

A TRIBUTE TO RICHARD HOWARD

Friday, March 31, 2023

7 pm

Miller Theatre

2960 Broadway

New York, New York



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A TRIBUTE TO RICHARD HOWARD

MARY JO BANG

“A Far Cry After a Close Call” from *The Damages* (1967)

WAYNE KOESTENBAUM

“Bonnard: A Novel” from *The Damages* (1967)

VIJAY SESHADRI

“Beyond Words” from *Findings* (1971)

RIKA LESSER

from “After the Facts” from *Two-Part Inventions* (1974)

BENJAMIN TAYLOR

“The Giant on Giant-Killing” from *Fellow Feelings* (1976)

BABA BADJI

Preface to *Alone with America* (Second Edition, 1979)

JENNIFER FRANKLIN

from “Ithaca: The Palace at Four a.m.” from *Lining Up*
(1984)

MEGHAN MAGUIRE DAHN

“Lee Krasner: Porcelain, a Collage” from *Trappings* (2000)

CRAIG MORGAN TEICHER

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SAMANTHA ZIGHELBOIM

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EDWARD HIRSCH

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JIMIN SEO

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GRACE SCHULMAN

“Pansy, That’s for Thoughts,” from *RH ♥ HJ* (2020)

A Far Cry After a Close Call

For if they do these things in a green tree what
shall be done in the dry? -Luke 23:31

Nuns, his nieces, bring the priest in the next
Bed pralines, not prayers for the next world,
But I've had one look myself
At *that* one (looking

Back now, crammed in the convalescent ward,
With the Invisible Man opposite
Sloshing most of the Black Sea
Around in his lungs,

While the third patient coughs and borrows *Time*).
No one turned over when I was wheeled in;
The efficient British nurse
Snipped off my soggy

Trousers and put me right, "sure as Bob's your
Uncle?" The water roared and ran away,
Leaving only words to stock
My mind like capsules

Crowding a bottle. Then the lights blew up,
Went out, someone was going through My Things
While I rowed—rowed for my life
Down the rubber floor—

But the waves failed me. The hallway heaved where I
Foundered and turned in my doctor's dry hands
To sovereign selflessness:
Meaning had melted.

("Mon corps est moi," Molière said. They're more than that,
This monster the body, this miracle
Its pain-when was I ever
Them, when were they me?

At thirty-three, what else is there to do
But wait for yet another great white moth
With eager, enlarging eyes
To land on my chest,

Slowly, innocently choking me off?
The feelers stir while I lie still, lie here
 (Where on earth does it come from,
 That wind, that wounding

Breath?), remembering the future now,
Foreseeing a past I shall never know,
 Until the little crisis
 Breaks, and I wake.

For as Saint Paul sought deliverance from
The body of this death, I seek to stay—
 Man is mad as the body
 Is sick, by nature.

Bonnard: A Novel

The tea party at Le Cannet. Just as we arrived it began,
a downpour, and kept on.
This might have been the time
before: Charles-Xavier playing Scriabin études, all the others
at the open window.
A landscape—lawn, garden,
strawberry patch, Japanese footbridge, barges moving on the river
beyond—as in Verlaine,
behind a mist of rain,
and the regular noise of the rain on tens of thousands of leaves:
such is the prose that wears
the poem's guise at last.
White cats, one in almost every chair, pretend not to be watching
young Jean worry the dog.
Sophie, damp, dashes in
dishevelled from the forest, dumping out a great bag of morels
on the table: the white
cloth will surely be spoiled,
but the mushrooms look iridescent, like newly opened oysters
in the raindark air, blue
by this light. Calling it
accidental is only declaring that it exists. Then tea
downstairs, Jean opening
the round pantry window:
the smell of wet soil and strawberries with our cinnamon toast: all
perception is a kind
of sorting out, one green
from another, parting leaf from leaf, but in the afternoon rain
signs and shadows only,
the separate life renounced,
until that resignation comes, in which all selfhood surrenders . . .
Upstairs, more Scriabin
and the perfect gestures
of Sophie and Jean playing ball with the dog. All the cats are deaf.
Steady rain. The music
continues, Charles-Xavier
shouting over the notes, ignoring them: "Beatitude teaches
nothing. To live without
happiness and not wither—
there is an occupation, almost a profession." Take the trees:
we could "contrive to do
without trees;" but not leaves,
Charles-Xavier explains from the piano, still playing, "we require
their decorum that is
one of congestion, till

