

# Tales of Virtue and Transformation

by

**Jim Gustafson**

Found & Resuscitated by The Ransom Corp's agent mT, September 1999 as samizdat manuscript project 1 for the tfx (transformation) festival nyc.

*First and only known printing of 600 copies in 1974.* Originally published old school on looseleaf 8" x 11" 24 lb paper, double-sided, one tale to a page, and bound by three strong staples— a labor of intentional love. The original copy recovered and now in the hands of the Ransom Corp appeared on the shelves of Alabaster Bookshop on 4th Avenue in downtown Manhattan at the exact moment that agent mT saw it. It may be the only extant copy. It is not, however, one of the 26 signed by the author and cover illustrator.

This volume is a predecessor to *Virtue and Annihilation*, also by Gustafson, which was gifted to Zemi17 by Andre Codrescu who knew Gustafson and also knew of the work of the Assault Poetry Unit. That book remains in print and is available via many of the usual channels.

Circulation is a performance in the manner of CPR. <<<May the life force within this poetic incantatory volume be restored and it's purpose resumed.>>> *Snap fingers, repeat 3x.*

The Ransom Corp has retyped and condensed the layout of the original to produce 100 copies. These are distributed by hand and post as a philanthropic endeavor. This reprinting does not include the accidental (?) double printing of tales 27, 28, 29 and 30 found in the original copy of the found text. Digital copies of *Tales of Virtue and Transformation* are also available by request.

I know no biological facts about Jim Gustafson except that he is in one manner dead and in another awake.

**ADDENDUM 2022:** Since this earlier samizdat effort and the explosion of the internet and social media, agent mT has connected with the niece of Jim Gustafson who runs an FB site in his honor and has collected many of his writings and life stories. mT sent her a copy of these *Tales*, which she did not have, as well as a copy of a volume of DUST, a literary chapbook that featured one of Jim's works. She reciprocated with a work Jim completed on breathing. A quick internet search shows several extant copies of the originals of these *Tales*. However, there has not been a new printing. As a renewed **offering to the Muse**, agent mT has again typed up these *Tales*. May they reach the ears and hearts of those who might enjoy them and find in them some sustenance and incorrigible inspiration. Sarva Mangalam!

**TALES OF VIRTUE AND TRANSFORMATION**

**JIM GUSTAFSON**

**COVER BY GREG IRONS**

**BIG SKY BOOKS**

1.

Everybody wants everything and most  
want more than everyone else. The clowns  
dominate this circus of eventuality.

If I were a legless man today I would  
stand on my head and fly my pants in the wind  
like a flag. Vampires are the only things  
with teeth you can trust. Those that claim  
to be honest must have a reason. Those that  
jump in front of you and pretend to have  
holes in their hands should leave you alone  
in airline terminals.

I am auditioning for the highest paid trapeze act  
in the world by falling off a chair. I am living  
in a world of noisy bankers and quiet assassins.

I am dancing like a fool with feet like mercury.

There is no surface that can impress me.

There is no fish with a belly big enough  
to spread me to all that are worthy.

Born without a healthy sense of restraint,  
he punches the orange lights and the police barricades.

Born with a mouthful of wood pulp, he invents paper  
and starts asking about poems.

Everybody wants to be the new star.

Everybody wants to share the secret recipe.

Everybody wants everything, and to seem  
to have a general plan.

2,

Sympathy does not come cheap.

It does not grow on trees like prime beef.

You are competing for the right to continue.

Many are lined up waiting for the others to go away,  
a carnivore with religious affiliations,

the fading hope for a surplus, the mockery of death  
by music. Brush your pretty hair and we'll

go downtown and watch people grow. Put a mint  
in your mouth and we're getting out of here.

All the laundromats look like refugee camps,

Dialects spilling across the floor like bleach.

Everybody is in heat and there is nothing for miles

to slip under. It is moving too fast.  
Panic, hysteria, breakdown, bliss.  
A song that the crazy masses can't stop singing.  
It looks like apple pie, but smells like a dead fish.  
A bag of wheat, a city of gold, the dream  
of playing with a band. The nagging joy of subsistence.  
Why can't we sneak out while they are counting the poems?  
Escape does not come cheap. We are involved  
too deeply now, in this until the last lightbulb  
is shot out, until nobody has any bullets left.  
Maybe it will turn into a farce, maybe benevolence  
will become a trend. She who dances  
with a credit card between her teeth is doomed.  
The man who rents space to the planets will prosper.  
Straighten your hat, and we're going out  
to find the big one.

3.

Like vultures fighting over the last french fry  
in America, like power brokers with strange ideas  
about submission. I am sullen and alone  
While everybody else pisses into the hands  
of peasant women and believes that if you  
do anything often enough God will appear. I doubt  
that I am alone in this turkey sandwich of a dilemma  
Like Billy Budd walking into a meat market and  
offering himself at today's prices. Like ghoulish children  
stolen away from their parents and trained to steal  
other children away from theirs. I am being  
swept down upon by many hordes and the one with  
the longest name will win the kingdom.  
Food at last! Cookies come in the mail  
and there is free wine and cheese if you will sit quietly  
and keep shopowners company while they count the money.  
Certain things that you can fall back on, like  
the legend of Babe Ruth. Certain truths that  
withstand the test of time, like fire and gravity.  
Like the idea of something being new everyday  
and this life is becoming gristly with purpose.  
I am the father of all conquest and you are  
my over eager slave: Love me, O love me  
until my work is done? Like long teeth

being a constant cause of jealousy among dogs.  
Like waiting for the women to come and take our guns away.  
Like blowing kisses to color televisions in hotel lobbies.  
I am without home, without name, without country,  
without identification, except for my famous lip prints,  
which I will now leave on your glossy nose.  
Like the welcoming committee to the Fire Escapes of Paradise.  
We are just awaiting up here until the masses  
in the streets calm down.

4.

