

# Men, Death, Lies



Roy Bentley

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## Famous Blue Raincoat

*Well I see you there with the rose in your teeth  
One more thin gypsy thief...*

—Leonard Cohen, “Famous Blue Raincoat”

The year I first heard Leonard Cohen sing of gypsy thieves and the sort of loss you dread like conscription, I bought a black leather motorcycle jacket. I didn't own a motorcycle. I owned my experience: enlisting to avoid being drafted and sent to Nam. The jacket was my Famous Blue Raincoat, a symbol. I'd seen *The Wild One*, and it was that jacket—the kind with the belt in the back and silver snaps, zippered sleeves, a design to cover anatomic regions of the upper body in case of a crash. The first time I wore it and waltzed in to the Union Bar & Grill in Athens, Ohio, I liked the way women paid attention to me. I liked the man I was then: back from the air force, a giant chip on my gypsy shoulder the size of a country. I drank beer and didn't mind crashing and burning for the better part of a day afterwards. Some men are halved by their lives; some women, too. But whatever else a self is, besides a set of understandings we put on and take off like this year's fashion or a uniform, in the jacket I felt whole. I was building myself from a kit, and the black leather jacket was my Cloak of Visibility, you could say: Whatever mystery surrounds attraction, whatever prayer for peace wearing it was (the Beatles wore jackets like it, in their early publicity stills, or John Lennon did) the thing drew women. On top of which I wore wire-rimmed glasses with tinted lenses (like Lennon) night or day. They were part resolve, part a promise I made myself to look past appearances, to scratch the surface for whatever depth is, even if it's more surface—the way a Plato or Aristotle might. I think it was Plato who said, *Only the dead have seen the end of war.*

I'm not saying I was Marlon Brando, metaphorically slouching on some iron horse in movie light, or Plato. I'm saying I was from Ohio and learning to live.



## Why Palestinian Men Fire Submachine Guns in the Direction of the Bone-colored Face of the Man in the Moon

They have forgotten physics and the Qur'an  
of gravity. Bullets go up like prayers: a sky and  
faint stars concede only that there are rules to this.  
It's nightfall; barrel flashes light the storefronts  
and stone streets of Bethlehem. Sometimes  
peace is an absolution of little thunders by a shop  
that can't keep posters of Clint Eastwood in stock.  
Sometimes the sun sets like the end of a Western.

Even now, a soccer star's fugitive brother  
sleeps in a different neighbor's house each night  
to avoid arrest, re-imprisonment. Sometimes  
he dreams of his 46-year-old mother in a hospital,  
dying alone, compassion the property of those  
who can call down God as border guards. Tonight,  
a radio of explosives on a shoulder hails a taxi.  
*Oh, turn it up, someone says. American music.*

## Nosferatu in Florida

Maybe vampires hear an annunciatory trumpet solo. Maybe they gather at the customary tourist traps like a blanket of pink flamingos plating a lake and lake shore by the tens of thousands to drink. The whole, tacky blood circus is theme-park stuff and as Disneyesque as lifting the lid on a casket to flit about sampling the inexhaustible offerings of O Positive like the Sunday brunch at IHOP. But if you had a booming, amphitheatrical voice and had been recently rescued from the grave—if you wore the republic of the dark like a cape at Halloween, all bets would be off by the signage for Paradise Tire & Service, a neon-green royal palm. Bela Lugosi could materialize on a trailer-park lawn and the locals would miss it, though lap dogs howled as kingdoms rose and fell. You could say a kingdom of fangs glows and drips red by the broken temples and wide, well-lit aisles of Best Buy and Wal-Mart. By the shadowed homeless holding up placards hand-lettered in English, as if the kind-hearted of the nations of the world spoke one language and could be counted on to forgive misspellings, bad syntax that announces one life is never enough. The resurrection of the body is tough everywhere. In the Sunshine State, despite eons to shake off loss, a body carries the added burden of perpetual labor and cyclical, inescapable debt. The dead know this.