like Shelley we become lewd vegetarians.” Apprehensive
about the rain, I ask
Jean to order a dosed
carriage for Simone. The doctor frowns—a regular visitor
these days?—and frightens her,
eyeing Sophie’s mushrooms;
his diagnosis: toadstools. Scriabin diminishes. Is the dog
lost? Jean rushes outside.
Punishment of the dog:
he is forbidden the strawberry patch. Darker now. One candle
is found for the piano,
and the music resumes
with Debussy, a little sphere of yellow in the sopping dusk.
The river's surface looks—
is it the rain?—like the sea
in shallows: this moment is an instance of the world becoming
a mere convenience,
more or less credible,
and the old questions rise to our lips—but have we spoken a word?—
before we remember,
prompted by the weather
probably, or the time of day, that we already know something:
we are not newborn, then.
What is it that we know?
The carriage comes at last, but it is an open carriage, merely
hooded. We crowd under,
fending off the last drops
with a violet golf umbrella Charles-Xavier has somehow
managed for us. A slow
cold drive under the trees,
Simone balancing the suspect mushrooms in her lap. I tell her
it is not dangerous:
we cannot die, but are
in this light or lack of it—trees dripping, the sky fraudulent—
much less individuals
than we hope or fear to be.
Once home, we shall have a little supper of Sophie’s fresh-picked
morels.

Beyond Words

Song is miraculous because it masters what is otherwise a pure instrument of self-seeking, the human voice. —Hugo von Hofmannsthal

He was a man whom words obeyed. —Richard Strauss

His last month was July, the Summerland
he called it, when one son
(the older boy) had taken poison: then,
quite suddenly, he died too.

Look—through the crooked window
he could never open, between branches
of an old sour-cherry tree
bright with fruit—orderly there on the desk,

letters from his old ally and foe,
paperweighted in packets
by two Offenbach scores: *La Belle Hélène*
beside *Orpheus in Hell*.

“You know this inmost aim, this
arrogance of my nature,” he confessed,
“to produce out of myself
a whole theater, a repertory:

not works, but rather a literature?”
In a real sense the man died
of responsibility, the sustained
pressure of remembering

what had long been dismembered—
Europe, the wide land. Deep secrets hide
in surfaces, he knew, where else
could they go? and the spells we desecrate

run from mouth to mouth, unguessed, exhausted.
He fell, then, the Conjurer,
and all the puppets with him into whose
sawdust he poured so much blood.

Speechless they lay where he lay,
corpses who once had proved that what lovers
or friends mean to each other
is made clear by exchanging magic rings,

the presentation of a silver rose . . .
All gestures were ruined now:
the Madman's knee in Zerbinetta's eye,
Sophie with the awful nurse

hanging on her, Mandryka
sprawling, broken, obscene really, like them
all at this remove—merely
the others of *him*. That much of dying

could be rehearsed: for we are not ourselves
until we know how little
of our selves is truly our own. He knew,
now, how little and how much,

the Magician who leaped from
the father's into the son's body and
back, changing like clothes The Forms.
You can see the papers still, by this light,

though not the thread of script: it is too dark.
Branches move at the window
and bitter cherries like dead tanagers
brighten the grass where they lie,

shed the night before—droppings.
They sweeten, rot and dry. In an early
poem he said, "and yet, to say
'evening' is to say much." It is evening.

may be of some use
in restoring to his proper genius
a poet, as you intimated, forlorn
in the prime of his prophetic mission.
Mad or even masked
as “Scardanelli” (the one clue you afford),
I would succor a man who discards his own
identity—let me describe to you more
circumstantially
than Papa ever could or *would* (my father
was the son, necessarily, of another age—
an age perhaps of clearer vision, clearly
one of drier eyes),
more *flagrantly*, as Papa would have phrased it,
the Episode I figured in to such effect.
Discover to your mysterious “patient”
my recollections,
for one memory makes us all remember,
and I am certain what so amazed me, then,
is with him, now, wherever his mind may be.
I have plagued *my* wits
to “place” the man—between your Schiller and your
Schlegel, though surely neither: too young, too fair,
yet the eminence you intimate was there.
Will you not name him?
It had been one of those autumn afternoons,
ageless, unswept, apparently infinite—
weather which to reminiscence seems a rule
of life in those days.
At first I scarcely glanced up from the volume
(the Cérieux edition, I have it still,
of Sénancour’s romance, or is it nonsense
so to qualify
a work of such laborious melancholy?)...
As I say, I was not inclined to leave off
reading to Papa, for I supposed the sound
no more than the cry
of our peacocks, more strident at that season,
in fine weather. How like my father it was,
to cultivate the white variety alone -
and fondly insist
the creatures supplied by harshness of accent
what they lacked in luster! Granting it was so,
the present intonation was too gentle,
too lamentable
to be the clamor of our particular birds,
and I suspect a sort of curiosity
conquered my reluctance to lay by the tale
of poor *Obermann*.

with a terrible sigh—"we are not in Greece."
"Are you then a Greek?" asked Papa, gesturing,
"and are these your gods?" "These? Neither mine nor yours.

