

Ashberyana • Fenton Songs I and II • Josquiniana

III. Finale: The Laughter of Dead Men

What a gorgeous sunset, cigarette case, how tellingly
the coiled rope is modelled, what perfume
in that sound of thunder, invisible! And you wonder
why I came back? Perhaps this will refresh your memory,
skateboard, roller skates, the binomial theorem picked out in
brutish, swabbed gasps. All the way to the escape clause
he kept insisting he'd done nothing wrong, and then – pouf! – it was
curtains for him and us, excepting these splinters
of our perpetual remainder, reminder
of all those days to come, and those others, so far back
in the mothering past.

Laughing Gravy

The crisis has just passed.
Uh oh, here it comes again,
looking for someone to blame itself on, you, I ...

All these people coming in ...
The last time we necked
I noticed this lobe on your ear.
Please, tell me we may begin.

All the wolves in the wolf factory paused
at noon, for a moment of silence.

Dear Sir or Madam

After only a week of taking your pills
I confess I am seized with a boundless energy:
My plate fills up even as I scarf vegetable fragments
from the lucent blue around us. My firmament,

as I see it, was never this impartial.
The body's discomfiture, bodies of moonlit beggars,
sex in all its strangeness: Everything conspires
to hide the mess of inner living, raze
the skyscraper of inching desire.

Kill the grandchildren, leave a trail
of paper over the long interesting paths in the wood.
Transgress. In a word, be other than yourself
in turning into your love-soaked opposite. Plant
his parterre with antlers, burping
statue of when-was-the-last-time-you-saw Eros;

go get a job in the monument industry.

The Laughter of Dead Men

Candid jeremiads drizzle from his lips,
the store looks as if it isn't locked today.
A gauzy syllabus happens, smoke is stenciled
on the moss-green highway.

This is what we invented the suburbs for,

so we could look back at the lovable dishonest city,
tears clogging our arteries.

The nausea and pain we released to float in the sky.
The dead men are summoning our smiles and indifference.
We climb the brilliant ladder toward their appetites,
homophobes, hermaphrodites, clinging together like socks
hanging out to dry on a glaring day in winter.

You could have told me all about that
but of course preferred not to,
so fearful of the first-person singular
and all the singular adventures it implies.

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Fenton Songs I

Beauty, Danger and Dismay

Beauty, danger and dismay
Met me on the public way.
Whichever I chose, I chose dismay.

Out of Danger

Heart be kind and sign the release
As the trees their loss approve.
Learn as leaves must learn to fall
Out of danger, out of love.

What belongs to frost and thaw
Sullen winter will not harm.
What belongs to wind and rain
Is out of danger from the storm.

Jealous passion, cruel need
Betray the heart they feed upon.
But what belongs to earth and death
Is out of danger from the sun.

I was cruel, I was wrong –
Hard to say and hard to know.
You do not belong to me.
You are out of danger now –

Out of danger from the wind,
Out of danger from the wave,
Out of danger from the heart
Falling, falling out of love.

Serious

Awake, alert,
Suddenly serious in love,

You're a surprise.
I've known you long enough –

Now I can hardly meet your eyes.
It's not that I'm
Embarrassed or ashamed.
You've changed the rules
The way I'd hoped they'd change
Before I thought: hopes are for fools.

Let me walk with you.
I've got the newspapers to fetch.
I think you know
I think you have the edge
But I feel cheerful even so.

That's why I laughed.
That's why I went and kicked that stone.
I'm serious!
That's why I cartwheeled home.
This should mean something. Yes, it does.

Hinterhof

Stay near to me and I'll stay near to you –
As near as you are dear to me will do,
Near as the rainbow to the rain,
The west wind to the windowpane,
As fire to the hearth, as dawn to dew.

Stay true to me and I'll stay true to you –
As true as you are new to me will do,
New as the rainbow in the spray,
Utterly new in every way,
New in the way that what you say is true.

Stay near to me, stay true to me. I'll stay

As near, as true to you as heart could pray.
Heart never hoped that one might be

Half of the things you are to me –
The dawn, the fire, the rainbow and the day.

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Fenton Songs II

1. Blood and Lead

Listen to what they did.
Don't listen to what they said.
What was written in blood
Has been set up in lead.

Lead tears the heart.
Lead tears the brain.
What was written in blood
Has been set up again.

The heart is a drum.
The drum has a snare.
The snare is in the blood.
The blood is in the air.

Listen to what they did.
Listen to what's to come.
Listen to the blood.
Listen to the drum.

2. Tiananmen

Tiananmen
Is broad and clean
And you can't tell
Where the dead have been
And you can't tell
What happened then
And you can't speak
Of Tiananmen.

You must not speak.
You must not think.
You must not dip
Your brush in ink.
You must not say
What happened then,
What happened there
In Tiananmen.

The cruel men
Are old and deaf
Ready to kill
But short of breath
And they will die

Like other men
And they'll lie in state
In Tiananmen.

