

THE SEX OF ART

SAMPLER

Shearsman Library Vol. 7

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The Sex of Art

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Frances Presley

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CONTENTS

AMERICA

Pennsylvania wilderness	11
Birmingham, Alabama	12
After Washington	15
Spiralling out of Maine	16
Newsmen	17
Another failed Futurist poem	18

HEROES OF OUR TIME

The one	21
The shooting of Pechorin	22
"Fixed on the wall..."	23
Carnal knowledge	24
"Style is excused by fever..."	25
"Too blatant for deceit..."	26
Portrait of a writer	27
4 a.m. Ditchling Rise	30
The Ezra Pound papers	31

THE RIGHT BALANCE

Le juste milieu	37
North face	39
From the Jura	40
The contemporary poet in Paris	41
The attraction of American Express	42

GERMANY IN AUTUMN

Anniversary poem	47
Autumn now	50

Letters to Heidelberg	52
Love poem	57
Free union	58

THE COMMUNITY PROJECT

The community project	63
Highgate Cemetery	64
Deconstruction	66
Sari	67
Wear your poppy with pride	68
Orgreave	71
Greeks	72
British Museum	73
The damp patch	74
Uscita	77
Eight dead as gang fires on Naples crowd	78
Reconstruction	79

THE SEX OF ART

Niki St. Phalle	83
Tinguely	84
Gwen John	85
The Dinner Party	86

HOLLAND : ITHACA

Holland : Ithaca	91
Ithaca : The Haven	92

Publisher's Note	95
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AMERICA

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PENNSYLVANIA WILDERNESS

Coming down to the Susquehanna
through the burnished gaming forests
of late Fall
I saw youth
with an outdated headband
poised in the wind of an outstretched rock
“Are you the new ghost of the Susquehanna?”
I inquired with sly hope

But the smile as his head turned around
was empty
and he asked us only for fresh water

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BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

Three days of paranoia
a loaded gun always at hand
I lay against the crinkled grass
of a Jewish grave
because the black neighbourhood
was forbidden
The state of siege is alleviated
when my aunt allows me out to the library

Where
a host of multicoloured children
gabble like Thanksgiving turkeys at story time
or flap their wings
like fabled eagles together

In Atlanta I waited an hour while the 3038 bus was serviced to complete the last stage of its journey. I was one of only three people left since New York. Two elderly men occupied the front seats. One travelled considerably, the other said he didn't travel anymore because the changes would depress him too much. After something close to eternity the city lights and illuminated smoke of Birmingham extended below us and Vulcan raised his ominous greeting. The torch which so often burns red not green – signalling the road deaths in the previous twenty four hours. Just outside Birmingham there is a highway warning which takes the form of successive signs:

LOOK
WHAT WE
PICKED UP

a heap of tangled car wreckage lies dumped in the central reservation.

“Say hello to your aunt for me,” said the black G.I., who sat next to me for twenty eight hours and left in Atlanta. Later I was shown the church where the negro children were blown up. The man who was driving the car I was in suggested that the blacks may have planted the bomb themselves to gain sympathy.

My Greek cousin Micky lives forty safe miles away from Birmingham on the banks of the Logan Martin lake system. To Micky I was always “mah crazy English cousin”. On New Year’s Eve I stayed with them for the first time and at midnight Micky fired six shots into the still forest. As we staggered off to bed after too much vodka Micky shouted “Hey limey?”

“What wop?”

“First one up gets busted.”

“What you mean busted?”

Made the sign of a fist. “That’s busted.”

“Won’t be me,” I assured him.

There were things I tried to make him understand and he would give me a puzzled, sideways glance as we argued in the car. He was always reminding me from some less than pleasant situation, saying: “How you bin sweet angel? Ah’ve been right worried about you.”

It was he who said, “You know this is your home if ever you want to come here” in one of his rare serious moments. Even in our clashes over racialism he was still joking, but he noticed my narrowed stare after one of his more provocative statements: “You know this girl hates me.” I may have cared for him more than anyone else in the whole venture. I think that is why I tried to get through to him. “Ah’m gonna go out and shoot me a few of them jungle-bunnies. No, but seriously Fran, ah reckon something like ten per cent of the niggers are real jewels and ah’d be proud to have ’em living in our neighbourhood. You know Miss Watts down at the restaurant, honey, she’s always so neat and clean. But that other ninety per

cent. Why, they're filthy honey. You seen what they've done to decent white neighbourhoods in Birmingham."

Indeed I did see, if not quite in the angle of vision they expected. Micky was to appear almost tolerant after a few days spent at Uncle Ben's. Ben had the rather macabre job of looking after a private Jewish graveyard for some of the wealthier citizens of Birmingham. They were the last whites in a now black neighbourhood. I wasn't allowed outside the confines of the cemetery into those other confines. Ben carried a loaded gun everywhere: after all, just like in 'Police Story', those damn niggers could attack at anytime. At night we drove away to their other house in a dead suburb.

The worst problem is trying to get nigger help. He can't hardly get none now they're all on welfare. The day we had a funeral in the bright sunshine Walter Chambers wrote to the bossman asking for a raise (spelt 'race'). Across the road was a rival cemetery run by a black. I could imagine the scene in Chambers' house: "What you work for them white folks fo' Walt? You kin easy get more money. They can't manage without you." Irritated by their ingratitude, there was many a mealtime when Ben would launch a tirade over the corn bread and biscuits about the damn niggers taking "white houses, white schools and white churches and driving in their Cadillacs to collect their food stamps".

Aunt Mary confessed to being shocked that some blacks were actually travelling by plane but she allowed me to go where I pleased. Researching in West Ensley library I noticed it was story time for a group of children of mixed race. Captivated by two stories, the first about the turkey and the second about the eagle, they gobbled like turkeys and flapped their arms like eagles, each answering the other in an excited crescendo.

AFTER WASHINGTON

Though the nuns have fallen asleep
beneath the white mist wraps
as the bus slowly creeps to Pennsylvania
my eyes are still open
to a crumbling city
the startled eyes of a black worker
flagging down our bus with orange flag
for the emergency cement mixers filling
in surreptitious holes

Somewhere in the centre of the insectlights
is the one who issues confused officials.
(in the station)

"Show me your ticket"

"Hey man, what do you think I am
some kind of bum?
you sick or something?"

"I'm only doing my job"

"Why don't you search them?"

Gesture to the whites
a nun stirs uneasily in sleep
the black bible slides to her feet

SPIRALLING OUT OF MAINE

White angles razor
a fish back kicked
numbed by Ogunquit sands
'a permanent condition'
Sucked by uneven prints
the sea fragmented
our shells
splashed down
an inert brown jellyfish
or a broken lobster claw
rasping attention
at the net of an unlicensed
fisherman

In Maine
there was a clam
thrown loose to the reality
of flotsam
and now bubbles blind flesh
in its tight shell

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