Inert good and value. The conviction is  
that he will do something important if he lives.  
Shut up and eat your cookie!  
The German way of love, the French way of death,  
the American flair for the dramatic.  
I just broke out again, and I ain't got the time,  
Dirty Mama, to shop around!  
By this month next year nobody will have faces.  
There is not now and never has been anything  
that can be construed as the "The Ultimate Tragedy".  
Though friends disappear into the haze to play oboes,  
though lovers are anybody you spend two hours with at night,  
though the wires are still finding ways to pull  
themselves tighter. There is nothing  
like that here.  
Please read to yourself. Please don't feed the dwarf.  
Please stop wiggling your fingers in front of my eyes,  
because though it is seven in the morning, I will  
still chase you for miles and direct the attack myself.  
Having owned a ranch once isn't enough.  
A two-room apartment consisting of a garage  
and a Volkswagen bus isn't that much better.  
A system of absolutes based on the maxim that depression is fun  
will never stay organized long enough to prosper.  
And how are you? Terrible.  
Why are you terrible? Because I take things too seriously,  
and unnecessarily complicate my life.

5.

People here flirt with disease, tread on  
the foot of death, devour our commitments, and  
sleep in the rain. They know everything about religion  
having brought it with them and matured it as an art.  
Lord Visnu thanks you for living in this hotel.  
You thank Moses for riding on his bus.  
I wake up in a town without real buildings,  
and try to find the coffee and the dawn.  
I have never felt so loose, humble, refined, possessed,  
or exhausted before. So many firm offers.  
The laughter, the weak chin of speculation,  
the good life that ruins your spleen, the high quality  
of the leather goods. I talked to you about sunglasses once,  
and hope this makes us allies when the revolution  
finally comes. These tiny little prisons,  
the young boys in long dresses, the letters to presidents  
of multi-national corporations, the pleasures of pieces,  
the miscellaneous undetermined content, the frailty of roots.  
Nebula into seclusion, orphans and their conquerors,  
doorways slippery with blood, metal funerals,  
felt figurines, the most frequently asked questions,  
and the top three inches of your head.  
Thank you for the sweet and bitter wine and for the way  
you have opened your heart and let it flow.

6.

The promise of a future is like losing  
a bag of pills. I am being followed everywhere  
by a Chinese Jerry Lewis who laughs through his nose  
when food falls off my fork. I am being followed  
by a man in sequin shirts who sneaks up behind me  
in public places and screams "Sing it, Tammy!"  
real loud.  
The future sits with its back to the door.  
I understand more and more while forgetting everything.  
The library is stocked with electrodes, street wars,  
and out-of-town phone books. So many prisoners  
buried up to their necks that you can't go into the park  
without walking into their mouths. The good girls  
go home to their mothers  
We all back into the same corner at once,  
each for a different reason. I have been caught

mailing a copy of "Strangers in the Night" to a woman  
in Laguna Beach. One bad leg and two bad shoes.  
Every night crashes onto me like a heavier lid  
to the same casket. You have to understand  
why I walk around for twelve hours a day for weeks  
at a time before you can understand my sense of magic.  
You have to know the difference between isometric and isotonic.  
You have to meet her, and believe that she  
looks like Bob Dylan and writes songs like Marlene Dietrich.  
A lip that bleeds and rabbit that won't move.  
A thumb bent like a seashore and paint on everything I own.  
Turning on the faucet and there being nothing  
but the faint gurgling of energy.  
Poets make the most wonderful things seem mundane.  
How long did it take you to teach your dog  
to piss on its leash? When will I be able  
to dress myself? Why can't I go away?

7.

It's a fun for a while, like peeling off  
layers of dead skin. But like any common sport  
it becomes familiar, dull.  
People leave, and others come and take their chairs,  
and leave. Education is essentially that process  
of making lists and losing them. Morality is  
basically a subscription to that premise  
that all power flows through the legislature of the crotch.  
Independence means the freedom to loose the terror  
that you are upon the world if you'll pay the cleaning bills.  
Nobody's Valentine again this year! You are becoming  
a part of the sink you piss in. You try to find  
a place to land, a place that won't hurt your feet.  
Waiting for the virus, waiting for the band to come,  
waiting for the perfect temperature for genius.  
Nobody talks to you for a week.  
A wet wool blanket over everything you do everyday.  
There is nobody to pick scabs with, nobody to come  
to the door and say "Have some damson plum reserves and  
some nice bread", nobody to throw paper at.  
It will get better, but it took a long time to get this bad.  
All those lost elves in the parking lots that can't leave  
unless everything else leaves first. Locked in

for the night again. Is there ever going to be  
a cheaper mercy?

8.

Maybe life is a circle of cheese, or  
a zoo of a thousand tiny smells. Things are growing,  
learning new tricks, new songs. Nobody has  
fallen off anything for a week. Maybe the life  
is turning into a jungle of soft purring, into a blitzkrieg of eternal  
light.

She is here, the one with the crayons, drawing  
mustaches on the photograph of spring. She is here  
with a hundred followers, each more beautiful  
and promising than herself. She is asking,  
demanding, to know, to be told. She is pressing thorns  
into your eyes and crying with your blindness.

But the life is as unstressed as a shoelace.

Nobody is falling down, and I am finding my way much easier.

People are sending baskets of fruit and bottles of milk.

I have just come home from winter, fresh with rain,  
heavy with lost clothing, destroyed by its length,  
maddened by its disregard. But it might be over.

There are the rumors, but they can't be loved.

There are the promises, but they will not be kept.

Maybe the life is turning into valleys of tiny sounds.

Maybe I will find them.

9.

Like certain tantric disciplines that involve  
the eating of all maps, the burning of all hair.

A shamanism that chases people off the walls  
and back into the necessity of their grim lives

A bag of wood chips, a curtain without a window,  
nine out of ten being lost and the other  
forgetting to look, getting drunker every night.

Like stamp collectors that build empires out of glue,  
like little girls that chew on slivers of metal,  
like a thousand miles of bad road.

Everything that can crawl crawls, all that can fly flies,  
everyone with an excuse uses it. They are turning



into a mob that refuses to hide its eyes. They murder sheep  
with umbrellas, push fields of grain out windows, think  
of themselves as buyers, sellers, speculators.  
But they are nothing but scraps of colored cloth  
sinking into minor puddles of delirium, bubbling  
like fools, holding their ears, as sirens  
from far below the earth claim that  
it is almost time.

10.

