

Charles Bernstein

The Boy Soprano

Daddy loves me this I know
Cause my granddad told me so
Though he beats me blue and black
That's because I'm full of crap

My mommy she is ultra cool
Taught me the Bible's golden rule
Don't talk back, do what you're told
Abject compliance is as good as gold

The teachers teach the grandest things
Tell how poetry's words on wings
But wings are for Heaven, not for earth
Want my advice: hijack the hearse

August

Once you start
counting
stars there's
a full night
before you.

Once you part
counting
mars the
way that's left
before you.

(From *The Absent Father in Dumbo*)

OFFPAGE
A Visiting Writer Event

8 pm Tuesday
Apr 11, 2006
Commonplace
Coffeehouse



Idiopathic Pathogenesis

Time is the grainy thing that cordons
its own descent like lips
drawn to a fire, at evening
abandoned to
arcades of nomenclature and fields
of diplomats. Always a sudden mirage
as turned in jackets
wisteria — bloom of hurled departure
grooming houseboats for
duplicity's declaim. Trebled as the day is
poured, incumbent as a
periscope, a boaster's plan for serenade
rejoins its party further down
the road to which remove's absolved.

(From *Resistance*)

Beyond Emaciation

Hemmed in by oceanic verisimilitude
quite a lot like blazing pumps
with pompadour upholstery, bloated
enough to play a hunch on
lumpy reprehension, sputtering
atop murky monstrosity of
chronic maldistribution of rectifiers,
like the match that hit point
at the expense of spooners, or
the pompadour that cartwheeled
past Tumultuous Expectation
(Evacuation), slogging through
packed pitfalls and penny-dreadful
circuits, melody of tilts
& tailspins, tunnels &
torches. Suds, these are my
suds -- any attribution to
corroded (corrugated) segment,
spooked the stake and succumb
to eviscerated haberdashery
on line at navigational stump --
bumpy calculus to somewhere
near argumentation's eponymous
mortuary. Then walking ahead
or backing off, gesticulating
with meretricious momentum,
salamander retrieval intercepts
gummy (gulled) garrulosity
who meant all the time to
throw the dice to the other
corridor. The ball rolls
down the lane or street or
curb or row or meeting
ground and the titular
turner stoops
to swoop it up
but

[I was delighted by the subject of lecture by J-F Lyotard which I kept hearing as 'beyond emaciation', just my topic, so it was with some great disappointment that, after a while, I realized the philosopher's title was "Beyond Emancipation". C.B.]

Memories

1. Grandfathers

The farm never seemed the same after gramps died

Grace kept saying, "Every life has its tide"
But to have his testicles cut that way
Even if he had done what, whatever they say

The corn grew high as a boy in britches
I loved the smell of the bulls and bitches
Motorcars and kikes seemed a world away
We thought we would always lounge in the hay

The first time I was in Kansas City
All the boys and girls looked so damn pretty
I said to my great friend, hey Joe, I said
How come gramps said we'd be better off dead

Than drinkin' the sweet liquor and tasting
the fruits -
The muscles and turnips and duckling soups
Such that we never ever none did had
When, oh when, we were tiny lads

2. Heritage

Don't you steal that flag, my Mama had qualms
But a boy gotta have something to boast on
Crack that rock, slit that toad
Nature's a hoot if you shoot your load

Flies in the oven
Flies in the head
I'll kill that fly
Till I kill it dead
And no more will that fly
Bother me
As I roam and I ramble
In the tumbleweed

3. Tough Love

My Dad and I were very close
I like to say, int'mately gruff:
We hunted bear, skinned slithy toes
You know, played ball and all that stuff.
Daddy had his pride and maybe was aloof
But when he hit me, that was proof --
Proof that he cared
More than he could ever share.
How I hated those men who took him away!
Pop was a passionate man
Just like me
And I'll teach my son, Clem
To love just like we men.

4. Sisters

William Kennedy Smith
He is an honorable man
And Mike Tyson's
A giant in my clan.
The liberals and the fem'nists
Hate men and vivisectionists.
But when they want the garbage out
Who do they ask, we guys no doubt.

there's beauty in the sound of the rushing brook as it forks & bends in the moonlight

I've tried to be
an American. I've
gone to Pizza Hut
to "make it great"
with my favorite
toppings. I've
negotiated for hours
about the rescheduling
of plane reservations
with in-training
nonunion operators.
Though I've resisted the
closures of form
I've
been told the
result risks
being Jello (without,
alas, a nod to Jack
Benny--"Jello
Again"). I've been to
Boca Raton & twice to
Disney World &
three times to
Sea World. Soon I'll
be going to the Universal
Studios, which is my
idea of a great name. But
I've had trouble with

sincerity--
people say my
irony is static & that
I can't get "with"
detail. But
I've been
doing aerobics &
completed my third session
with the
chiropractor, & been
better in groups &
started feeling comfortable
sharing
my high-medium
cholesterol level to
get support for
a change to synthetic
fats & sugars.
When I die I'm
sure America
will have
taken hold.