We have come too late
for them. It is the world which is divine now,
and that is why there is no God. The divine
has no name, only the gods are named, like these,
and they change their names."

My father was a man of principle, not
a man of faith, and would have pursued the point
(it is no common thing, to hold such discourse
with a Wanderer

in one's park), yet even as he made to speak,
the ragged man rushed on: "To be what we are—
that is to be divine. But the gods are dead,
the world is alone

and knowledge—knowledge..."—here he fixed upon me
eyes that seemed to draw my own into a pool
of dim oblivion—"knowledge is only
knowledge of our death."

By these words it was apparent, to Papa,
the speaker was a German; he asked his name.

Thereupon the man fell again to his knees,
his face in his hands

(which I had occasion then to remark: thin,
pale for all the dirt and curving at the tips
as if they would scoop the darkness hovering
round the blue pupils)

and promised to tell us ... the next day! "It is
difficult for me, remembering my name.

To escape a city is one thing, to choose
a road, another."

These were his last words, for with them, as if
summoned *by* them, one of our peacocks appeared,
crest trembling like a lyre, coral claws oddly

raw upon the moss,
and with the hollow clash of an opening
parasol, spread his perfect fan before me,
white quills quivering, each one an inducement
to admiration.

Faced with this...rival, the Stranger turned away,
and I never saw him again. Nor have I
forgotten what I *heard*: that night I wakened
to a horrid scream,

never explained, from the servants' hall, a scream
like the peacocks' (though they do not cry at night).

Papa, next day, said the lunatic had fled,
but in my own mind

I cannot yet reconcile that Wanderer

saying, “the gods are dead, the world alone,”
with the howling of the night, if that was he.

“He”—I mean the one
you desired my father to identify,
though with no more designation who he was
than the calling of Poet. *Will you not name him?*

Nor have I yet solved
the riddle of his departure, the gaze
he gave me (that I gave him back)—then nothing
but a shriek at midnight, and the man was gone.

Almost, I incline
to call it jealousy of a white peacock
paying court to a white girl. What is the use
of trying to fit the two visions together?

All of us have been
children though we may not know what we knew then,
nor have at the same hour the wisdom of those
who are at the end of their days. M. Prüfe,

perhaps my father’s
emphasis upon that night’s disorder has
prevailed over what was said the day before,
in the circle of the gods, and in sunlight,

as the white peacock
pronounced *his* judgment, and the Stranger spoke
of our immortality, or of what is not
itnortal, merely fate. If I have redressed

the balance, do I
earn thereby an answer to your Enigma?
Never, as you may discern, have I broken
faith with my bright recollection, for all
the days dividing

me from that strange encounter. Thus I remain,
with passionate hope for the recovery
of a mind so *memorable* I believe

it cannot forget
what it wrought as well upon your importunate
correspondent, MARIANNE FOURIÈRES, *née*
DESTOURD. May I depend on the indulgence
of a prompt reply?

II

Tubingen, the New Year. My dear Madame,
*you have gone to some trouble, and you have
(in the circumstances) my gratitude
for your letter. I fear it comes too late.
Evidently you paid your visitor
the extravagant compliment which no
ordinary woman ever pays a man—
that of listening to him while he talks.
I cannot say the person you describe
(when you give him a moment from your own
preoccupations and predilections)
is the patient in my care. Certainly
he differs altogether from the fool
represented in your father's account.
That is immaterial. Such glimpses
as you afford when it is not yourself,
your father or your finery you bring
before us—on stage, one might almost say—
fail to supply the means whereby I might
awaken in the man who answers to
“Scardanelli” those associations
which would bring home to himself a poet
absent so long in mind if not in flesh.
Men are like trees: last to go is the bark,
and it is indeed the rind of a man
living with us so long in Tübingen,
heedless of every bodily function,
refusing to have his fingernails cut
and speaking—when he speaks—in Italian,
a language he has by no means mastered.
His social existence is more like that
of an early Christian than of a man
of the Nineteenth Century, and if much
must be excused him, there is much to be
excused. As you appear to realize,
it was my hope, in writing to your father,
that when faced with what had been his words
—spoken while he was yet the Laureate
of our earth, our sun, our moon—the poet
might recover what had been his alone:
acceptance, after all, is that final
act which enables us to see clearly.
Alas, earth is no more than an old sun,
and the moon a dead earth. Many a time
I have shown to Signor Scardanelli
(as he must be called) manuscripts of his,
written at twenty. At twenty, Madame,*

