

Advice to a Poet

The present writes the past the future needs. Believe it, baby. So, here's to martinis all around and to stars in our eyes and Davey Crockett too.

Thou shalt, O poet, make us remember the hero and his horse galloping from Old North Church. One if by . . . and two if . . .
Make us genuflect again to the cherry-tree slayer who never told a lie.

And give us cause anew to sing Hosanna to all of their tribe—men by gum and by god—thickly dressed, well coiffed—ready for sketch-artist, painter and passerby.

But note well, my boyo.

Thou shalt not indulge your passionate heart's indignation against the human stain. Remember always the comforts of forgetting.

Thou shalt, thou must, make us forget the gleam of the quick blade by night into the un-American needle-scared husk of a someone—never to be named—who searched for

holiness in euphoric oblivion. Too bad, so
sad. Doo bee doo wah . . .

Don't go there, poet. Please, don't go. Thou
shalt not . . . Hey, It won't play in Brighton or
Brentwood. Leave death to the dead.

The present writes the past the future needs.
So here's to Johnny Walker Blue; but just for me 'nd you,
to enjoy in order to forget.

Sure, go 'head, remember the
righteousness of T. Jefferson and A.
Hamilton too—
both coming to theaters near you.

But always, always rely on the prudence of
the jump cut, quick like the mercy of street-
corner drugs to distract, erase, avoid, evade
all the reality that can ruin the amnesia in a
good simulacrum. Genocides? Slavery?

Don't go there, poet. Keep the word
streams easy and bright.

The present writes the past the future needs.
So, here's to noble compassion for the stranger in trouble,

down on his luck,
portfolio amuck,
hedge fund empty,
pillaged by investments too trendy,
O. K., so write a lament for the poor bastard's offspring
who now must enroll in schools with no bling.

But thou shalt, thou must, ignore the scourged
shoulder, arm cinched, fist clenched, flesh
puckered for the pinch. (What was his name or
was he a she?)

Don't go there poet. No need to heed
in print the scream of the police cars
in the pleading night of this excellent America.

No need to see—not really.
No need to heal—unseemly;
or resurrect
or redeem.

The present writes the past the future needs.
So here's to overalls dancing on the clothesline stretched
between tenement windows, a photo op: happy diagonals,
busy in the wind, waving to America from *Life Magazine's*
glossy image of the poor.

But turn the lens away from the clubby knees
that fill faded pants with arthritis and regret

seven days a week

longing to give way and fall, just once
before death, on to a neatly made bed—
somewhere clean.

The present writes the past the future needs.
So here's to Babe and Ty and Mickey and Roger and good
ol' Ted—who swung from the heels.

And, bestowed a star-spangled blessing on the long arc of
revenge sent deep out of the park over the beatific smiles
of the fans who, with eyes glazed ever upward, will not see
the ruined, the ravaged, the desecrated—all—

All those who didn't see "it" coming':
the downward break of jobs and dreams,
or the middle-finger change-up of corporate lies;
all those who couldn't strong-arm the ball from
deep in center field to catch the stock binge on Wall
Street as it broke for home among the rich.

We don't want to see them, poet: all those strewn across
city parks, back allies, parking lots, overpasses, cement
water ways, their bodies expendable, unnamed,
unremembered, their souls betrayed by the failure of their
bootstraps, who are the collateral damage of the American
religion:

“Success is virtue and virtue success,” in the
name of the father, and of the son and . . .
Can I get an Amen. Altogether now . . .

The present writes the past, baby, in digitized neon
mochas and lattes, super-sized, Apple-eyed and
FannyMae-etized.

But please—and I’m pleading here—ignore the
hieroglyphics needled onto mutilated arms or
between white-crusted toes.

Don’t go there poet, don’t go.