



Painting Rust
by Jonathan Penton

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BANNED in El Paso
In Our Own Words: A Generation Defining Itself
Antipatico
Big Bridge
Poetry SuperHighway

*I am spitting out all the bitterness along with half of my last drink
I am thinking of your woman who is crying in the hall
It's like drinking gasoline to quench a thirst until there's nothing there left at all*
—Suzanne Vega, *Knight Moves*

Regarding Your Career:

Your books are worthless.

Your perfect-bound, professionally-made, trade paperbacks from the bigger names in the small press are worthless.

Your rice-paper handcrafted signed and numbered achievements are worth less than the formaldehyde stuck to a dead poet's balls.

Your credits, your blog, your hand-stapled 'zines will be forgotten as soon as they are produced. Your friends will laugh at them at your funeral. Your hopes for immortality mean less than the knots in your noose.

Yes, I admire the tall trannies with glamorous coats in the laundromat documentary

Yes, I admire the Ocean Queen

with her marijuana fire department

Solicit their opinions on your goulash.

Let your work die with you

In the Company of Them

So I'm sitting here in San Fran
In another used bookstore
On another hipster block
In this fuzzy hipster town
And I'm browsing through the bookstore
And I'm looking through the comics
There are shelves of graphic novels
And I think they must be recent
From the flashy well-done covers
And the hip PoMo technique

So I grab some graphic novels
And I'm setting on the benches
And I'm getting up, and walk around, and find a comfy chair
So I lean back, and I'm comfy, and I open up the comics
Which are trendy, which are clever,
Which have lots of lit-techniques
There's this one with the stone giant
Who starts out as a hero
Who might be old King David
or George Washington Carver
and he bests the evil villain
who was belittling his race
but now he's getting bigger
and he just keeps getting bigger
and pretty soon he's enslaved all the creatures all around
the metaphor was obvious
though the subject imprecise
He might have been Israel
Or maybe Nashville, Tennessee
But the book was tortured, troubled
And so exquisitely drawn

There's a million sock-drawer poets
Who've put down their San Fran paintbrush
To write of what will happen
To warn the world of what will happen
If we let a madman rule us
If we let the wealthy lead us
If we sign away our neighbors for another cup of Starbucks
And the artists are all drawing
And the folkies are all singing
And the poets all recite their angry lines at open mics
But there's no one really listening
No there's no one really listening
And the few who clap politely never do a goddamned thing
But the days are getting hotter
And our lives are getting shorter
And the Fertile Crescent won't be fertile for four billion years
While MSN reports on Fox News
CNN reports on Slate
CBS reports on Sharpton
And Al Sharpton studies Fox
While the talking heads keep talking
And the bloggers keep on blogging
And the artists keep pretending there is something left to say

Deep Throat Nihilism

Never forget that beauty is destructive
and poetry is its most destructive form

Poets do not ask permission

When you sing *Ave Maria* in the library, sing it loud

Yet Another Leo Frank Piece

Thank you, Leo, for showing us America
A place where the occasional child must be sacrificed
 not to the altar
 not to the Auto-de-Fe
 not to the Cossacks
but to the ADL

Waking up early to read
 500 distribution newspapers
 join certain mailing lists from secret PO Boxes
 conjugate the statistics of hate

 into poetry

While Judah pretends not to notice

For us, America is the goldene Medina
 And what we don't ask for ourselves
 We don't sincerely seek for others

But we are Judah
and the Pyramids were not the last thing we built!
We raised Madison Avenue,
 the great tomb of the AmeriCAN mind

Form over Substance:
 the old gematria the new math

So Gallagher, a fine Irish, portrays you in the

Made for TV Movie of the Week;

Mamet tells us how you **felt**

And, best of all, Alfred Uhry and Hal Prince

—lacking only the lyrics of Sondheim

put on a Broadway show!

“Hey, my dad has some old anti-Semites in the garage.....”

“And we have a hangin’ tree out in the back 80....”