*the Poet is always right. At sixty,
the Doctor is never wrong, and to these
confrontations his response is one blaze
of invariable babble, the rough
scratching of filthy talons on the page,
and then the poor creature begins to sing...
It was long my notion that what appears
nonsense in these "performances" of his
would recover itself into poetry
and more, but it is all monstrous, grotesque,
gross and degrading. You write, let us say,
from the brink of prurience, of prying
at best, nor can you have a conception,
when you speak of his pale hands, his blue
eyes, even of his responses to questions!
what it means to minister to this man.
If he could ever regain acquaintance
with what he had spoken upon the edge
of darkness, from whose fall our dimensions
rise, then indeed might some resumption come.
The Cup, the Poem, the Light are all drunk
in darkness—how else could they be taken?
But we are beyond the edge, the margin
where you and your father met a Stranger
who may or may not have been my patient.
I read him out those portions of your tale
in which his own grievous utterances
were given. Nothing availed. With a burst
of derisive laughter, he who had once
been Master of our German Muse, who had
dedicated his odes to Schiller and
his versions of Sophocles to Hegel—
this man, my dear lady, closed his eyelids
(reddened now by nights of staring dullness)
and murmured but one phrase, so utterly
belied by his own condition (as by
his Italian comedy) that it dismays me
in the mere report: "la perfezione
è senza lamento." The rest dithered
away into incoherence. Perhaps
my little experiment did no harm—
surely it did no good. Nothing changes,
all is changed. I am obliged, nonetheless,
for your telling of an episode to which
you bring the talents of a telling pen,
indeed. Your narrative shall be added
to a memorial volume the Friends of
the Poet are compiling in witness
to his life among us. What the witless*

*Scardanelli makes of these matters
is no matter. You have had, dear Madame,
a privileged or a preposterous
meeting—the risk of your choice remains
with you. Though futile to its possible
subject—or object, as he must now be called—
its record is of consequence, and I am,
as I was to the late M. Destourd,
your debtor, faithfully,*

JOACHIM PRÜFE

The Giant on Giant-Killing

Homage to the bronze *David* of Donatello, 1430

I am from Gath where my name
in Assyrian means destroyer, a household word
by now, and deservedly. Every household needs
a word for destroyer—nothing secret in the fact,
nothing disgraceful about a universal need-
and my name is a good word.

Try the syllables on your own tongue, say *Goliath*.
It sounds right, doesn't it—powerful and Philistine
and destructive, somehow. It always sounded like that
to me. *Goliath!* I shouted, and the sun would break
in pieces on my armor.

The world, as far as I could see, was the sun breaking
on things, making them break. So I was hardly surprised
when the world came to an end because the sun broke *through*:
no pieces, unbroken, whole—no longer flash but flesh.

The end came as a body.

You see, I am past the end, or I could not know it:
look at my face under his left foot and you *will* see,
look at my mouth—is that the mouth of a man surprised
by the end of the world? Notice the way my mustache turns
over his triumphant toe

(a kind of caress, and not the only one), notice
my full lips softened into a little smile. You see:
the triumph is mine, whatever the tale. And the scene
on my helmet tells the true story: a chariot,
eight naked boys, wingèd ones,
and the wine, the mirror, the parasol—my triumph
inherits me. He holds my sword. He is what I see,
that is why you see him: the naked boy without wings.
There is a wing, but it happens to be my helmet's
and inches up the inside

of his right thigh stiffening to allow the feathers
an overture covertly spread, that focus where
nothing resembles a hollow so much as a swelling.
That focus?—those. Find one place on his fertile torso
where your fingers cannot feed,

one interval to which all the others fail to pay
their respects even as they take the light, the shadows.
It is why the swl broke through me that morning—no stone
could lay Goliath low. See it still in the boy's hand?

No need for a stone! My eyes
were my only enemy, my only weapon too,
and fell upon David like a sword. The body is

what is eternal; the rest—boots, hat ribboned and wreathed,
even the coarse, boy's hair that has not once been cut—
 a brevity, accidents,
though it is no accident when it is all you have.
Almost I think his face too is an accident, dim
wider the long pointed brim. Call it an absence then,
an absence where life is refreshed and comforted
 while the body has its way:
a presence, a proof emptied of past and future, drained
of obligations pending. Climb across the belly,
up the insolent haunches from which the buttocks are
slung (there, that is the boy's sling), scan the rhyming
 landscape of the waist between
the simple nipples arched by his simpler, supple arms—
even the vulnerable shoulderblades, the vain wrists
are present but not the face, not David's mouth that is
the curved weapon used to kill a smile. And the carved eyes,
 what are they seeing? Only
the body sees, the eyes look neither down at me nor
out at you. They look away, for they cannot acquit
what is there: the eyes know what the body will become.
It is why they are absent, not blind like mine, not blank
 as iridescent agates.
They see the white colossus which in eighty years will come,
unwelcome: marble assertion of a will to wound
against which no man or music can survive. It is
what giant-killers must become. Michelangelo . . .
 They become giants: no head
of Goliath kisses those unsolicited feet,
no one is there . . . Yes, I go, I have gone already.
I would rather mourn my going than mourn my David.
I am the man Goliath, and my name in Israel
 is also a household word,
every household needs the word—perhaps there *is* a shame
in that, a secret about such universal need—
but it is a good word, my name; try it on your own
tongue, savor the hard syllables say *Goliath*
 which in Hebrew means *exile*.

