

ROBERT THOMAS

Neglige and Hatchet: A Sonnet Crown

Sonnet with Blackberries and Clocks

Brambles knotted into the Klamath mist,
swamp pop on the radio, bad coffee
in a good doughnut shop: some things you love
more than me. And the guy who picked you up
when you hitchhiked to Minneapolis,
when you had to go AWOL from the sun.
The way he didn't say a word and then
he did—how the sky blushed over Utah
as if it knew you were hitting on it,
and I love that you hit on everything:
fig jam, for fuck's sake, and closets and clocks
and libraries Open 24 Hours. . . .
You love them more too, and there's real snow now
falling like secrets in the Oakland hills.

Sonnet with Sump and Sourdough

Falling like secrets in the Oakland hills,
questions clog the drains. What could I have done?
Repaired the sump pump? When the groundwater
rose and the cellar flooded from below,
not from a leak above, what could be done?
A man's supposed to do something, or else
it's bad for business, bad for every dick
everywhere, bad all round. Tell me, sweetheart,
if I am nothing but a shaggy gob
of dough, can you stand to get your hands stuck
in this warm paste, to love this sodden sponge?
And if you can, will it ferment and prove?
Scored, crusted, slashed, charred, coarse, salted, buckled,
bronzed, ridged, cracked, geological, shining.

Sonnet with Seashell and Chinatown

Bronzed, ridged, cracked, geological, shining,
God rises from the waves like Mick Jagger
and you unzip, offering your jacket
as a beach towel. You know in *Chinatown*
when Cross says people are capable of . . .
anything? That's the anything I mean.
People will give themselves to anything.
The volume's turned up on *Satisfaction*:
all you want is to 86 yourself
from the warm booth in the diner of you,
your burgundy banquettes. To deep-six your
soul you'd tender yourself to a conman,
a snake who sells his own snake oil. His blue
hypnotic scales that seem to be the sea.

Sonnet with Ark and Tug

Hypnotic scales that seem to be the sea.
The pianist plays identical notes
a dozen times, evokes a dozen shades
and shifting harmonies, as the sea turns
in its bed transposing ordinary
wind into dragons. Meanwhile I'm a one-
note wonder, my earnest tug chug-chugging
through the harbor while the sky scrolls and scours
itself for stars, hard to find as sailors
in a typhoon. How fortunate they are
to die that way, drowning in God, while those
of us still here plink-plink and go unheard,
as the child's cry was unheard on the ark,
lost in all the mating howls and bellows.

Sonnet with Vespers and Machine Tools

Lost in all the mating howls and bellows,
a virginal vespers chant penetrates

the storm of noise. Of all the forms of praise,
why does God prefer music? Why not dance
or drag racing? And if it must be song,
why not blues, *Chicago* blues: loud, urban,
industrial? Machine-tool blues. God loves
the sound of the machines that make machines.
Saints praise with their bray and swagger the blast
furnace that burns like a billion suns. But
it can't drown out the *who!* of a girl's breath
as she enters the sacred limestone cave,
willfully blows out her only candle,
and descends into the cragged grotto.

Sonnet with Ochre and Aurochs

Descending into the cragged grotto,
you see that darkness affects only one
of your senses, while it frees the others.
Water dripping from rough rock onto smooth,
you and stone wrestle each other's sinews.
A mash of mud and blood and ash and rose-
ochre clay slathers and anoints your skin.
You smear your flesh against the sweating walls
until they breathe with you, until they thrum.
You have no memory of what happened there,
but something tore and changed in your body.
You wound the cavern round you like a cloak
and left a perfect image on the stone:
the wild aurochs, their sweeping, graceful horns.

Sonnet with Jokes and Car Jack

The wild aurochs, their sweeping, graceful horns —
would you dare take that form to come to me,
knowing no human could compare to you?
What's the difference, after all, between gods
and humans? If I met Aphrodite
at Kathy's for coffee, I couldn't tell
from her skin or her figure, but her jokes

would have a weird darkness, and when she said
she'd seen it all, I'd look into her eyes
and see she *had*: her ex the mechanic
whose foot was gouged in the shop when the car
jack broke, and her other lover, the man
who sank softly in her immortal arms
as the wild, blood-gluttled swine squealed victory.

Sonnet with Barn Dance and Solar Storm

As the wild, blood-gluttled swine squealed victory
and thought you were his, I was conspiring
with a lunar eclipse and a solar
storm to win you back. One of them dips you
in the equinox ballroom; the other
push-pulls and whip-spins you to Battle Creek
for a barn dance on the sprung space-time floor.
It's not me you love, but that green-eyed fox
who follows me around, one of the skulk,
and the bad weather we bring, thundersnow
over Black Lake. They're in my neighborhood
and they make you crazy, in a good way.
You love me the way swans love Michigan:
you always come back for the dirty snow.