They hung you, Leo Frank,

like more black men than will ever be counted

and the curse Judah doesn’t refuse our own children’s head

we don’t demand be lifted from others

Atonement Fast

If you could take
every time
a Muslim fucked someone over during Ramadan
every time a Jew killed someone during Pesach
and every single St. Valentine's Day massacre
and put them all on the page
you'd have no more room
for angry little poems

so i'm
at a bar no i'm
at a party or i'm
walking down a downtown street and there's this man
and he's
my age and he is a
some man and
he's cry
ing
he is cry and
he
wants to talk to me
because he
needs some one to
talk to
because he
doesn't have many friends
and i look like
someone he can trust

he is
my age and
he is
an NCO and he just got back
and i
do not want to talk about this
and i do not want
to be here but he is here and i am here
and i am still here and he is
still talking
and he

doesn't want to hurt anyone

he just wants things to be better he thought he
could make things better but
now he just wants to stop crying all the god damn time

i know

this is not a new thing i
saw *Forrest Gump* which had very realistic
wartime footage and for
counterbalance i saw
Full Metal Jacket
which showed how sexy
men could be

i saw a very wealthy actor portray Lee
surrendering to Grant

and a different actor cry at the Treaty of Versailles
and of course there was

the real violence

hatred

madness

but as bad as things got
sooner or later

i could get away

and i always did

eventually but now i'm

in this bar at

this party and

on this downtown Texan street and

he is the first NCO home and

he is the first of many he is

my age but so many,

so many are still gone,

so many are so much younger than me and i say

Johnny, you'd better get used to this, because

 this is a big nation and

 this is a big war and there will be

 many NCOs

 and they will have

 no place to go

 and if they

 cannot get away then

 neither can you

Trembling

It is the day after Yom Kippur

sometime in the 90s, late

You come into the office, contrite and pained
and explain to your Camaro-driving, peroxide-kike paralegal
why Yom Kippur is a time for tough choices

to fire your mouthy, mousy-English secretary
to make room for the young and naturally blond

You and I, we've never believed in a Judgment Day
You and I, still we worship different G-Ds

Hashem, Jesus, and King James's Sexy Legs

It's a crock, and you know it
an ancient tyrant's power play
the very oldest trick is the Book

These buried ancestors you worship
can't keep the gentle folk at bay
or your lovers from dying one by one

Religion gave you hope
but long after your g-d died
you weren't willing to throw hope away

The profane game of faith
left you immune to despair
and you can't kill that which is unafraid

Ravens and Jays

Startled, I watch the blue jays from my window. They have no business here. They cluster in the branches of the huge oak, rustling, leaping, making no calls.

It is October in rural Georgia. Have they flown south? I know nothing about the migratory habits of jays. But I know that the ravens who live in that oak tree do not migrate. I know they will return. And at noon, they do.

I sit on the front porch and watch their massive bodies fly over the house. They fly like bullets, like missiles, like creatures from below. They are purpose, they are terror. They fly into the oak, into the flock of jays—

And do nothing. They take their places at the top of the oak and watch. The jays go about their rustling. No one fights. None call out.

What holy rite
can halt this fast decay?
What ancient herb
could help us sleep at night?
Is there a magic drug that can endure our pain?
an acronym to make
a crib death less dead?
Some pagan festival that can make peace with the past?
What
sort of revolution
could give my father back his childhood
my mother, her husband
or my children what they needed

Give an Indian his land
or a slave his dignity
Restore eleven million West Europeans
nine million Russians
twenty million Chinese
nine million medieval women

What bold new painting
can reflect this slow despair?
And if one should
what could it do
for anyone?

Is there some poem
stronger than the past
and our present vanities?
Stronger in its order than our instabilities?
Can it purge me of this rage?
Can it cleanse me of these memories?

What

gift from the divine

What

Orphean tune

could restore your touch to me?

Is there nowhere I can turn?

Is there no ancient quest

stronger than inevitability?