(Liberty, New York, August 1989)

Thank You for Saying Thank You

This is a totally accessible poem. There is nothing in this poem that is in any way difficult to understand. All the words are simple & to the point. There are no new concepts, no theories, no ideas to confuse you. This poem has no intellectual pretensions. It is purely emotional. It fully expresses the feelings of the author: my feelings, the person speaking to you now. It is all about communication. Heart to heart. This poem appreciates & values you as a reader. It celebrates the triumph of the human imagination amidst pitfalls & calamities. This poem has 90 lines, 269 words, and more syllables than I have time to count. Each line, word, & syllable have been chosen to convey only the intended meaning & nothing more. This poem abjures

obscurity & enigma. There is nothing hidden. A hundred readers would each read the poem in an identical manner & derive the same message from it. This poem, like all good poems, tells a story in a direct style that never leaves the reader guessing. While at times expressing bitterness, anger, resentment, xenophobia, & hints of racism, its ultimate mood is affirmative. It finds joy even in those spiteful moments of life that it shares with you. This poem represents the hope for a poetry that doesn't turn its back on the audience, that doesn't think it's better than the reader, that is committed to poetry as a popular form, like kite flying and fly fishing. This poem belongs to no school, has no dogma. It follows no fashion. It says just what it says. It's real.

Dear Mr. Fanelli,

I saw your picture in the 79th street station. You said you'd be interested in any comments I might have on the condition of the station. Mr. Fanelli, there is a lot of debris in the 79th street station that makes it unpleasant to wait in for more than a few minutes. The station could use a paint job and maybe new speakers so you could understand the delay announcements that are always being broadcast. Mr. Fanelli--there are a lot of people sleeping in the 79th street station & it makes me sad to think they have no home to go to. Mr. Fanelli, do you think you could find a more comfortable place for them to rest? It's pretty noisy in the subway, especially with all those express trains hurtling through every few minutes, anyway when the trains are in service. I have to admit, Mr. Fanelli, I think the 79th street station's in pretty bad shape & sometimes at night as I toss in my bed I think the world's not doing too good either, & I wonder what's going to happen, where we're headed, if we're headed anywhere, if we even have heads. Mr. Fanelli, do you think if we could just start with the 79th street station & do what we could with that then maybe we could, you know, I guess, move on from there? Mr. Fanelli, when I saw your picture & the sign asking for suggestions I thought, if you really wanted to get to the bottom of what's wrong then maybe it was my job to write you: Maybe you've never been inside the 79th street station because you're so busy managing the 72nd street & 66th street stations, maybe you don't know the problems we have at 79th--I mean the dirt & frequent delays & the feeling of total misery that pervades the place. Mr.

Fanelli, are you reading this far in the letter or do you get so many letters every day that you don't have time to give each one the close attention it desires? Or am I the only person who's taken up your invitation to get in touch & you just don't have enough experience to know how to respond? I'm sorry I can't get your attention Mr. Fanelli because I really believe if you ask for comments then you

ought to be willing to act on them--even if *ought* is too big a word to throw around at this point. Mr. Fanelli

I hope you won't think I'm rude if I ask you a personal question. Do you get out of the office much? Do you go to the movies or do you prefer sports--or maybe quiet evenings at a local restaurant? Do you read much, Mr. Fanelli?

I don't mean just Gibbons and like that, but philosophy -- have you read much Hannah Arendt or do you prefer

a more ideological perspective? I think if I understood where you're coming from, Mr. Fanelli, I could write to you more cogently, more persuasively. Mr. Fanelli, do you get out of the city at all--I mean like up to Bear Mountain or out to Montauk? I mean do you notice how unpleasant the air is in the 79th street station--that we could use some cooling or air-filtering system down there? Mr. Fanelli, do you think it's possible we could get together and talk about these things in person? There are a few other points I'd like to go over with you if I could get the chance. Things I'd like to talk to you about but that I'd be reluctant to put down on paper. Mr. Fanelli, I haven't been feeling very good lately and I thought meeting with you face to face might change my mood, might put me into a new frame of mind. Maybe we could have lunch? Or maybe after work? Think about it, Mr. Fanelli.