from *Alone with America*

PREFACE TO THE ENLARGED EDITION (1979)

THE criticism of criticism, as Irving Babbitt used to say, is a languid business, and even ten years after the publication of *Alone with America*, I am not prepared to determine the discrepancies and appositions between what I was trying to do and what it now appears I did: I cannot still remember the former and cannot yet discern the latter.

Others, of course, do not labor under my incomparable disadvantages, and I have had occasion to learn a good deal, in this decade, about my enterprise. If the book has even as much value as some have suggested, it would be temerarious to modify its design—to drop the essays on the three poets who have died, for example, or to add essays on the “new” poets who now appear to fulfill my qualifications. Certainly the perspectives of these essays *date*—that is perhaps their liveliest claim on our interest now, for without a history, what is any criticism? and I think it would be a falsification to alter the contours of the undertaking, though such modification might make me out to be more perceptive than I actually was. Yet perception is not the same thing as presbyopia, and I suspect the chief merit of these studies resides more probably in an immediate attention than in an ulterior deduction. Therefore I have left the book as it was, unplundered by hindsight.

But I have added to some of the texts. Not with the intention of rectifying, merely of extending the account. I recall, during the forties, how my stepfather, in the course of those Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera broadcasts, would step over to the piano and as the tiny French soprano reached her culminating F above the line, gravely and even righteously would sound the same key, just checking, as it were, that Lily Pons had got it right! My subscripts, though in some cases extensive, are offered with no such corrective intentions. I had chosen to write about a generation of poets “taken” very much *in medias res*, which “thing” is still very much going on; and in many of the cases, the subsequent developments are not only unforeseen but also infinitely attractive. Often I have been asked by editors to account for these developments, often my own fascination with them has obliged me to write further. So that in some instances—Ammons, Ashbery, Hollander, Merrill, Merwin, Wright—it is not that my tastes have changed but that the poets observably have, and it was my study to account for the metamorphosis. In other instances—Hecht, Moss, Rich, Strand—it was simply a pleasure to loiter a little over the provocations of a mastery already registered; that there are not extensions in still other cases implies no criticism (or lack of criticism) of those poets, whose high F may be still to come, but instead a kind of discretionary fatigue on the part of an author whose aims, and whose targets, were notably elsewhere. The new texts, then, are an indication of what *Alone with America* might be like if it were to be rewritten every five or six years, in which case it would have to be called, as John Ashbery once remarked, *Alone Again, Naturally*; but I prefer that initial solitude, somewhat infringed, suggestively it is to be hoped, by further perscrutations.

Ithaca: The Palace at Four a.m.

for Katha Pollitt

FIRST WORDS

No god could make up for the ten years lost
(except by ten years found). Nor would I dream
of trying anything so grandiose
my first night home. Was I trying at all?
Hard to say, when it has taken this long
to be in a fitting position . . . Still,

your old responses seemed to be intact
before I even touched you. Wasn't it good?
For me it was: all that I waited for
(and I did wait, you know—those episodes
with silly what's-her-name were meaningless)
ever since we left those invincible walls

smoking behind us, the islands, the sea
between . . . But if you had been satisfied,
would you have left me sleeping behind you?
Not of course that *I* could satisfy you,
but the occasion itself? Surely that
afforded a fulfillment sleep might crown!

Just look around you: not one trace of blood
left on the marble, not a sign there was
anything like a massacre downstairs
only yesterday morning; then dinner—
wasn't that a nice dinner they gave us?
as if they served a banquet every night!

But all of that—or none of it—would do:
the house swept clean of the scum you condoned
(I won't say encouraged, but they did hang on!)
and things back where habit said they belonged:
your own husband lying in your own bed . . .
Yet you had to leave it! Without showing

much solicitude for a light sleeper
who might, after all, have been easily
disturbed (straw rustles and an old bed creaks,
you know: I've grown accustomed to keeping
my ears open—wandering will do that),
you seemed to *drift* over to that corner

where you always kept your loom—it's still there!
and with only one clay lamp to see by
set . . . to work? Penelope, I am here.
You don't have to do whatever it was
you told them you were doing anymore—
stop picking at that thing, come back to me!