Like lizards taught to ring bells, like snakes  
jumping out of wedding cakes, like refusing  
to live with either. Giving up too soon  
leaves your spot to someone unworthy.  
Rats become jewelry, sewers are plush like banks,  
the man with the best bomb is the best man.  
But this does not satisfy. It leaves me here  
like the last kid to have his shoes bronzed,  
like the only walrus in Lake Erie, like the visionary  
that melted gold into dolls that became gods,  
into holes that became nations.  
I am trying to rest, let my lungs catch up with my eyes,  
determine a longitude, find a tree to live in,  
to sell my wares from. It may work.  
It is like wind-burn, or food poisoning, or divinity.  
There are no explanations. The processes slide along  
like eels, the designs are left in baskets  
like stale bread. Nobody comes to ask.  
There is nothing they can be told.

11.

You know that is it noon when the animal's tongue  
is twelve measures from the earth.  
The sticks that prop their mouths open are pulled out  
The tops of their heads collide with the bottoms:  
Bells ring.  
So many clowns in this circus that they are assigned numbers.  
The clown of realization and discovery, the clown  
of pestilence and control, the clown of virtue and transformation,  
the clown of flight and distance. I am watching

from under the floor, the observer of the opaque form,  
the apprentice of dancing feet. Dividing  
every motion into a million movements, more tiny movements  
than stars, more mystery than planets.

It is the time for postcards from Mexico, soundtracks  
being beamed from the moves of your soul, a list of stones  
that will be important to you later, of clocks  
that eat sandwiches.

Clowns riding on unicycles with tires molded from the cosmos  
juggling balls of negative infinity. There is  
the passing of time, of time weighed out in grams,  
time given to you through miracles, time that is broken  
into hoops only you can jump through.

And it is noon when the animal eats its master  
in twelve perfect courses.

12.

There is a force in this room, like the hands  
of a paper bag, or a hatred for the color orange.  
I remember when the leaders' throats were cut  
and they sang like harps. I remember yesterday  
when the whistling started. I have walked through  
a thousand doors, and I am still in here with these bodies.

The night throws me fish through an airhold, and I  
am grateful but not thankful. I remember believing  
that there was no totality, only thousands of Fords,  
paid performers, and their imitators.

I am being closed down upon. The strength that was  
to be used for escaping is gone. Yes, I sold it for food.

The dancing in this room is the dancing under my skin.

The breathing in this room is that of an old man I won't see.

The voices you hear are not mine, nor are they elves,  
street musicians, or salesmen. I don't know whose they are,  
and don't really want to find out. There is a force in this room  
that already knows the many stories about contradiction.

I cannot tell it anything, and yet it refuses to go away.

13.

Gonzago, what does this number mean  
to you? It comes to me in my sleep

like a bear on a train. "Take this number  
and spread it to every corner. Tell them  
to remember it, that they will need it."  
Like the special magic of small breasted women,  
like dwarfs wanting more dwarfs for children,  
like the way homicide affects petty crime.  
There are mercenaries out here that are  
heavy-footed, like tractors, that chew on lead,  
that are killing my plants and creatures.  
Things come to me in visions: "You are to lead them  
the entire length of one direction and leave them there."  
"You are to find an excuse for a powerful presence  
and then welcome it." They all have quick hands,  
they roar when they excrete, they are always ahead of me,  
moving the props, putting the gun in my hand.  
Gonzago, how do i move away from action  
and back to the calm of scenery?

14.

There is milk on your breath, your skin  
is beaded with polished rice. Great ships praise you,  
bring you gifts: You will never ask for anything again.  
But you can't take the bones out of your mouth  
when you speak, you can't control the things  
that actually need to be controlled. There are roses  
with fangs growing in your hair, there are kittens  
with numbers that tell your secrets, there are places  
that say "come now", when they mean "come forever".  
You will have to know this. Somebody will have to tell you, and  
I can't.  
There will be joy on your cheeks and your hands  
will become part of the drums. Men will bury their wives  
and burn their homes to be near you, but please  
don't trust them.

15.

It looks like spring and tastes like  
wax fruit. It is the season of migrating flowers  
and annual lovers, a tulip flies back from Hawaii  
to throw dirt on your poems.

But it does feel good, the old skin useful in making shoes,  
the winter coat and two oxen combining as a great wagon,  
the screams coming from the bridge boiling the coffee.  
I think that it is catching up with you, and that I  
have gotten away with everything. I had expected scars,  
but there is nothing bigger than a dime. I knew  
that it wouldn't last forever, but it is gone already.  
I thought that I would suffer ten more years,  
but now realize I will be lucky with three.  
I am renewable and renewed. I have given up nothing  
to get nothing, and now me and my many selves  
huddle around the number zero like road tramps  
around a can of beans. Freedom! O sweet freedom!  
Comes the gluttony of spring and I  
want to eat everything that you are!

16.

Sunday afternoon, and he shakes his hair  
and miniature silver boots fall out and tinkle  
onto the floor, like a tiny welcoming to Oklahoma,  
like an artifact from a country western Bethlehem.  
Something is moving the boxes around in the warehouse  
of his soul. Highways to the sun, the grace of  
Hank Williams, the power of tender steel.  
“Why should I want to walk/ on the lonesome railroad tracks  
when I can walk all over you.” It does take over,  
like an earthquake, manipulates him, tricks him to jump  
under the hat and to close his eyes, to let the Harmony  
of Truth move him around, and to trust it to put him back  
when it is down. There are horses in his pockets,  
and a waitress for every internal organ. A truckdriver's school  
in his notebook, an unemployed picker biting his toes.  
A bottle of beer from the Kingdom of the Nameless,  
the rodeo of spiritual discovery, a broken pool cue  
across the bridge of the nose of doubt. “Why should I  
eat the highway sounds/ and wander far away / when I can pick  
you  
from my teeth/ and love you night and day?” So infrequently,  
never this strong. He is swept away. Does this ocean  
go by Nashville? Can I write my poor mother a letter?  
The forces put rings on his fingers and his fingers  
on a button called GO, and we are of, like

a blue Kentucky Lear jet, like a coon in the mudflats,  
like a life-long friend who just got out of prison.  
Why does this happen now when he scarcely needs  
the confusion of more music? He was happy before,  
without the hat, without these managers.  
“Why can’t my mind stop slippin’/ into the cracks  
of the walls of time? / Why can’t I find my gear and pack it?/  
and move it farther down the line?...”

17.