She asks me what she can do to help
I tell her that any problem worth solving
is beyond the human capacity to solve

I am wrong. She gives me love, love gives me sleep, and
sleep gives me dreams
Dreams give me a few hours with the dead

It's not much, but it's as much as I got while they lived

Yet Another Mary Phagan Piece

When they killed you, Mary
were there any witnesses?
did anyone hear as they
 raped you
 beat you

 did the things men like to do
did they listen, head down, mouth shut,
 receiving the commonplace pleasure
 of that brush with mortality

And when they killed him, Mary
when they hung an innocent man for the crime
did you bear witness?
 did you watch

 as they drug him from his cell
 rope, torches
 brother, father, friends
 strangers

caught up in that racism
 we southerners have always called righteousness

 what did you think on that day, Mary?

 tell me how it feels—

—tell me what you see today—

tell me

if you've had a chance to converse
with the newcomers to the cemetery
tell me if you've learned what the world has become

tell me if, lying there, you hear the nearby niggers being cut
from the nearby trees

tell me if, surrounded by dead confederates,
Kitty Genovese is just another yankee to you

So many murders in Marietta

So many wars on this soil

Yet the goyim leave teddy bears only on your grave

Post-Coital Depression

Now

after the parties
and after the Seders
a few scant hours before the POWs come home

(and home is here, this is their home, and this is my home,
far from my friends and family and far from their friends
and family and the things that any of us would call home)

Now, on a quiet Saturday, I ponder art for art's sake
and art for society's sake
and art which by its nature could never last
because it is too specific
too focused in its condemnations
and not at all metaphorical

Today I ponder the role of an artist
at the close of a war and the dawn of an empire
And what it means to believe in something
anything
in a time of blind faith in blind and stupid leaders

Today I am an artist and a businessman

so I look over my projects

what is due, what is due me, what will be due soon

what must be achieved today so that
other artists will still consider me important

so they will come to my rallies
and come to my readings
and thank me for my politics
and thank me for my energy

Today at home
I think of the best way to relieve the burden
of living, writing, and voting in the country
destined to conquer the world

Today I think of stacks of burning bodies

dictatorships established in the name of democracy

and the motherless sons who will come back to America
and do everything they can to bring it down

and what does that mean to anyone,
anyway?

Today the POWs come home
tortured beaten terrorized
and I will celebrate
with my city and with my country
and I know
that this is the last day we can call ourselves
a Republic of Laws

today

I fear for myself

I fear for my son

I fear for the Arabs

I fear for the Israelis

I fear for the Persians

I fear for the Americans

and I fear for every artist

who makes art for art's sake

who won't speak out

at the end of our world

Skydive

I see everything
all the way down
from the time when the world is a
patchwork of fields and forests
stretching out past the horizon
to the time when the tops of the trees
stare into my face

I see it all
every pine needle every lost aphid
my senses are infinitesimal
in their precision
and all the beauty opens up for me
From the curve of the earth
to the immediacy of this situation

to the fact that it is all about to end

Don't tell me
about your unrequited love
the one you've been pining for
since high school—
I've heard that shit before.

Spare me your tales of childhood rape
father's rage
mother's fear
as if you were
the only one who suffers
I don't care
about
your existential tragedies

Come to me naked or avoid me altogether:
Leave your facades for those who think in words.
Show me the silence
behind
your mouth and body language

We are in a room
too small for movement
Dance me with your stillness
or shut up

In 1918, Jonathan Penton fled the Red Army and sought the Black, claiming that the Bolsheviks betrayed the original ideal of the Soviets. Attracted to the personality and philosophies of Nestor Makhno, he joined the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of the Ukraine. The Cheka caught him and hung him in 1922. You can learn less about him at his web site, www.UnlikelyStories.org. He is deeply indebted to Michael Rothenberg for his assistance with this chapbook, as well as Rofiah Breen, Terri Carrion and Julie Keller.

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www.UnlikelyStories.org

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for seven U.S. dollars plus \$2 shipping