LAST WORDS

What I “have to do” has nothing to do
with what I have—or with doing, either.
You tell me I have you. Evidently
you can't imagine what it means to live
inside a legend—scratch a Hero and
you're likely to find almost anything!

Having scratched, I found you. Was I surprised?
Once her womb becomes a cave of the winds
which appears to be uninhabited,
there are no surprises for a woman—
she has survived them all. But at the loom
I learned that even you were ignorant,

crafty Ulysses! Weaving taught me: our
makeshifts become our mode until there is
no such thing as *meanwhile*. Not craft but art!
So you see, I must ravel the design
all over again: there is no end in sight.
Ulysses home? You don't come home at all,

wandering will do that, though I say it
who never left. The loom's my odyssey—
dare I call it my Penelopiad?
You think you were asleep just now, don't you,
after those homecoming exertions? But
you were never here at all, my husband:

the sea still has you—I heard you insist
you were No one. No one? How many times
you sighed “Circe” in that light sleep of yours:
she must have had her points, old what's-her-name.
You snored, but sirens sang, and when the moon
silvered our bed you seemed to feel the sun

depositing tiny crystals of salt
all over your old skin. You were away.
That was your weaving—and my wandering.
The suitors are dead, your bow is a prop,
but neither of *us* is present. Let me
give you some peace at this ungodly hour . . .

Be patient—having found or feigned this much,
perhaps the two of us can fool the world
into seeing that famous genre scene:
The King and Queen Restored. It's abstinence
that makes the heart meander: you're at sea,
I worry this web. Lover, welcome home!

Lee Krasner: *Porcelain*, a Collage

oil and paper on panel, 30 x 48 inches, 1955

Take it down Tear it up Turn it over Make
it new out of old makings:
exert what that venerable scatterbrain
in Weimar once called the Power
of Pulling Yourself Together whereby
the master is first revealed.
Exposed is more like it: shown for what you are.

Porcelain! If a watched pot never boils, what
happens to a pulverized one?
These are not heroic fragments, nothing here
inherently shapely! No
identifiable vessel remains: you
picked up the pieces all
over the place and laid them down again

according to your own ragged politics
of reaching and retracting, no
better than breathing really, putting mere drips,
untimely ripp'd, not so much
where you saw they belonged, but how you surrendered
to their various discomfort:
an open mind must be open at both ends!

The wrong papers, the wretched old canvases
discovered to be no more
than rehearsals for much new catastrophe:
this purple patch, that sliver
of viridian woven into the web
of accommodating earth
our only planet not named for some god . . .

Then glued these scraps these scrapings, these scrupulous
approximations to some
consistent field of accidents all that year, once
your wild partner in chrom-
atic fantasy had spilled himself out of
life like a puddle of paint:
these exist only because they have been made to—

compelled, this time, to sort together without
alienation, which means
they are a final vision. No, semi-final,
since the whole soul is never
one, save in ecstasy and not merely when,
as Yeats declared, it has been
rent. Another twenty years had to be lived

before there were Krasner collages again,
entire paintings ripped to shreds
to let the white light through. But that was when
you were dying, as you knew.
Meanwhile, there were other allowances
to be made, other makings
allowed. You decided once again to paint.

Our Spring Trip

Dear Mrs. Masters, Hi from the Fifth-Grade Class
of Park School! We're still here in New York City
at the Taft Hotel,
you could have guessed that from the picture printed
on this stationery—I inked in x's
to show you our rooms,
which are actually on the same floor as
the Terminal Tower Observation Deck
in Cleveland, Ohio,
which we visited on our Fourth-Grade Spring Trip,
but nowhere near so high as some skyscrapers
in New York City:
we've been up to the *top* of the Empire State
and the Chrysler Buildings, which are really tall!
But there's another
reason for writing besides wanting to say
Hi—we're having a problem Miss Husband thought
you might help us with,
once we get back to school . . . yesterday we went
to the Dinosaur Hall of the Natural
History Museum
for our Class Project—as you know, the Fifth Grade
is constructing this life-size Diplodocus
out of chicken wire
and some stuff Miss Husband calls papier-mâché,
but no diagram we have shows how the tail
balances the head
to keep our big guy upright—we need to see
how the backbone of a real Diplodocus
manages to bear
so much weight: did you know that some Dinosaurs
(like the Brontosaurus) are so huge they have
a whole other brain
at the base of their spine, just to move their tail?
Another thing: each time Arthur Englander
came anywhere near
our Diplodocus, it would collapse because
of not balancing right. This went on until
David Stashower
got so mad at Arthur that he flew at him
and gave his left shoulder a really good bite
so he would keep away . . .
That was when you called the All-School Assembly
to explain about the biting: biting's no good . . .