They lie in state.
They lie in style.
Another lie's
Thrown on the pile,
Thrown on the pile
By the cruel men
To cleanse the blood
From Tiananmen.

Truth is a secret.
Keep it dark.
Keep it dark
In your heart of hearts.
Keep it dark
Till you know when
Truth may return
To Tiananmen.

Tiananmen
Is broad and clean
And you can't tell
Where the dead have been
And you can't tell
When they'll come again.
They'll come again
To Tiananmen.

Hong Kong, 15 June 1989

3. The Ballad of the Shrieking Man

A shrieking man stood in the square
And he harangued the smart cafe
In which a bowlered codger sat
A-twirling of a fine moustache
A-drinking of a fine Tokay

And it was Monday and the town
Was working in a kind of peace
Excepting where the shrieking man
A-waving of his tattered limbs
Glared at the codger's trouser-crease

Saying

*Coffee's mad
And tea is mad
And so are gums and teeth and lips.
The horror ships that ply the seas
The horror tongues that plough the teeth
The coat
The tie
The trouser clips
The purple sergeant with the bugger-grips
Will string you up with all their art
And laugh their socks off as you blow apart.*

The codger seeming not to hear
Winked at the waiter, paid the bill
And walked the main street out of town
Beyond the school, beyond the works
Where the shrieking man pursued him still
And there the town beneath them lay
And there the desperate river ran.
The codger smiled a purple smile.
A finger sliced his waistcoat ope
And he rounded on the shrieking man

Saying

*Tramps are mad
And truth is mad
And so are trees and trunks and tracks.
The horror maps have played us true.
The horror moon that slits the clouds
The gun
The goon
The burlap sacks
The purple waistcoats of the natterjacks
Have done their bit as you can see
To prise the madness from our sanity.*

On Wednesday when the day was young
Two shrieking men came into town
And stopped before the smart café
In which another codger sat
Twirling his whiskers with a frown

And as they shrieked and slapped their
knees
The codger's toes began to prance
Within the stitching of their caps
Which opened like a set of jaws
And forced him out to join the dance

Saying

*Arms are mad
And legs are mad*

*And all the spaces in between.
The horror spleen that bursts its sack
The horror purple as it lunges through
The lung
The bung
The jumping-bean
The I-think-you-know-what-you-think-I-mean
Are up in arms against the state
And all the body will disintegrate.*

On Saturday the town was full
As people strolled in seeming peace
Until three shrieking men appeared
And danced before the smart café

And laughed and jeered and slapped their
knees
And there a hundred codgers sat.
A hundred adam's apples rose
And rubbed against their collar studs
Until the music came in thuds
And all the men were on their toes

Saying

*Hearts are mad
And minds are mad
And bats are moons and moons are bats.
The horror cats that leap the tiles
The horror slates that catch the wind
The lice
The meat
The burning ghats
The children buried in the butter vats
The steeple crashing through the bedroom
roof
Will be your answer if you need a proof.*

The codgers poured into the square
And soon their song was on all lips
And all did dance and slap their knees
Until a horseman came in view -
The sergeant with the bugger-grips!

He drew his cutlass, held it high
And brought it down on hand and head
And ears were lopped and limbs were
chopped
And still the sergeant slashed and slew
Until the codger crew lay dead

Saying

*God is mad
And I am mad
And I am God and you are me.*

*The horror peace that boils the sight
The horror God turning out the light.
The Christ
Who killed
The medlar tree
Is planning much the same for you and me
And here's a taste of what's in store -
Come back again if you should want some
more.*

On Sunday as they hosed the streets
I went as usual to pray
And cooled my fingers at the stoup
And when the wafer touched my tongue
I thought about that fine Tokay

And so I crossed the empty square
And met the waiter with a wink
A-sweeping up of severed heads
A-piling up of bowler hats
And he muttered as he poured my drink

4. Fireflies of the Sea

Dip your hand in the water.
Watch the current shine.
See the blaze trail from your fingers,
Trail from your fingers,
Trail from mine.
There are fireflies on the island
And they cluster in one tree
And in the coral shallows
There are fireflies of the sea.

Look at the stars reflected
Now the sea is calm
And the phosphorus exploding,
Flashing like a starburst
When you stretch your arm.

Saying

*Waiting's mad
And stating's mad
And understating's mad as hell.
The undertakings we have made
The wonder breaking from the sky
The pin
The pen
The poisoned well
The purple sergeant with the nitrate smell
Have won their way and while we wait
The horror ships have passed the straits -
The vice
The vine
The strangler fig
The fault of thinking small and acting big
Have primed the bomb and pulled the pin
And we're all together when the roof falls in!*

When you reach down in the water
It's like reaching up to a tree,
To a tree clustered with fireflies,
Fireflies of the sea.

Dip your hand in the water.
Watch the current shine.
See the blaze trail from your fingers,
Trail from your fingers,
Trail from mine
As you reach down in the water,
As you turn away from me,
As you gaze down at the coral
And the fireflies of the sea.

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