## Ringo Starr Answers Questions on *Larry King Live* about the Death of George Harrison

First, Larry King mistakenly calls Ringo *George* then asks him whether his passing, George's, was expected. He answers that it was. Says they knew he was sick. Had lung cancer. I'm watching, though it's none of my business how grief-stricken Ringo Starr was and likely still is or whether he was there, at the bedside, at the moment George left his life for some other, if you can believe what George believed, which was that we keep coming back till we get it right. And when Ringo is about to let down his guard and be a bit more self-disclosing, even honest, Larry interrupts, asking, *Do you ever want to pinch yourself?* And Ringo Starr says, Sure. In 1988, years before, in another interview, with George, this years after Lennon's death, Ringo confessed that he was the poorest Beatle then laughed and blew cigarette smoke upward. Which must've seemed terribly funny to George, an inside joke, because he said *Hello, John* to the smoke like it was Lennon (by virtue of his acknowledged wealth) or some spirit he used to conquer worlds with. Ringo says he was shocked upon hearing the news of the death of John Lennon, but that George's death was another thing entirely. He doesn't quote from the Bhagavad Gita, but it's as if he wants to say we continue on, are these *spirits*, a sort of outrageous bliss even to think it, dumb luck on the order of being hired as the Beatles' drummer. Maybe he would have said it, with respect to George or ventured his own beliefs, if Larry hadn't butted in to ask him which of the Beatles was the best musician.

*You mean, now?* And I want to laugh now because  
maybe Ringo's imagining how hard it is to move  
your hands after you're dead, or to move at all,  
and how impossible it must be to keep time  
and tempo in all that anonymous blankness,  
the dark become your most imploring fan.

## Transcendence

There is the human in the drop-winged angels in El Greco and the ellipses of youth in a milkmaid's face in Vermeer.

There are the spaces between notes in certain guitar solos by Carlos Santana or Django Reinhardt in which existence is reconstituted as bliss, orchestrations of mercurial joy.

There is the locker-room smile on Mickey Mantle's face in the '56-'57 season, the patter of a titan in the ascendant.

There is the talk of afterlife and deities, the sage expression of caucasian-Christ-in-the-lighted-frame on church walls and in funeral homes where the newly grieving delight at *heaven* showing up on the tongue like a eucharist.

And for the poets there is a blankness before words to be risen above like Dorothy's tornadic, sepia Kansas in *The Wizard of Oz*, the way a metaphor in some hands protects and serves like a pair of regulation ruby slippers, a humbug behind the curtain of the page the best in us.

Maybe the way a lover looked at you after sex, in the last soulful glow of arousal and climax, spoke of an escalator to the stars, the escalator melting like clocks or that one drop of blood from a cracked-and-hatching egg of a world in those paintings by Salvador Dali. Maybe

the only rising we do is out of this body.

## White Firebird

This morning on the phone a voice freezes time.  
My wife is at the hospital. The voice on the phone  
is avoiding the how-is-she foreseeable question.  
I awaken to find myself driving, and I'm there.

The nurse says, *Have a seat*. I say, I'll stand.  
Then she shows me what's behind the curtain.  
Sherry is wearing the clothes she picked out  
that morning. No hospital gown or booties.

She says, *The woman who hit me was tired*  
as if the failures of others could make sense,  
headlamp threads resolving as braids of dawn  
anywhere a woman is stepping from a Firebird,

a white Firebird that looks worse than it is.  
The few who sidestep catastrophe know this:  
it's the majority who fail to swerve in time  
and hear a voice say a name. Their name.

I walk over. Touch her arm. Words spill  
as anthem to the future that language can be.  
I love this woman. And this is what we mean  
by blessed: the horrible cancelled for a time.

## Score for a Movie about the Death of a Carnival Worker

I'm reading a CD case marked CALLIOPE MUSIC.  
I see the wavy-haired Suit popping it in and adjusting  
a volume control as "Entry of the Gladiators" launches—  
minus too-much-rouge and night-quiet, he looks good,  
considering the transplant and months on a ventilator.

A roustabout's iPhone trickles "Happy," the ringtone  
signaling the need for the next small Midwestern town  
to recall last August when the tents were up for weeks.  
I slip a poem about the Gravitron into a costume fold,  
a rap-sonnet about outlasting smack then greasepaint.

If God is the ringmaster doubling as relief driver  
for a semi moving heaven and earth and elephants—  
if grief is an aerialist's love of flight after a bad fall,  
a body laid out is cue to roll credits to rising music:  
acknowledgment there are only so many encores.

## Magnificent Strangers

### 1. *Playing Army, 1963*

After exactly the right sound, after splaying  
my arms outward and clutching a wound  
as real as a skinned knee, my over-the-top death  
is like something out of the movies.

I'm 9, a boy, outmanned and outgunned  
for as long as I can't find the Daisy air rifle  
tossed aside during the tumble I took. Unfazed,  
I count—82, 83. (I'll resurrect at 100.)