But comes Monday, the day Ezra Pound dies.  
Eight lines of cocaine disappearing up that old nose,  
the borrowing the motorcycle, crossing the bride  
and heading toward the Coast Highway. Buttoning  
his pearl buttons, adjusting his string tie, looking  
a little too much like Grandpa McCoy. Good night Ezra,  
we know where you are going, please be careful!  
Tuesday. Remembering that living without teeth  
is better than living without words, that there are  
only a few good people with the right tools,  
it is in the air, the madness is closing in,  
maybe coming in the mail, like advertising,  
like another death notice.  
Wednesday. I want everything to be picture perfect,  
like a thousand dollars worth of leather, like  
expensive antiques, like sentimentality. I want to  
be remembered as a pioneer, not as a refuge.  
I want you to come see me.  
Thursday. The Empire is eaten by peacocks,  
and I open a carwash with the idea of becoming very rich.  
I want things now, and I want control and I want  
Friday to slip by unnoticed.  
Saturday, clear skies again, and I feel better.  
I go outside, walk to the docks. There is this resonance,  
like a planet that wants fewer inhabitants. Birds  
are wearing bags over their heads, the sea is calm,  
I feel much better.  
And then it’s Sunday, and Picasso is dead,  
another occult murder. He’d been looking so well,  
working hard, his eyes bright. Now everybody is leaving,  
no one feels safe in their own homes. My controls  
are thinning like a soap film, they are going away

like numbers on a calendar. Another week is over with so many less people to talk to. Where is everybody going, and why can't the band stop playing?

18.

Like spices. The curry of the whip, the oregano of being left on the beach, the cinnamon of martyrdom, the bay leaves of possession, and the basic salt of ignorance. You are the one that squeals like a starfish and runs to the pot, peeling your own carrots, making me promises about a trust fund somewhere. You are the one that says everyday will be better and every road will be dryer, that someone will come and take us away. But I am just hungry, a fool, and a lustful fool at that. You carry stones home and write out messages like "have faith" but have none. I love your stong back, I love the way you bake bread into loaves of little children that tell delightful stories, I love the television and the stereo that you want to bring into the marriage, but this is only the soup, mostly fat, a lot of water, little meat, a few tiny fish swimming in the bottom of the bowl. You must bear the scourging of the fork, the lashing of the napkin, the spittle of the alphabet, the profanity of the circle, the villainy of the last droplet, and the essence of the spoon before you can claim me as your own.

19.

And then a frenzy of righteousness, like chasing Yoko Ono around Hollywood screaming "Remember Pearl Harbor! Remember Pearl Harbor?" You can stay but that dog has to go. I am loose today and very crazy. This doesn't matter except for the long-term effects, like ships bubbling at the bottoms of harbors. The prisoners have all gone home without forgetting a word. I am still here, razor strapped into my hand Latino style, thinking of a way to make you move faster, then of

a way to stop everything all at once.  
Begging for crumbs, kissing the feet of mystical wholesalers,  
wishing that I were someplace safe, like inside your stomach  
because I know you respect me  
Spending another day cutting the freeways out of maps  
and replacing them with miles of teeth. I have  
my skills and my quotas, and have a plan, and I have  
the time to follow you around San Francisco asking  
if you would like to see my shrunken head,  
and then saying that I am wearing it.

20.

Brighter light, clearer vision. Many voices,  
all saying, "What are you doing in my house?"  
Their nerves are sliced and the face rolls off  
the skull. Some find their bodies tattooed  
to look like baseball uniforms, while I just  
think of the millions of spaces a sphere can fill  
in the course of a flight. There is no responsibility.  
Warmer days, longer periods of activity.  
The most recognizable talent here is availability.  
Like the hum of a new source of energy, like  
the chatter and giggling of our machines as they  
like the jellies off themselves. A dynamic rush,  
like revolutionary greed, like becoming an art form.  
Clearer light, brighter vision. The elevator  
is full of trained, meat-eating birds. There are  
parades of colossal proportions that are never announced.  
Talk of delay, rumors of postponement. They are  
all out there, heads wrapped in brown butcher paper,  
hands trembling like the winds of jets,  
the feel hidden in the vines and bushes.  
They are always there just like I am always here.  
They are the source of the scent, the voice of the bones.  
Men tied into curtains, women eating grass  
and pretty weeds, children learning to read earlier.  
Brighter light, clearer vision. There are only  
reflections and recordings. Please, you are too close already.  
Stay where you are. Please, don't come here.

21.

Harmonica gymnastics, or huge buildings crumbling  
into their own basements like pairs of panty hose.  
I never sang "The Volga Boatmen" for my father  
nor was I ever tempted to. The difference between  
drug-crazed and drug dulled so very slight, make  
any other entry, make Louie Chop Suey go away.  
Tour de force, or popsicle de force, or popsicle  
cell anemia. Daddy, I left my shoes in the fire.  
Does it matter? The bottom 1/16 of an elephant's leg  
resting on your chest. Hello Central. Volcanoes  
mean glee to glee and nothing to me?  
The Celestial Salted Strawberry. The Old Man and the Sea.  
I am not as likable as you but I try. The swirling of numbers,  
the number of swirls in a give box, a very large man,  
minimal delight, the celebrating of a birthday by wearing  
a chocolate cake, passive, yet impatient.  
Junkies that steal only salt shakers and beach sand.  
That much flaunted Christian deity as the curator  
of a gallery of disgusting beings. No going to no Detroit?  
Whoremaster, grim winter, a narration of the pain  
in your knee, a friend's head being rolled up in the window of a  
Buick, a ton of pineapple incense,  
a little fellow that really likes to get down,  
the last word, and it's yours, take it, get ready:  
Someplace.

22.

Acupuncture by mail. Screaming children  
and the parents of screaming children.  
Please don't piss on my toothbrush, Mister.  
Why the lump? A marrow buyer kicking the ass  
of the working class while a swan dressed to look  
like Sugar Ray Running Water throws  
priceless uranium rings out onto the hockey rink!  
Madness! O be-bop, be-bop, be-bop, shooo-ee!!  
Who was it that got caught in the gears today?  
Why mam I being tended by gospel singers  
wearing robes cut from the anguish of Viet Nam?  
"Help us through our crisis/ help us take the cure/  
Help us with our madness/ help us to endure.)  
Everything that can rattle rattles.



