

## Prose Poems

### **The Stranger**

*Charles Baudelaire, 1869*

Tell me, enigmatic man, whom do you love best? Your father, your mother, your sister, or your brother?

—I have neither father, nor mother, nor sister, nor brother.

Your friends?

—You use a word that until now has had no meaning for me.

Your country?

—I don't know at what latitude to look for it.

Beauty?

—I would love her gladly, goddess and immortal.

Gold?

—I hate it as much as you hate your God.

What, then, puzzling stranger, do you love?

—I love clouds . . . clouds that go by . . . out there . . . over there . . . marvelous clouds!

### **Loss of a Halo**

*Charles Baudelaire, 1869*

“What! You here, old man? You in such a place! You the ambrosia eater, the drinker of quintessences! This is really a surprise.”

“My friend, you know my terror of horses and vehicles. Well, just now as I was crossing the boulevard in a great hurry, splashing through the mud in the midst of seething chaos, and with death galloping at me from every side, I gave a sudden start and my halo slipped off my head and into the mire of the macadam. I was far too frightened to pick it up. I decided it was less unpleasant to lose my insignia than to get my bones broken. Then too, I reflected, every cloud has its silver lining. I can now go about incognito, be as low as I please and indulge in debauch like ordinary mortals. So here I am as you see, exactly like yourself.”

“But aren't you going to advertise for your halo, at least? Or notify the police?”

“No, I think not. I like it here. You are the only person who has recognized me. Besides I am bored with dignity, and what's more, it is perfectly delightful to think of some bad poet picking it up and brazenly putting it on. To make some one happy, ah, what a pleasure! Especially some one you can laugh at. Think of X, or of Z! Ha! Won't that be drole!

## **Antique**

*Arthur Rimbaud, c. 1872*

Gracious son of Pan! Around your forehead crowned with flowerets and with laurel, restlessly roll those precious balls, your eyes. Spotted with brown lees, your cheeks are hollow. Your fangs gleam. Your breast is like a lyre, tinklings circulate through your pale arms. Your heart beats in that belly where sleeps the double sex. Walk through the night, gently moving that thigh, that second thigh, and that left leg.

## **War**

*Arthur Rimbaud, c. 1872*

When a child, certain skies sharpened my vision: all their characters were reflected in my face. The Phenomena were roused.—At present, the eternal inflection of moments and the infinity of mathematics drives me through this world where I meet with every civil honor, respected by strange children and prodigious affections.—I dream of a War, of right and of might, of unforeseen logic.

It's as simple as a musical phrase.

## **Side Show**

*Arthur Rimbaud, c. 1872*

Very sturdy rogues. Several have exploited your worlds. With no needs, and in no hurry to use their brilliant faculties and their knowledge of your conscience. What ripe men! Eyes vacant like the summer night, red and black, tricolored, steel studded with gold stars; faces distorted, leaden, blanched, ablaze; hoarse burlesques! The cruel strut of flashy finery! Some are young, —how would they look as Cherubim? —endowed with terrifying voices and dangerous resources. They are sent out buttfucking into the town, tricked out with nauseating *luxury*.

O the most violent Paradise of the furious frown! Not to be compared with your Fakirs and other theatrical buffooneries. In improvised costumes like something out of a bad dream, they enact heroic romances of brigands and of demigods, more inspiriting than history or religions have ever been. Chinese, Hottentots, gypsies, simpletons, hyenas, Molochs, old dementias, sinister demons, they combine popular maternal turns with bestial poses and caresses. They would interpret new plays, songs for young girls. Master jugglers, they transform place and persons, with recourse to magnetic comedy. Eyes flame, blood sings, bones swell, tears and red trickles flow. Their clowning or their terror lasts a minute or entire months.

I alone have the key to this savage side show.

## **The Disciple**

*Oscar Wilde, 1894*

When Narcissus died the pool of his pleasure changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, and the Oreads came weeping through the woodland that they might sing to the pool and give it comfort.

And when they saw that the pool had changed from a cup of sweet waters into a cup of salt tears, they loosened the green tresses of their hair and cried to the pool and said, 'We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he.'

'But was Narcissus beautiful?' said the pool.

'Who should know that better than you?' answered the Oreads. 'Us did he ever pass by, but you he sought for, and would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirror of your waters he would mirror his own beauty.'

And the pool answered, 'But I loved Narcissus because, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored.'

## **The Colonel**

*Carolyn Forché, 1978*

WHAT YOU HAVE HEARD is true. I was in his house. His wife carried a tray of coffee and sugar. His daughter filed her nails, his son went out for the night. There were daily papers, pet dogs, a pistol on the cushion beside him. The moon swung bare on its black cord over the house. On the television was a cop show. It was in English. Broken bottles were embedded in the walls around the house to scoop the kneecaps from a man's legs or cut his hands to lace. On the windows there were gratings like those in liquor stores. We had dinner, rack of lamb, good wine, a gold bell was on the table for calling the maid. The maid brought green mangoes, salt, a type of bread. I was asked how I enjoyed the country. There was a brief commercial in Spanish. His wife took everything away. There was some talk then of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes: say nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled many human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this. He took one of them in his hands, shook it in our faces, dropped it into a water glass. It came alive there. I am tired of fooling around he said. As for the rights of anyone, tell your people they can go fuck themselves. He swept the ears to the floor with his arm and held the last of his wine in the air. Something for your poetry, no? he said. Some of the ears on the floor caught this scrap of his voice. Some of the ears on the floor were pressed to the ground.

### **Short Talk on Homo Sapiens**

*Anne Carson, 1992*

With small cuts Cro-Magnon man recorded the moon's phases on the handles of his tools, thinking about her as he worked. Animals. Horizon. Face in a pan of water. In every story I tell comes a point where I can see no further. I hate that point. It is why they call storytellers blind—a taunt.

### **A Performance At Hog Theater**

*Russell Edson, 1994*

There was once a hog theater where hogs performed as men, had men been hogs.

One hog said, I will be a hog in a field which has found a mouse which is being eaten by the same hog which is in the field and which has found the mouse, which I am performing as my contribution to the performer's art.

Oh let's just be hogs, cried an old hog.

And so the hogs streamed out of the theater crying, only hogs, only

hogs . . .

### **Little Theory**

*Janet Kaplan, 2003*

A machine named Universe knew about itself what it knew at present, nothing more. Away it skipped, blowing bubbles and careful not to step on Father's clock.