I carry on a conversation with the twilight,  
with white clover and a fenced orchard  
and the coming on of evening which tries  
to convince me it's time to go inside.

In my head somewhere, Vic Morrow's voice  
is hard as husks, and I want to be him—  
Sgt. Saunders on *Combat!*, a root of uncorrupted soul  
beneath a scratchy crabgrass plain of grief—

he strides toward his squad, stops, takes a knee. Maps  
the next round of morally defensible mayhem  
in the parched, foreign earth. His business is to survey  
a swastikaed topography and flick ashes

from a filterless cigarette into his free right hand.  
I hear him call roll like God on a hangover,  
saying *Kirby Cage Little John*, his submachine gun  
draped, ready to hiccup death. It's summer,

and they've yet to shoot JFK, so there's time



to hold hoped-for future in the mouth  
like the first burning drag on a Marlboro,  
time to lie on my back and harvest joy.

## 2. *Paul Newman in The Color of Money*

Who could resist his offer of a tutorial  
in the Science of Human Moves—

the Balabushka pool cue he tosses you,  
the end-of-dreams advice about your girl,

his proposal of a road trip for what sounds like  
a fair and reasonable slice of your winnings?

Maybe there will be a new Minnesota Fats  
and glory to rival a vision of the afterlife,

but when you lean against his white Cadillac  
he says “Watch the paint” just so you know.

Your first test is a guy with a hole in his throat.  
You ease up, take a beating, and he tells you:

“The problem with mercy: it ain’t professional.”  
He continues the lesson, on the way out of town,

saying, *Money won is twice as sweet as money earned.*  
You’re hooked, the hug you give him is sincere,

filial, which is something he wants no part of—  
he wants you on your knees for what it says

about all of us. “That’s swell, kid,” he tells you.  
The smile, you’re pretty sure, is part of the hustle.

3. *Watching The Adventures of Superman, I'm Reminded of a Kid Who'd Have Understood Comparisons to Christ*

George Reeves stands in front of a 48-starred flag rippled by an off-screen Hollywood wind machine; he's flexing his S-emblazoned pecs as a voice-over drones on & on about buildings leaped in a single bound. Circus stuff. Now, a revolver pivots in a disembodied hand. Fires. There's talk of speeding bullets, the American Way—which is part the Immigrant redefining what success is, part a wide-eyed kid who believes the best about us.

Say it is about that kid's yearning to be saved, rescued, from a come-from-Krypton backhand slap or, worse. Does it matter, then, that the Man of Steel's "take-off" is done with a springboard, his "flying" with a harness? If, like God, he's a string of lies in support of moral action, sacrifice, a world that deserves the efforts of its citizens, maybe there's a boy made of heartbreak in there, too. Could be something to the guy, who knows?

#### 4. *Magnificent Strangers*

In the months after I left my first wife Sherry I watched Westerns in which men are villainous or wholly good. I felt I needed to organize my thinking along the lines that choices take on heroic proportion. Clint Eastwood

dragged himself through the indifferent dust toward the next bright light or showdown. After a beating, a rushing by of wind resolved to whatever he grabbed to raise himself— on his feet, he squared his shoulders and lit

a cigar, the message: *And now the mortal spirit is a man before whom other men tremble.* So what if I lacked Clint Eastwood's trademark squint, a serviceable serape. An unfamiliar woman had slept on the other side of the bed for years,

her breathing a story with secrets and no happy ending. We'd met in a town filled with ghosts and moral absolutes; we'd bought our first TV to see John Wayne gift the world with reprieve and just reckoning at the point of a Winchester

when life is neither fair nor about reckonings. If we're heir to anything, as humans, it's failure. When it ended—no trumpet flourish—the rest of our lives did seem to flare in the distance like twin, burning cities on a wide frontier.

## 5. *Love Lessons in Stop Motion*

The Claymation monkey-god Kong disports itself  
and beats upon perfect ape pecs before snatching up  
the offered blond. More morsel than meal, a snack  
to be one-handed from a jungle altar, something

Freudian is underway here that can't be stopped.  
Fuzzy, ceremonial ropes are the accoutrements  
to a foreplay and sex premised upon screaming.  
What sort of truly disciplined sphincter must she

be in possession of not to foul herself in transit?  
The real thing chomps Fay Wray like a sausage  
with arms and legs. Not this Kong: he fights  
a T. Rex then gets bored and unwraps the girl

as if boys will be boys and gorillas, too. Snakes  
and pterodactyls be damned, this one's *his*.  
At a signal at the jungle's end, bombs go off.  
There are downpours of arrows from hordes

of natives, gunfire from swarms of white men;  
however, she's worth the sting of flesh wounds.  
In what animal language does he squander this  
that he's rescued from a sailor named Jack?