The sky is hinged for perfect escape, and  
she has the tools but won't admit it! Ouch.  
I hope that a fashion show was all you wanted.  
I hope you will take this to all my friends.  
One cheesecake, one newspaper, one kingdom  
unshakeable by greed or famine. I-ness is the state  
of absolute saltiness. What a man! What a woman!  
What a pretzel of a situation! There are thousands  
of really fat Baptist women out here. Get your asses  
back into the fields, ladies! But they just sing.  
(We are friends of yours/ yours are friends of we/  
Help us face the challenge/ tell us what to be/  
Help us find the problem/ show us what to see/  
Problem help us find you/ help to set us free!)

23.

So much refusal. Refuse you. Refuse me.  
So much refuge. Refuge you. Refuge me. Refugee.  
Plastic spoons, the sparks flying, the crisis mounting.  
The lions are roaring! Turn them babies loose!  
Shocked by all this open space. A parasite paradox.  
Eyes over the top of the cup. The championship  
of mental activity. I feel pretty, oh so pretty.,  
I feel pretty and witty and gay. Krishnamurti.  
Dogs that have soldiers for pets. A romp in the park.  
Finding a book of matches, thinking that it might be  
a new beginning. The flesh is so supple.  
I feel soft. There is just a little bit of slack,  
enough that nobody is walking on the wires. Good.  
I think think think that it might be backing away.  
What a cute chipmunk I would have made!  
What a wonderful beekeeper, what a tremendous trained seal!  
Should I tell them how I woke up one morning and felt calm?  
That I looked out the window to see if the bridge was coming  
and knew that it would never come. I'm not going anywhere.  
So much simpler with the throttle unstuck. I think  
I can handle it now, thank you. Please give me  
my pants back, there are some things I want to look over.

24.

Just turn around and walk back out and say "hello."  
Buying candy bars and a pretty face. Sorry about  
the hard way your cat died. Please talk into the microphone.  
What was it like? Oh, it was  
just like you'd expect.  
On the morning that the barge was towed off his back  
he walked ten miles looking at things, crossing streets,  
back and forth, back and forth, to show that he could.  
New friends were giving him presents for his nose.  
Young women were measuring him for new suits.  
Cameras are mounted on road graters and utility poles.  
They follow him to be sure he's safe. He waves.  
He has been waving to everyone.  
Clusters, connections, banquets, and the streets  
full of people with great tongues. Tell the truth  
about how bad it hurt. Free samples, the gift of faith,  
the resolution to avoid conflict. Please, just  
a few words, just one question.  
His feet are not on fire, he is walking slow enough  
that they can keep up if they want to. Will it  
be hard to continue your work, where you left off?  
The costume of an adding machine, the mask of a yak.  
This is a city of balloons and I want to ride with the wind.  
Muted voices, the season of free music, the strength  
of isolation. Do you have any regrets? What did  
you miss the most? Would you do it again?  
Whole vans full of equipment. Not having the right tools  
is no longer an excuse. Eating ice cream and  
twenty centuries of servitude topped with whipped cream  
and chopped mice. Did they feed you well? Often?  
Turning around, walking back out, hello.  
Everything is expected to go smoothly now.  
There are no regrets. Nothing of consequence to  
concern yourselves with, gentlemen. He walks in  
an upright position, loves the attention,  
regulates his voices, and smiles wide  
for the technician.

25.

The feet between my toes, the soft earth  
around my ears, a dollar in my pocket,  
and this new way of finding the west.

After all this time I want something more  
than a doorknob. Something like the force of age,  
or the wisdom of velocity.  
I advise those suffering from hunger and depression  
that eating their belts will leave nothing  
to hang themselves with. I am as content as the weather.  
I know what is hiding and how to avoid it.  
I am as compromising as fission and positive  
that I am right.  
Countless theories of space, all of them correct.  
The secret life of a time traveler. The celebration  
of perpetual magic. Every page another wizard,  
every mile closer to the center, every spoken word  
bringing along three of its sisters.  
I am here for a reason and will remember it soon.  
The soft toes around my ears, the feet between the earth.  
No gold, no trials, no doors, no praise.  
I feel that I could tell you about it, I am almost sure.  
Hands in the water, eyes toward the sun, the sources  
becoming more discreet. Something of value,  
like exploration, like experiment. I think that  
I've done it right. I think it should work now.

26.

Ponies with their paws in the glasses,  
in town recruiting hunchbacks and there are none.  
Walking backwards through doors where there are  
no doors. Nobody that is forced to live with mirrors  
can learn to love them. He is so attentive  
he can hear things stretch. Oh have mercy,  
pass the awareness, pop the corks, release the waters  
from their masters, dance ten more minutes,  
terrorize all limitations!  
The man of the hour is throwing carrots to missionaries  
and proving that anybody will crawl when there exists  
the prospect of warmth. The night has many wheels  
The night has many harvests. Baskets are passed  
for the survivors. He donates a comb.  
Everybody is going down to watch the wagons roll  
through the gates of the city. He stays,  
thinks about other wooden boxes. Wake up the windows,  
make things move around some more, put your toys away.

Nights and lines, nights and empty ends, nights  
and stray collaborators. He begs for juices,  
for particular songs, for post cards. He puts  
another coin into the candle but it's time to leave.  
He leaves, but thinks that it's pointless.

27.

Another version of a day at the circus.  
Arabian women in their bathing suits, two bears  
and a hundred dogs, Chinese gorgers, dainty beads  
of sweat, the ground covered with circles.  
Clowns that were decals on pianos sliding into life.  
Clowns that seemed like dust actually being  
important dust. Clowns without faces, clowns  
without footprints, without trails.  
Is he there as a special guest, or because he found  
a sinister way to get in? All alone, clapping his hands,  
rattling his chair. Like a true stoic he watches  
as the dogs gain momentum and the bears tire.  
It's even more barbarian than it is advertised as being!  
So completely incredible, but it should start  
quieting down soon.  
Midgets going back into their briefcases, horses taking off  
their hats and changing into their sport clothes.  
Would it have been the same show without him hanging  
from the sky by those thin strips of flesh?  
Would the hoop have been accepted without the blue flames?  
Why didn't they feed the clowns before the performance?  
Didn't they realize that hunger causes fright, attack?  
The clown of consumption and impossible damage,  
the clown of carnage and resurrection, the clown of torture and  
expired faith.  
Could it have been hilarious, and him not understanding  
because of having been away? It might have been  
another pathetic mistake, but there have been so many.  
He says that he will wait another year, and try  
to see it again in a different town. It should  
have been more fun, he should have wanted  
to become a part of it. Where was the cake and the ballet skirts?  
What happened to the monkeys and fields of light? Why didn't  
it end sooner? Why did it start again?