Sonnet with Squeegee and Crackerjack

You always come back for the dirty snow,
my red raincoat and my crackerjack car,
auto row combo of panache and kitsch.
You can be yourself eating caramel corn
with me by your side watching the Yule log
on TV. Clean my glass, my oriel,
with your sweet squeegee whenever you like;
I'll furbish, refurbish, and defurbish
your furniture until it feels like home.
I mean, with me you can break any code:
dance pas de deux with a Tex-Mex sextet,
run to Rangoon with the strongman who said

I'll be back. But you're the one who came back,
negligee and hatchet in your knapsack.

Sonnet with Zombie and Zoot Suit

Negligee and hatchet in your knapsack,
you're ready for any apocalypse,
ready to gallop the pale horse bareback,
Ziploc go-bag full of Xanax and floss.
Did you think I wouldn't understand why
you'd have to choose the one who was alpha
and omega? Zydeco and acid
rock, ascot and zoot suit, Zen and Amish,
apparition and zombie. I'm a guy
who just wants a BLT, who wants you
to have whatever *Sturm und Drang* you want.
Go! I sprinkle holy water on you
with sprigs of basil. When God kisses you,
He'll taste the faint mist on your parted lips.

Sonnet without Jukebox or Fox

He'll taste the faint mist on your parted lips.
He even died for you (sure-fire technique
to get you hot) but couldn't make it last.
How sheepish the good shepherd must have felt
when he nudged the stone from the tomb, slithered
out like a cat through a crack, then lit out
for some off-the-grid kibbutz where he could
lie low till the heat was off. It was hard
to hide with holes in his hands. If I knew
the secret word, you bet your life you'd see
he was only a baritone hustler,
not the blues rustler who brings the bad news
you can't hear enough. *There ain't no more fox,*
no more rock 'n' roll, girl, no more jukebox.

Sonnet with Hard Rain and Spreadsheet

No more rock 'n' roll, girl, no more jukebox,
no more two-bit Bob Dylan and the Hawks.
What if by definition your soulmate,
who keeps you up till sunrise talking songs
(Which is better: "Hard Rain" or "Idiot Wind?"),
is impossible to love, and the one
who's inarticulate as chalk, who sits
across from you at the Doghouse Diner
sharing her ketchup and fries in silence,
loves you with Bachian, Beyoncéan
fathomlessness. Yes, her, your un-soulmate,
verifying the spread in her spreadsheet:
she loves you with Dostoevskian fire,
the subtlety of water, depth of sky.

Sonnet with Velvet and Buck Moon

The subtlety of water, depth of sky:
I wouldn't want you any other way.
I wouldn't want to be enough for you.
The Klamath River cannot be enough
for the salmon that leave it for the sea,
nor is that swift rainbow, at home in both
saltwater and fresh, enough for the stream.
Is acoustic guitar enough for one
who longs to raise Cain in rolling thunder?
Can talk satisfy those who hear the swing
of the ineffable? They say it can't
be put into words. It can. Even those
who just point at the buck moon feel the twinge
as their own warm, velvet antlers emerge.

Sonnet with Oak and Aspen

As your own warm, velvet antlers emerge,
you disappear into the woods and breathe

for the first time the intoxicating
night air without the salty aroma
of my skin seasoning it like sea wrack,
drink from a stream without my reflection,
sniff the faint, delicious scent of white oak,
savoring the acorns—free to pick what’s
sweet to *your* tongue now, sick of my harsh elm
and aspen. If there is life after death,
the question always goes, why has no one
returned to tell us? Because they’re so full
of love for *something* they’ve forgotten us,
as full of love as deer gorged on acorns.

Sonnet with Negligee and Hatchet

Falling like secrets in the Oakland hills,
bronzed, ridged, cracked, geological, shining,
hypnotic scales that seem to be the sea.
Lost in all the mating howls and bellows,
descending into the cragged grotto,
the wild aurochs, their sweeping, graceful horns.
The wild, blood-gluttled swine squeals victory,
but you always come back for the dirty snow,
negligee and hatchet in your knapsack.
He’ll taste the faint mist on your parted lips:
no more rock ‘n’ roll, girl, no more jukebox,
just subtlety of water, depth of sky.
Now your own warm, velvet antlers emerge.
You’re full of love as deer gorged on acorns.