The final solo swan dive she'll look down on  
from a ledge, counting bounces without pity,  
but this minute she's a bird-wristed creature  
who can holler herself silly, for all he cares.

6. *Gina Lollobrigida in Never So Few*

Gina's doing her best Sophia Loren—same accent, same night-sky brunette hair and sleeveless gown—and trashes Frank Sinatra for the reason that she can, on the dancefloor, saying how men love war, all men, before sashaying past Steve McQueen, Frank's driver, Ringer, who's doing a bit of carousing of his own.

She waltzes through her bit part like it's the real deal. Frank's smitten and the Voice, so they hook up. On a stroll past a cage of macaques, Sinatra explains the word *hanker*, says he “hankers”—who wouldn't?—and kisses her shoulder before a backdrop of orchids. Frank isn't paying attention to the monkeys. Neither

is Gina. But there's a little zoo at their backs—you'd never know there was a war on, a killing war, Steve McQueen to work the mortars. Which says, we're dead ringers for a bunch of caged monkeys. Trapped by leggy women with to-die-for breasts and a nation of men whispering: *Fuck her, Frank.*

## 7. *Harrison Ford in Regarding Henry*

Maybe it takes two bullets to the cerebral cortex and rehab for a lawyer to behave morally again: to want to hold hands with his wife, buy a dog for a daughter who's grown up without one.

It does seem that the man remaining, *that* Henry, needed to be shown the world of little deaths and random violence; that it is what it is— a place where the 21 grams we call a soul

entitles us to, well, nothing. Not luck or love, certainly not Everlasting Life. If it's in you, this weight of Spirit, then it's a bloom as dark as a bullet to the brain. Maybe the trajectory

and track through the living tissue is a Braille pressed because we're more than bodies. But as it leaves, the bullet, exiting with a sound like someone (or hope) drowning, this one

says he thought of a door being opened: a new hinge beginning to move on its fulcrum of light. He says it sang about nothing very much, his dream-door. Nothing about the other side.

8. *Jason Robards in The Day After*

The long, drawn out quarrel that is History  
is impelled to be told around a man and his  
daughter. She explains point of view in Chinese art.  
*God's point of view*, he says, *is everywhere*—  
as a bystander with a radio waves him quiet.

ICBM silos in the silting drift of late-light and tassled corn  
wait for whatever is to happen next. Robards  
goes home, gets in bed with a frightened  
wife wants to talk 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis,  
because nothing happened and they made love, in fade-out.

*This time, it's different*, she says. It is. And I'm thinking,  
This must be how it feels when some idea of Deity  
fails us. Next day, he's in a white Volvo  
on I-70, straining to see past lines of Fords and  
Chevys stalled in the last clock-tick of flag and republic—

he blinks in the new sun's red roar. A down-feather froth  
of fallout says we're not in Kansas anymore.  
White-maned horses leave off drinking,  
scalded by the same declaration of light  
flocks of scavenging birds stared into and went blind.

9. *The Exact Location of His Grave Is Unknown to Everyone Except a Small Group of People*

Other people treasure memorable moments in their lives: the time one climbed the Parthenon at sunrise, the summer night one met a lonely girl in Central Park and achieved with her a sweet and natural relationship... What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*.

—Walker Percy, from *The Moviegoer*.

At the last, they say John Wayne was 160 pounds. Bald, a fringe of gray. A twenty-eight-inch scar from lung surgery in '64 had been reopened along the revenant ridges; followed, like a map to frontiers of glory and self where we gallop off in the grit and dust of a cowboy goodbye.

They say he asked for a pistol; was given it—radiation target fields on his chest had developed a “radiation sunburn” and of course there was the fact of that permanent IV of morphine—but John Wayne doesn't shoot John Wayne under an orange bull's eye of California sun.

And since the Church had little to say about the sins he favored—gambling, card playing, drinking—he accepted baptism and last rites. What was a little water? He'd fished oceans with John Ford, Ward Bond. They say he smiled as the droplets found his face.