28.

You have to say it didn't happen like that.  
Deny the curved blades, deny the sacrifices,  
admit that you were fabricating, that nothing  
you told us actually occurred. You have  
to purge yourself, say that there was nobody  
wearing masks, admit that their faces were  
as normal as yours. We want to believe you.  
Deny that you saw anything burned, deny  
the smells, the tastes, the textures.  
Nothing will happen to you. There is no  
punishment for telling the truth.  
(No place to run, no numbers to call out.  
I think that they are right, but I can't  
accept it. I should leave. There are people  
that will take care of me. These are all  
mercenaries and trained professionals.  
They aren't concerned, but they might be right.  
No, nothing happened. I saw nothing, I felt  
nothing, I wasn't even there. The person  
who told you these things is a liar,  
a conspirator, a person without foresight.  
No, nothing happened. I felt nothing  
I saw nothing, I wasn't even there.)

29.

The fear of accidentally sending coded messages,  
the fear of anything that is flat and dark,  
the fear of quiet, forceful persons.  
Never tapping on walls, never leaving anything  
under doors, never being more than a few feet  
from a compass. It doesn't matter. Feed  
and clothe yourself, polish your own silver,  
handle your correspondence. They will not  
have to invent a prison on wheels to follow you.  
They did not put a roof on the house to keep you in:  
They left the windows open. You leave, or let  
everyone else leave.  
The fear of green check books, the fear of phone calls  
before noon and after ten, the fear of refugees,

of their coats, of their boots, of their food.  
Hiring large dogs to walk you to the mailbox  
will not get the answers back any faster.  
There will be proof and then you'll guess the problem.  
Salvation is a light-weight process of distrust and new trust.  
The empty rooms are empty with intent. Go to them.  
The fear of men with ink on their breath, the fear  
of being left outside the bank in a car with the motor running,  
the fear of horizons and towers. It doesn't matter.  
There are more new cures than there are new terrors.  
You will start going back the other way. Things will  
seem so much easier with aging. You will be different.  
Your guardians will be changed like sheets, but you  
will always know the safety you know now.  
There will be no one left to hurt you.  
Please don't worry.

30.

True safety is calling for the removal  
of the firing pin from the rifle of the future.  
We are ten years beyond control, beyond mistakes.  
We are ten years beyond fallout shelters and  
there are still thousands living underground.  
My children are the only protection that i have,  
little vaults of plastic explosives.  
Nothing will get past them.  
Give up canned peaches and come out and eat grasshoppers.  
Characterize yourself as a victim, and shake hands  
with the flyboys and the system designers. They are  
no better than you are son, and everybody's drugs  
will be the same color someday soon.  
This is winding down. It sees its way clear  
to the new planet where all the dust is edible,  
and all the light falls on truth. Theoretical geography,  
or living in an atmosphere like the inside of a vacuum cleaner.  
There is no reason to pick up the phone. Why would you  
want to hear a voice calling you a priceless metabolism  
when you know you can be bought? I am winding down.  
I will trade my silver flight suit for a sharper pencil  
and a heart closer to the surface. I am tired,  
I am acting like a proponent, I am trying to find  
somebody to talk to, and never can. Hello?

This is Flash Gordon calling his father, the renowned  
President of Earth. Hello, Dad?  
The radar wizards, the brave men under the ice caps.  
I have no use, no respect for them. My children  
are the only protection I need. They are wired  
to burn with intense heat. Nothing will  
walk by them. But a felt hat is blocking the air holes.  
There is spoilage amongst the unground grain.  
I want a way out of here but forgot where I put it.  
I am calling for the clipping of the fuse from the explosives  
of the past, and euthanasia for the very young.  
But there is nothing we can do. We are still  
too stupid.

31.

Maybe a fire engine driving down the street backwards  
with a song in its heart and chickens in its teeth.  
Or maybe it's a dump truck with a swagger looking  
for a place to drop its load. Like handling it gently,  
but with a chrome hook. Like airline stewardesses  
guarding the entrance to a church. Like teaching books  
how to spit and thus eliminating the writers  
You do not need to become obscure. You are noticed  
running from the room with a rag in your mouth.  
We do not care. We do not need to become obscure,  
or do I mean more obscure? I run from the room  
rubbing salt into my eyes. Maybe a rental agency  
is sweeping up the tears, maybe personalizing the luggage  
with bloody finger prints. Maybe the show is over  
and we should go home. Home, to kittens, manifest destiny,  
and clean toilets. Home to the east, to monkeys playing organs,  
to the women of the holy banana. Home to the peace of napkins,  
the cravings of literacy, the buzzing of controlled power.  
Closing oneself into a drawer and praying to slips of paper,  
feet propped against the lock, you can't come in.  
Maybe a broom that can be played as a harmonica or flute.  
Maybe the creation of a department of adequate windows  
and special doors. Maybe you want to have your shoes shined  
by a saint and your legs rubbed by a scientist.  
Somebody has to be gratified. They are all so open  
to new experiences without ever having any. It will  
hurt them in time. I never want to see any of the places

I dream about, I never want to be any of the places I am.  
She says the only thing worse than touch itself  
is the thought of touch. I always want to change my name,  
but never do. She thinks that abstract sound is  
just abstract sound. There is no further explanation,  
except maybe a cattle van, traveling slowly,  
rounding up strays, encouraging them to sing.

32.

Virtue. An apple with such a magnificent aura  
that it will fit into no earthly mouth, a woman  
that claims to be a human carving knife, the color  
silver on the color white.

Virtue. Immigrants with bottles of ammonia,  
coughing sound from solid blocks of metal, running  
on the beach with sheep biting at your ankles.  
Indulgence becomes as common aspirin. You are  
locked in or locked out or locked together.