Even so, Arthur
decided not to come on this year's Spring Trip.
Well, we took a Subway train to the Museum
from the Taft Hotel,
in fact that was our very first excursion,
but the noise, once we were on the platform,
was so loud one girl,
Nancy Akers, cried (she always was chicken)
when someone told her that terrible roaring
the Expresses made
was Tyrannosaurus Rex himself, and she
believed it!—then we went to the Great Hall where
we were surrounded
by Dinosaurs, all the kinds we had studied:
some were not much bigger than a chicken, but
some were humongous!
One was just a skeleton wired together,
so it was easy to see how we could make
our Diplodocus
balance by putting a swivel in its neck.
All the other Dinosaurs were stuffed, I guess,
with motors and lights
inside: when they moved, *their* heads balanced their tails!
There was even a Pterodactyl flying
back and forth above
our heads, probably on some kind of a track.
But even though Miss Husband tried explaining
(for the hundredth time)
how the Dinosaurs had all been extinct for
millions of years, not one person in the class
believed what she said:
the idea of a million years is so *stupid*,
anyway—a typical grown-up reason . . .
You know the Klein twins,
the biggest brains in the whole Fifth Grade (a lot
bigger, probably, than *both* brains combined in
that Brontosaurus)
well, they had a question for Miss Husband: what
if the Dinosaurs' being extinct so long
was just a smoke screen
for their being Somewhere Else, a long ways away?
And Lucy Wensley made an awful pun on
stinky and *extinct* . . .
Actually, Mrs. Masters, we've already
figured it out, about death: the Dinosaurs
may be extinct, but
they're not dead! It's a different thing, you dig?
When Duncan Chu's Lhasa jumped out the window,
or when Miss Husband's

At Sixty-five

The tragedy Colette said is that one does *not* age. Everyone else does of course (as Marcel was so shocked to discover) and upon one's mask odd disfigurements are imposed; but that garrulous presence we sometimes call the self, sometimes deny

it exists at all despite its carping monologue, is the same as when we stole the pears, spied on mother in the bath, ran away from home. What has altered is what Kant called Categories: the shape of *time* changes altogether! Days, weeks, months,

and especially years are reassigned. Famous for her timing, a Broadway wit told me her "method": asked to do something, anything, she would acquiesce *next year*—"I'll commit suicide, provided it's next year." But after sixty-five, next year

is now. Hours? there are none, only a few reckless postponements before *it is time . . .* When was it you "last" saw Jimmy-last spring? last winter? That scribbled arbiter your calendar reveals-betrays-the date: over a year ago. Come again? No

time like the present, endlessly deferred. Which makes a difference: once upon a time there was only time (. . . *as the day is long*) between the wanting self and what it wants. Wanting still, you have no dimension where fulfillment or frustration can occur.

Of course you have, but you must cease waiting upon it: simply turn around and look back. Like Orpheus, like Mrs. Lot, you will be petrified—astonished—to learn memory is endless, life very long, and you—you are immortal after all.

For Mona Van Duyn, Going On

As for me, I lost all sense of human possibility

Blacking out, we say; but it was more like
ablution in the Country of the Blue,
that region of “altogether elsewhere,”
possibly sacred . . .

Arriving hungry after airborne hours
for a Poetry Festival, I had
fainted among my fellow bards, offstage.

Out of the blue, then,
came (before I could recognize your face)
your voice, incredulous squeal that oddly
mixed with carpet-figures and the fragrance
of Spray-O-Vac Rose:

“Richard, you passed out!” The accusation
was evident: any *évanouissement*
to be sanctioned here was really your thing,
and my spill or spell
on the floor—though I had no notion of
its drama at the time: leave that to you!—
was probably a version of that same
“drive for attention”
to which, Mother said, I was always prone
(surely the *mot juste* now). In any case,
I knew I had no such viable contacts
with the Other Side,

no likely means of recuperating
messages left indecipherable
unless I put myself to Mona’s School:
where else grapple with
such hard-won experience, no sooner gained
than gainsaid by means of your so-envied
rhetorical conversion-hysteria?

Such was the lesson
of your lyceum—no wonder you laid claim
or likely connoisseurship at the least
to these episodes of “failings from us” . . .
In a life given

to any of these obliterations,
to debility, danger and despair,
let it come down! as the Second Murderer
famously remarks;
make no attempt to spare anyone grief,

but Go For It, fail without fail, settle
down at the center of the worst and wait
there for whatever
news we never hoped or hated to hear
half so much, dispatches you especially
listened for and lovingly received: not
to know anything,

but only to be looking for something,
renouncing the possession of wisdom
in favor of the power to observe.