10. *Sal Mineo in Rebel Without a Cause*

has shot puppies and been deemed  
a public menace and is in a police station  
where James Dean is sleeping one off  
in the shoe shine chair where he's being  
drunk and annoying because Nicholas Ray  
thinks that is the admixture of adult-as-child  
and he's right since Sal Mineo is a puppy killer.  
All right, I'll try and say this again, without  
James Dean and Sal Mineo this time—  
I'd have you look in the direction of Natalie Wood  
who isn't attracted to Dean's schoolboy antics  
or to pouty Sal Mineo because she's got a boyfriend  
named Buzz and Father Issues. Natalie Wood gives up  
a number to a cop who phones and gets her mother.  
Disappointment is etched on her too-gorgeous face  
like the per-service prices on the board outside  
above the shoe shine chair. Disappointment  
is her cue to throw a hissy fit then leave  
a make-up mirror that Dean retrieves  
so they fall in love and rescue one another.  
Sal Mineo wants a family, too. Not  
a Negro nanny, a family like Dean's  
where Mom and Pop change roles, though  
Sal Mineo doesn't know that (never will)  
lying dead from a gunshot wound in front  
of the Griffith Observatory planetarium  
with one red sock and one blue sock  
and James Dean zipping up a red  
leather jacket like Sal Mineo  
hadn't shot those puppies  
because he had a .45 and time  
and nothing better to do.

## America as Ex

About the 1776<sup>th</sup> time I begged her not to spend money we didn't have and she ignored me—we're not together. But if we talk on the phone, I'll start in wanting her back. Lately, however, I'm hearing the language of despotism. A dismissal of the sorrow of others. For as long as I've known her, her vibrator War—that's what she calls it—has been her dearest tool. Before, her Federal Reserve Bank of infidelities might have been almost defensible, but then she whined, *The effing poor are such a pain.*

To say you loved her, in those days, was to place yourself in contention. Because you wanted what she wanted, which was everything. I loved her then. But I'm prepared to watch her walk over the skyline, waving off the exceptional distance ahead and behind. I see buds she brings to flowering, that history. And can identify some in Ohio in spring, though I hate accounting for that weed-heart. Whatever else, screamers like her are all about pain. And some love will get you killed.

## My Father's Love Letters

It was 1959. Whatever had possessed my mother to drag out the charcoal grill and pour starter fluid over a rubber-banded stack of white envelopes, her actions assumed the tempo of panic. Fingers of flame shot up toward the match in her hand, blue-yellow and swelling, spreading outward like the hands of a pianist, the blackening scraps rising into Ohio-afternoon. Oh, and she was crying as the smoke suggested that in a clock tick a life can ignite and go up. I remember she walked

from the burning pile, left me to take over. Anything can be justified by a child's need to know what is happening, although the lump of smoldering intimacies inventoried feelings I was years from having. As charred as they were, the center mass of the letters was salvageable. I two-fingered out a handful of envelopes. Waved away the smoke. Grief is tissue-like, an envelope stamped *Par Avion* testifying to great distances. I read a few. The house

on Comanche Drive held three people then. One of them—my father—brought currency from Okinawa, hundred-yen notes with faces advertising faraway fatherlands like billboards. Adoration burns. And it keeps burning if you go inside to your room and retrieve things to feed the flames. All afternoon, I fed it on a paved street where hopscotching kids paused and pointed at the sky in the direction of the route and destination of the smoke.

## Men, Death, Lies

I asked you to a movie in the afternoon  
because afternoons were what we had then.

We bought Cokes and popcorn and suffered  
Nicholas Cage explaining men are faithless

in order to cheat death, though death is never  
cheated. It's not like they tell you, adultery,

though it is a form of afterlife, it turns out.  
You open a dead self to someone to feel

the pull that the living die from a lack of.  
Never mind the promises in motel rooms:

I like to think assurances have a shelf life  
and lapse like produce past its sell-by date.

How about: the brain lights up like an MRI  
with exploding-star sparks of recognition,

excited lobes a light-as-signature galaxy,  
a gravitational draw suddenly dizzying.

Still, it wasn't trading one love for another.  
It wasn't the doors and windows of a soul

thrown open, or was it? And what made it  
feel so desperate when it was mostly joy?