Virtue. Loving anyone that lives in a hotel,  
loving serenity but not seeking it, loving absence,  
departure, rejection, not claiming or denying  
responsibility, giving up pursuit, retaining  
the huntsman as the gardner.

Virtue. Empty cities full of gold rings all untouched,  
rooms where no children were conceived, men with hands  
like orchids, with unquestioned strength that remains  
untested, no interests in performing.

Common knowledge equates common pain. Flight is  
as dull as confession, punishment if a farce,  
an assumption of possession.

Virtue. Women in white are raped for their heresy,  
men on their knees are told to stay there,  
admitting fault is acknowledging fault, by burning  
the seeds you expedite anxiety. It is over,  
go on with what you have to do.

Virtue. Envelopes of water, packages of pressed air,  
magazines with nothing but names, light in dark  
circumstances, honesty when unsure, refugees  
that refuse to bleed, songs that do not concern heroes,  
enemies that hide, children that know,  
the refusal to participate.



33.

Like a quivering in the upper lip of a solar system,  
a pin-point leak in the oil drum of untimely events,  
or the bombastic treatment of something sacred  
that left me holding the duck.

It doesn't matter if it wiggles or swivels, the point  
is when it stops and is actually here. I want  
to see it. There is no person called the master  
of space and punctuation. Do not concern yourself.

The high plateau of any classic comedy is when  
the old king dies. Please don't treat me like  
anything special, but just as an uncommon stranger.  
Like a zeppelin crossing the Pacific, or the last entry  
in a life-long journal, or one crazy charade a decade  
and this one is almost over.

Take my hands, I'm a genius! I'm a doctor! I will  
haunt this continent like the chastity of pioneer women,  
nailing my friends to their doors, collecting string,  
tin foil, crumbs and sympathy. I am wearing  
your mother's dancing shoes, and your father's  
baseball cap. I am yours, but please don't  
treat me politely or kindly.

Destruction via the great joy of internal terror,  
annihilation at the hands of the most potent force  
since the hamster, decimation coming to the land  
natural sugar and the calcified brave.

Do you understand that I want nothing but a combination  
of four limbs that work and a mouth that speaks  
upon demand? I don't want a broad base of wisdom  
or a personal volcano I can call Sally. I only want  
an arrow with a string attached. I shoot it,  
you chase it.

There is no need to ring bells or hire a harpsichord,  
as I will be going past rather briskly and only those  
in the front have a chance of catching a glimpse.

Tell them that long life of patience and prosperity  
is worth more than any head in the backseat of a Cadillac.

Explain that things are arranged in advance,  
like the falling from the sky of a gold coin with  
an inscription that reads "Do no Defy". Like living  
only to see 360 full moons then going away.

Like how they come back from the west with one long story.

Serve yourself and refuse to listen. Burn the words  
for heat, and tell him he is not home yet.

34.

The toothbrush of transformation, the t-shirt of transformation,  
the comb, the notebook, the map of transformation.  
The genocide of transformation. The crusade, the redundancy,  
the choir, the tuba of transformation. The french horn  
of transformation. The swordfish, the fixation, the underwear,  
the atrocity of transformation. The being of transformation.  
The passage of transformation. The entrance of transformation.  
The color, the longitude, the typewriter, the hasty exit  
of transformation. the bubonic plague of transformation.  
The information booth of transformation. The penmanship,  
the disability, the lost realm of transformation. The river cruise  
of transformation. The bunny, the lion, the telegraph  
of transformation. The mundane of transformation. The mandate  
of transformation. The endurance, the brevity, the collaboration  
of transformation. The rose of transformation, the waffle  
of transformation, the label of transformation, the sabre  
of transformation, the plasma of transformation, the love  
of transformation, the dedication of transformation, the celibacy  
of transformation, and the journey of transformation.

35.

for Marat

This is supposed to say that meanwhile back in the orchard  
the merry peasants were gathering ground fruit for  
their evening feast. What it seems to mean is that I  
am still in the tree, waiting for an emblem to jump into,  
or a shield to break my fall. Come and tell me  
that meanwhile back in the vineyard the happy workers  
labor to the sounds of recorded music, and I  
am walking amongst them selling water.  
Concentrating on the crust, inventing more secret handshakes,  
discovering new places for holes. Welcoming the war weary,  
giving them shovels and chisels. Welcoming the merchants,  
finding them spaces in the alleys, homes in the park.  
Hoping that the rains will hold off, watching the last

of the buildings being put on wheels. Where to now?  
Screams melt mirrors and mirrors ruin faces.  
The story cannot end with the jailer teasing him with the keys.  
The story cannot end with her getting into the sports car  
and setting off for Las Vegas. The story cannot end  
in the factory after the assembly line has just voted to remove  
the supervisors to someplace they will be more comfortable,  
like the steel ovens. You do not carve "to be brave is to be  
meek"  
on the barrel of a shotgun. You do not understand  
how all of this is so unnecessary. I was supposed to  
hand out pictures and give you all inspiration, but this confusion  
forces me to improvise. This was supposed to say that  
they all joined hands and built roads and schools and churches  
and lived the good life of red meat and turning wheels.  
What it means is that he is not out of this yet,  
that the commitments keep growing like eggs, that the windows  
are still open and more birds keep flying in.  
The instant that he has a chance to report he will,  
but meanwhile, back at the grain elevators, they are banding  
their wooden bowls with spoons again, and he  
just keeps writing.

36.

Fantasies rattle inside pillowcases,  
or the chocolate-covered thumbs of your enemies  
jangle inside candy boxes of your own making.  
I have come to hate you, animals! You are at best  
minks and ground squirrels, fuzzy little creatures  
that breed and look pretty like rocks with soft textures.  
I wanted to give you everything, but I see this is impossible.  
I don't have another elbow. I can't let you keep me  
in a glass cage, or under the books, or between you  
in bed. I am always being teased.  
I am ruined and tired and tired and ruined.  
Testing the myth to see if it is as hot as it looks.  
Do I have to paint targets to get your attention?  
The loose ends are jealous of one another, there reigns  
a period of mass strangulation. I am still here  
waiting for you to show your stuff, Kiddies.  
Head just full of so much bad gas, cuts on my hands again,  
must have been real drunk last night. Addresses  
punched out in braille, the killer instinct

is slippery footing, whips are for children,  
numbers are for adults.  
There are differences between shreds and mere pieces.  
What was he singing when he walked off the roof?  
Did it sound like choking or garling?  
Was there anything on this face besides that big grin?  
Any gravy?  
You know where I am, come find me from time to time.  
I'll be the one with the ribbons in my teeth.

