

Vacation

The opposite of irony is common sense
- Richard Rorty

Down here, he said, to kick back like you can't,
you know, back home, in airports, hotels and the like,
certainly not at work, which like it or not,
is not our work but theirs, who want us to do it
for them, the dirty business that keeps us from thinking
we've become less than thinking beings, merely
workers and purchasers, buying what we work
to produce (to buy or not to buy not even
a question), or worse, when it gets down to it,
working to keep working, afraid of losing
our jobs no matter how low the pay or rotten
conditions get there or in our after-work lives,
inflation as if it was an act of God
beyond their control (like they don't know where
the deficit came from), unemployment numbers
a mystery (like they don't set them
just high enough to keep the job market
a big fish little fish circus and blaming the victims
— welfare mothers and unwell children — never
quite goes out of style), putting most of the goodies
just out of reach in any case, the booby
prize of owning the rich man's things and stuff
more dream than ever, pure faith, like freedom
we believe we've got because we've got
good credit and the lottery, everybody's
chance to be not just president but king;
we know we can because they tell us we can
so often they don't even have to anymore,
we tell ourselves, we've bought into it
(it's in the history books, isn't it)
so much so that millions of us are ready
even to go to war in the name of a free
enterprise system that turns almost everyone
into a tongue-tied wage slave or worse,
otherwise the sense of loss for what
we never had might be so bad the whole
damn lie could come tumbling down.

Right, I said, but it's more complicated
than that, of course. I'll tell you what, he said,

while we sat in the palapa's shade
watching the bare boobs and tight butts
bounce across the narrow beach toward the waves,
I don't even get off on that anymore
I'm so goddamned sick of being used
by the system we all love and die for.
I used to think it was just age, but then
I saw what I was seeing: all of us
grinding away at the old grind, thinking,
most of us, we're getting ahead, thinking,
the best of us, at least we're doing good
work, but see, he said, good work or get
mine, six of one or half a dozen,
it hardly matters, we're all in the same boat
owned by the same transnational corporations:
one way or another we all pay allegiance to
those 18th century myths of independence,
the liberal (what now they call conservative)
business of rugged individualism,
salvation of the single separate person
while at the same time we're utterly convinced
that we're incompetent even to survive
outside the artificial environment
constructed by our collective bowing down
before the urban-industrial money machine;
whether or not you're one of the millions standing
in the long bread lines of those dispossessed
by freedom of opportunity or those
psychologically unemployed by freedom
of information, whether or not you believe
self-interest is best for the species or planet
or permanent debt is the *sine qua non* of the State
or *Eat the Rich* is just another graffito,
everybody's out to cover his own ass.

Or hers, I added, as Venus rose from the surf,
but of course it's more complicated than that.
Yeah, he said, that's why we think we need
a vacation down here just to get naked
the way we were when we were born, the way
we always are under the uniforms.
And these blissninnies with their space music
meditation and touchy-feely sales pitch
are just another toss of the two-headed coin:
so self-righteous in their ignorance

of economics, politics and science
— or overwhelmed with the complexity
— or so unnerved by the sheer enormity
of things in themselves — or paralyzed with guilt
from personalizing the world's evils — or just so
put off by the whole damned lost cause of the great
experiment — or what the hell ever it is —
they opt out: revert to fetal positions
substitute therapy for participation
start psychobabbling on about transformation
while introspecting themselves into solipsism
nihilism and similar asylums,
seeing themselves in the world's placid surface
but enraged with the current underneath,
getting off on themselves like good romantics
making their lives into cautionary tales
that collapse past and future into this present
mincemeat of history reducing progress
to checklists of individualized ambitions
retreating in the name of self-liberation
into some fuzzy mind-fuck light show
of feelgood abstract universals where
omens are found in every event
healer is the title of highest praise
logic demeaned as *just* semantics
responsibility pushed up the line
to some kind of extra-natural overseer
everybody except their evolved few
consigned once again to hell on earth
and though only the lucky chosen fittest
survive, it's your own fault if you're not saved.
Not to mention Joe Sixpack and little Miss Manners
believing because they've heard it twice it's true,
their brains sucked dry by devices, their sense of self
the waking dream of their reality
shredded by strobelights brighter than the stars
they can hardly keep their eyes off.

Frankly, he said before I could get a word
in edgewise, even worse than the technocrats
with that apolitical objective
look-at-all-sides bullshit or sweet-tongued pop
psychologists who say you can win the struggle
for authenticity or whatever other
transformation you want by blessing yourself

with I'm OK/you're OK doubletalk, schmoozing
the least suggestion of reasoned public debate
into the cream-filled center of consensus
politics – the backslapping glad-handing
quid pro quo of mutual self-validation
while gun nuts take over the real world —
it's the goddamn academics artists
and so-called intellectuals that gall me:
pimping for the now and the used to be
but hung up the next big thing too,
their uncertain senses of self- and artistic worth
hopelessly confused in the trivium
trinity of creativity
originality recognition
as if free expression could show us more than we know,
society be a function of education
rather than the reverse, as if art
were a subset of letting it all hang out,
painting nothing more than self-exposure
to what's happening, sculpture just found objects,
intention design and subject chance effects
the natural world mere figments of perception
denoted by some intangible something or other,
the purpose of writing being the silent novel
the perfect unreadable poem intensely true
to grammar syntax logic decorum and tone
but less concrete than reflections in sudsy glasses
with characters who do nothing but think and feel,
unintelligible (except of course
to the in-group, more of the chosen few);
masturbatory epics and self-abuse
in clay, pigment and gesture; uninflected
discourse and empty surfaces — as if
instinctual were the same as beautiful
identical with the true and the good as if
aesthetics were devoid of ethics, structure
simply a matter of patterns, all values one,
no difference between art and entertainment
all themes a defect except those pointing away
from themselves and any other possible answer,
making art appreciation a selling
point and art itself a commodity
irrelevant (except to Numero Uno,
groupies who confuse artist with art,
fluffers who want to be entertained, and buyers

