pin rolling like law
Across plains of biscuit dough

While dark ripened, wind
Died on the tongue of each leaf.
The night broke in pieces
If she cleared her throat.

ONE OF THE CITIZENS

What we have here is a mechanic who reads Nietzsche,
who talks of the English and the French Romantics
as he grinds the pistons; who takes apart the Christians
as he plunges the tarred sprockets and gummy bolts

into the mineral spirits that have numbed his fingers;
~~an existentialist who dropped out of school to enlist,~~
who lied and said he was eighteen, who gorged himself
all afternoon with cheese and bologna to make the weight
and guarded a Korean hill before he roofed houses,
first in East Texas, then here in North Alabama. Now
his work is logic and the sure memory of disassembly.
As he dismantles the engine, he will point out damage
and use, the bent nuts, the worn shims of uneasy agreement
He will show you the scar behind each ear where they
put in the plates. He will tap his head like a kettle
where the shrapnel hit, and now history leaks from him,
the slow guile of diplomacy and the gold war makes,
betrayal at Yalta and the barbed wall circling Berlin.
As he sharpens the blades, he will whisper of Ruby and Ray.
As he adjusts the carburetors, he will tell you
of finer carburetors, invented in Omaha, killed by Detroit,
of deals that fall like dice in the world's casinos,
and of the commission in New York that runs everything.
Despiser of miracles, of engineers, he is as drawn
by conspiracies as his wife by the gossip of princesses,
and he longs for the definitive payola of the ultimate fix.
He will not mention the fiddle, though he played it once
in a room where farmers spun and curses were flung,
or the shelter he gouged in the clay under the kitchen.
He is the one who married early, who marshaled a crew
of cranky half-criminal boys through the incompletions,
digging ditches, setting forms for culverts and spillways
for miles along the right-of-way of the interstate;
who moved from construction to Goodyear Rubber
when the roads were finished; who quit each job because
he could not bear the bosses after he had read Kafka;
who, in his mid-forties, gave up on Sartre and Camus
and set up shop in this Quonset hut behind the welder,
repairing what comes to him, rebuilding the small engines
of lawnmowers and outboards. And what he likes best
is to break it all down, to spread it out around him
like a picnic, and to find not just what's wrong
but what's wrong and interesting—some absurd vanity,
or work, that is its own meaning—so when it's together
again and he's fired it with an easy pull of the cord,
he will almost hear himself speaking, as the steel
clicks in the single cylinder, in a language almost
like German, clean and merciless, beyond good and evil.

THE SADNESS OF EARLY AFTERNOONS

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