Fans Listening to a Boxing Match Over the Radio,  
June 22, 1938

*“Each time Joe Louis won a fight in those depression years, even before he became champion, thousands of black Americans on relief or WPA, and poor, would throng out into the streets all across the land to march and cheer and yell and cry because of Joe’s one-man triumphs. No one else in the United States has ever had such an effect on Negro emotions – or on mine. I marched and cheered and yelled and cried, too.”*

—Langston Hughes

A friend from Detroit, Butch Thompson, once said that being black in America is an art. He said you practice it the way some paint or learn how to box. In a photograph at the New York Historical Society they’re listening to the Louis-Schmeling rematch—a barroom of faces, mostly black men in skimmer hats, a woman in a Juliet cap, before a portrait of Joe Louis. An aproned bartender has a hand on the dial of a Philco cathedral radio as if what most men, some women too, want between watered drinks is murderous syncopation for the soundtrack of our curses when peace doesn’t cut it. Joe Louis must have drawn a crowd like someone giving away what we forgot we wanted. The woman at the bar is years away from dying of a cerebral hemorrhage or

broken heart or the umpteenth lungful of foul city air. If there’s an art to being black, as Butch said, we see it in group photographs in rooms like this, the dark gloss of humanity become a face among other faces. I was about to say *A happy face* and then caught myself—see the hatless man, head turned and staring straight into the camera. That’s not the face of a happy man. In a land of thieves, the usual sawed-off under the bar isn’t there for regulars. It’s there because, well, because. If history has a center, it’s here. In a bar in New York

in the nineteen thirties. Ask the staring man, standing  
as if aware this is his shot at eternal anything. Ask him  
if it's the damage Louis is doing binds them together.  
That he's destroying a Nazi poster boy doesn't hurt.

“Robert Plant Holding a Dove that Flew  
into His Hands, Circa 1973”

The wing-flutter resolves like a breath of fog  
by San Francisco Bay. Like sand or white sails.  
This year, every snapshot of Robert Plant onstage  
describes the outline and contour of his cock  
through jeans. This is that. But the heart inside  
the successful crooner is what it is: Frank Sinatra  
with a smidgen of Elvis tossed in for good measure:

Shelley’s Adonais resurrected with a mane of hair  
and management, a record deal and Jimmy Page.  
Now the fingers tipped with nicotine gesture  
to the starveling crowd about to feast—  
the hand dealing with both a lit Marlboro  
and a bottle of English beer. Which is when  
the rock dove lands on the other hand. Settles

like news of the death of Keats settled on Shelley.  
This congregation still wants directions to Paradise  
if not ushered to the stairs. Taught the shibboleth  
for entry. What it gets is the flight of the dove,  
impromptu cooing, the talons ringing fingers  
as if what we call beautiful is straightening  
the curve of its spine and starting to sing.

## Prince Performs “Purple Rain” During Downpour

This is Super Bowl XLI Halftime. Ball buster of a deluge. Wind like the last couple of breaths of the Christ. But this is Florida. It rains, all right.

Miles Davis said he was James Brown and Hendrix and Charlie Chaplin. Miles added, *And Marvin Gaye* to remind us that a funk fantasy is about getting off.

Manning’s Colts have a 2-point lead over the Bears. No stalling the usual exsanguination by advertisement. The years that hourglass to death by overdose, CNN-

endless pundit prattle on the intentionality of the act. But onstage, the dancers, the motherfucking torrent, and a pop song reality rise into pure Soul-falsetto—

he’s waiting to cue (*tada!*) showers of fireworks to show us what we doubted: that it’s conceivable for a Black man to move between the raindrops.



## Rimbaud Dying

Most days, she pins an orchid into her black hair.  
Extravagant petal-crests of white and a dark trough.  
Tonight, no orchid, she leans over the man in the bed  
hoping he may linger and she can again collect wages,  
fill a draw-stringed bag with gems. Each stone an ocean  
of sharp starlight and an East Africa of terrible suffering.  
Her small, thin hand in his remains a kindness. Mercy.

Again she offers a thin rawhide to soften his screams.  
Places the strap in his mouth. It's his season in hell—  
nursed by an inamorata smelling of patchouli. Proof  
that comfort, unlike forgiveness, can be conscripted.  
Outside, no stars. No tolling bells on midnight streets.  
Only the annoying buzz of a fly that will see tomorrow.  
She curses at the fly in French as a pain-cry subsides

into a string of Bedouin oaths. When he's gone, fallen  
back, she traces the Braille of bite marks in the leather.  
The fly loots a flesh-crumbs nesting in the bedclothes.  
Her eyes fix on the amputation-to-the-knee as elegy.  
She knows nothing of Verlaine, the trouble in Paris.  
Fluent in French, she recalls the last hours and his  
mad ramblings and wishes she'd worn the flower.

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