Most of us, Mona,
spoil our poems (our lives) because we have
ideas—not ideas but approved topics
that can be carried around intact. Oh
watch me faint once more,
and this time make a true recovery:
acceptance of the vast erroneous
community of pain to which we all
belong. No ideas

but in nothing! No failures but those proved!
To become poets, *to become* human,
never *to be*, for as soon as we “are”
we are no longer
human perhaps, nor even poets . . . Once
I had come to, I obeyed Van Duyn’s Law:
we only are by virtue of (*it is*
a virtue, I guess)
our continual tendency not to be . . .
You scraped me off the floor, and we performed
our poems in a state of perfect health—
until the next time.

Elementary Principles at Seventy-two

When we consider the stars
(what else can we do with them?) and even
recognize among them *sidereal*

father-figures (it was our
consideration that arranged them so),
they will always outshine us, for we change.

When we behold the water
(which cannot be held, for it keeps turning
into itself), that is how we would move—

but water overruns us.
And when we aspire to be clad in fire
(for who would not put on such apparel?)

the flames only pass us by—
it is a way they have of passing through.
But earth is another matter. Ask earth

to take us, the last mother—
one womb we may reassume. Yes indeed,
we can have the earth. Earth will have us.

Mind Under Matter

Consulting recollection, I am foiled
to find the times I've been honored by love
 chalked up (or down) to purely physical reasons,
as those involved continued to maintain.

This strikes me as wrong-headed, even delusional,
given (or taking) what the mirror shows.

Why couldn't (and shouldn't) love come to light
for reasons of . . . well, for *reasons*? Isn't *mind*,

its faculties, its powers, something worth,
if nothing "purely"-something *more*?

Dear Robert Browning, what became of . . . love
before what you called kissing could begin?

Of course my first reaction to what seemed
calumny-by-physique was to rebuke
 the obtuseness of my lovers, if indeed
there were any, actually. And then,

on further reflection (in a different mirror),
I had to acknowledge that *mind*, insofar
as I know my own, forbears to generate
high voltage in a lover's interest—

what could be counted on as competent
erotic apparatus was the lure
 of a strong back and stagnant blue eyes.
Purely physical . . . How sad that is.

Pansy, That's for Thoughts

February 28 1916

Tomorrow's Papa's birthday, a freak
reckoned by fours, whereby he's turned twenty-one,
though by my calculation

(and sometimes by his too, when it suits
computing by common account—no
inconsequential event)

he's eighty-four, counting as most men
prefer, otherwise being of no account.
Such were the games my Ladies

liked to play with me, or insisted
I play with holier-than-thou Ladies like
themselves, mannerly Nuns:

“counting no account” as one might say,
proud of such snickering as was made during
the long years of loyalty
that stood for (staved off?) what always seemed
rather queer questions. For me there were always
quantities of these, although

holy loyalty was singular:
to Papa, of course. All that Papa need do
was ask—not even insist—
and such questions were settled: Who was?
Who is? Who will be? or even Whom would you
choose to be MAMAN? (of course
that was the tricky one), and for my
instant answer, without “taking” a moment's
thought, I would play a new game

with all those lackluster Nuns I called *Ladies*
(to each other they were merely *Soeurs*)
except for our anile Catherine
who was for all the other sisters
and oddly, even for me, *Ma Mère* (the which
I lost no time in turning
from *materfamilias* to a
mère toy). That was the kind of game I learned to
play with myself for myself.

I had no need for partners. Just think:
all Papa need do was speak, and that was how
I learned to love (and obey).
Who else was there to love, or indeed

to be loved? Certainly not *Ma Tante*, as she
begged me to call her—even
Papa smiled at that, though he told me
to obey her. And I'm glad I did, when I heard
what happened to Madame Merle

(her civilian name) back in the States—
in fact it was only after the rather
unseemly death of *Ma Tante*
and the determinedly celibate
farewell of Our Lady of New England (as
I had come to think of her)
that I began to feel a certain
blitheness. After all those dark endings
I managed to find my way

to become a tranquil version of
a Mistress of the Revels: to festivate
(a saying from Convent Days)
a version of poor Papa's life. Our Ladies
offer no answer to questions such as Papa's
rather terrible presence
offers (he writhes a lot, speaks nothing
from bed but disconnected syllables), which
corresponds to the merely

missing Maman (not even *missed*
as she would have been had she ever been held
or beheld): no Maman was
nor would ever be . . . Well, it was no
later than thirty-seven that I became
sufficiently expert at
badgering into well-read
literate those primarily young male
blue-stockings who have lately

become my life. I never explain
my texts, merely remark upon them: let's say,
rather, that I explain texts
only insofar as I disguise them
under some verbal specification, some
description. As the lady
known to you as Miss Dickinson says
in various versions: "It is the Emblem not
the life that's Measurable."