37.

If they are as in love as they say they are  
they will be just fine. And I will love them too,  
like liverwurst, like jetstreams, or answering services.  
No harm will come to them, they will be shown  
through the jungle by a white man that might as well  
be a native. They are as safe as a plastic fok.  
We gave them packages and prayers, saw them to the river,  
and burned the dock after they left. Just wondrous.  
Back here on the farm I am still sorting papers,  
the day is young, and the cows are expecting letters  
from their relative that just moved to Chicago.  
Back here in the city, an unemployed machinist  
has just proclaimed himself a reborn Nijinsky,  
and it's already past noon with the same lunch everyday,  
aspiring and Coca Cola. Our thoughts must be with them,  
as seems logical when our bodies aren't.  
So clear today, no haze, no alarm. While I rest  
I think of wings. I sleep some more, then think of granite.  
It is late afternoon and I am wondering what is happening  
at the bus station. They are drinking the last  
of their pure water and eating muffins, wishing that  
it was me and not them. I am being overly sensitive.  
If I were in prison I would stab somebody for a cigarette.  
There is no such thing as a bad boy.  
Little voices are lost in the wires, the empty shells  
of famous magicians are clutching bus transfers, the stories  
are getting ready to take off their boots for another season.  
Back on the farm, the mailbox is slammed again,  
the fields are aching for sex. and he is letting the roosters  
take turns driving the tractor. In the city people look  
at their empty bags, throw stones at the sun for making it so late,

and resolve to never go home again.  
A buddha with a wide mouth opens it, and says "holy smokes!"  
An ecosystem is entirely destroyed by poisoned wine.  
Virgins adopt totems. If they are as in love  
as they say they are, they will live forever.

38.

Virtue, meaning that we are eating more rice  
every year, that we are answering questions  
earlier in the day, that the situation is now  
defined, and we still cannot live with it.  
Ten cans of soup, stacked like a pyramid to the stars,  
the way the legs move instinctively when the screaming starts,  
the possibility that all of this was a mistake,  
or that it still is.  
Eyes that are folded back and clipped open, sanctity  
upon demand, goats promising that they are only goats,  
the spray of disinfectant.  
Virtue, like red paint on white pants, like dull claws,  
like the panic of chimes, the fervor of bells.  
Virtue rocks on its heels like it is waiting to be punched in the  
mouth.  
Running away from streets, from cities, from entire continents.  
Boxes for books and toiletries follow him from port to port,  
crying from the docks, we love you. He seems tired  
of all of this. Is it too soon to pitch a tent and wait?  
Virtue like rocket fuel, like the secrets of canyons,  
like little lambs and pink bows, like the serenity  
of departure, the marvels of origin.  
The winter is becoming functional, all of this is recklessness,  
the blouse of the sky is open to the fourth button,  
all of this is ridiculous.  
Virtue, like ladders, like ropes, like harmless greed,  
like gentle remorse, like silent children, like bronze,  
like echo, like passive vermin.  
There is nothing that can be said. He is wearing this  
like a napkin, the conviction is sometimes there,  
but we need a system. There is nothing that he  
can be told. He does not listen anymore.  
He says he's too tired.

39.

You fucked it up before, thinking that worms  
had tails and that you could tie them together.  
In lands without electricity people write in the dark.  
Your head hurts, so hold it, maybe it's a melon,  
maybe you can eat it.  
From a belly full of flesh to three dried beans a day.  
Some journey. Like ambitious little fools in branch libraries  
designing prisons for the very rich. Like receipts  
like stationery stores, like miserable fat scholars  
at burned out piers dragging a bootlace in the water,  
waiting for fish to jump in his mouth, waiting  
to tutor the dolphins.  
It looked good, but it stopped pumping. Things became  
still other things. It was amazing. Possibilities  
are like villages: They are eliminated one by one.  
Like growing old in one afternoon of selling newspapers.  
Like dedication, practice and fulfillment,  
like doing what you do the best, even if it's dull.  
There person becomes a trophy case, the furniture  
in an Algerian brothel, a certificate of merit, a fine white powder,  
a traffic light, a chipped tooth, a slight swelling,  
a stolen radio, a dictator, a wafer of light, or some equivalent  
of the same person except a few seconds closer.  
Like starving gypsies that will read your fortune if you  
will read theirs. Like it seeming conceivable until,  
like what happened when, like the curtain was drawn back and ...  
This has to go away now. It has spent its energy foolishly  
and has to go home and beg for more. You fucked it up,  
thinking it would just lay here like string.  
You talk to it, I'm going away.

40.

Getting out of this gracefully. Exit and withdrawal,  
too many twists and complications already. Maybe  
he will be arrested for chewing on flowers, and sentenced  
to twenty years as the shaky gardner at the police academy.  
Maybe he will fall out of bed and just keep falling.  
Too many variables, and we are always coming back  
to the place that we just left.  
Fishermen waving goodbye, locksmiths waving goodbye,

waitresses waving goodbye, clowns waving goodbye. Maybe he will be banished to Arizona where he will hand out candy to school girls. Maybe he will assume another form. It doesn't matter.

All of the mysterious and/or cosmic elements of this tale are entirely true. any resemblance to any person living or beyond was avoided whenever possible. All events are completely fabricated, and therefore malicious.

Please take only the right parts seriously

He thinks about what kind of horse he'd like to ride away on, about what kind of retreat that would give him the biggest stash of time before they found out. Please don't knock at the door when he is sleeping. Please don't laugh.

Please don't give up. Hot plates waving goodbye, harmonicas waving goodbye, telephones waving goodbye, there is no place to go, but he is leaving.

Carbonpaper waving goodbye, props waving goodbye. We have to get out of this gracefully. He is walking toward the sea with one small bag and cans tied into his hair.

He just keeps walking, saying it over and over,

we have to get out of this gracefully,

we have to get out of this gracefully,

we have to get out of this gracefully.

---

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[Samizdat

***offering to the muse***

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