getting vicarious thrills dealing in status).
May as well just go down to the bar
and jump around and jack off beer bottles;
better in fact: wouldn't waste people's
time thinking they were looking at art.
This lonely genius ivory tower crap —
Please don't bother me, I'm an artist;
Art is self-referential; A poem should not mean
but be; I never read the papers. Get real.
The question is, what are you doing with
your precious genius, or letting be done with it.
Your individuality exists
in context, like that shepherd who swears he loves
the wide-eyed sheep, devotes his life to them,
helps the kids get born, keeps off the wolves,
when all the while he's getting them ready for market
— and probably an export market at that.

Yeah, I said, watching that couple, off
by themselves, arms around each other,
fighting the waves to stay at least waist-deep
underwater, I know what you mean. The best
minds of my generation convinced that cities
were dead ends and the cultural centers
kitsch factories took to the streets
farms and mountains or holed up in obscure
little backwaters to do their own thing
trying if not completely burned out
to brighten the corners they got pushed into
but giving up protest as well as politics
preferring not to believe that their refuge
was an unfenced low-budget asylum
they'd agreed to commit themselves to
while pipedreams of love and self-sufficiency
danced like sugarplums in their wrinkling heads,
meaning almost all of them wound up
as aging hippies princesses and epebes
an order of ambition unto themselves
taking *The personal is political*
Imagination is the revolution
True art is truer than truth
as passports into solitary confinement
assuming in their convoluted states
the world might be as awful as it is
because of what they've made of it,

the weight of that so heavy on their shoulders
they've little choice but to contemplate their navels
trying through freedom from objectivity
and unlimited self-realization
to survive the unbearable —

 some so befuddled by the hodgepodge
thrown up by a century of trade wars
they mistake the blab and grime and splatter
for evolutionary diversity,
assert their own worth by mimicking it
in slather indiscriminately smeared
forsaking as elitist ego blindness
and unrealistic nostalgia for self-control
what once upon a time was called beauty —

 some hoping to escape our common fate
by keeping community a spectator sport,
receiving callers whose admiration they want
but won't open their mirrored doors to,
pretend that they themselves making the scene
are in fact the finest works of art
(with sympathetic audience always at hand)
narcissism the new aestheticism
though they know good and well their lives are a mess
of fears confusion frustration and alienation —

 some doing their Sunday best trying to evade
various trembling sicknesses, refusing
to believe that anything worthwhile
might come to us with age, aspiring to
seriousness of neither purpose nor mind,
tranquilize themselves with the trivial
allow themselves to be infantilized
by purveyors of rattles and push-me-pull-yous
agonize (while weighing other options)
over the plight of the less fortunate
drop coins in the collection receptacle
nearly every holiday season subscribe
to a few select publications pray —

 some in traditional left liberal fashion
unable to move from politics to union
give themselves up to mau-mauing each other
nitpicking each other to bits over stone age
fables of gender color class caste
diversity and ideology
style manner persona technique
imperative categories and cubbyholes

that reverberate in fragile egos
with self-congratulatory progressivism
that ties their theoretical knots tighter —
 some as convinced as their coming of age kids
that the show is run from far off-stage
that pleasure-pain is the sole criterion
that no position on anything beyond
the end of the nose can be genuine
no public utterance more than bombast
that because nothing works or everything works
so totally that anything goes
— so the schools and pulpits and so-called free press
utilities factories board rooms and governments
remain gripped in Mr Smith's iron hand
producing what Mr Jones will understand.
Like Olson said, *It does stay, unrelieved.*
But at least we can still laugh about it.
Myself, I said, I just came down here to lie
on the beach, soak up a few rays and watch
the birds and turtles before they're all gone.

Endnotes

the opposite of irony. Richard Rorty, "The Contingency of Language," *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.74.

more complicated than that. Kenneth Burke, "Epilogue in Heaven," *Rhetoric of Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1961; pbk., Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), *passim*.

so self-righteous. "Another name for self-righteousness is economic and political unconsciousness," Wendell Berry, "Style and Grace," *What Are People For?* (SF: North Point, 1989), p.81.

healer the title. Cf., Christopher Hitchens, "The Future of the Public Intellectual: A Forum," *The Nation* (12 Feb 01), pp. 25-26, 28-32, 34-35;32.

through freedom from objectivity. Hayden Carruth, "Survival as Tao, Beginning at 5:00 A.M.," *Tell Me Again How the White Heron Rises and Flies Across the Nacreous River at Twilight Towards the Distant Islands* (NY: New Directions, 1989); *Collected Shorter Poems 1946-1991* (Fort Worden State Park, Washington: Copper Canyon, 1992).

won't open their mirrored doors. "Narcissists receive callers without opening the door," Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990; pbk., (NY: Vintage, 1991),

p.376.

it does stay, unrelieved. Charles Olson, "Billy the Kid, *The Human Universe and Other Essays* (SF: Auerhahn, 1965).