

Five Poems

by D.A. Hagelberg © 2004

I Would Prefer Not To¹

For *The Rozetts*, *Debt Acknowledged*

I can neither parade nor protest
In a march down Sinclair Lewis's street²
Because I lie, cheat, steal and kill
Like almost any other: gravity-timed animal.

Those who do not break others or
Are not broken themselves by common stress,
Focused under pressure, streamed,
Like concrete cleaned with a hose of steam,

Must chew their gum again, heaved
Up from the Insideness of their character,
Done with a complaint about the bad breath
Of their sticky, cloying, neighbor's Other.³

In love I listen to these polar voices,
Acknowledge any cursive feeling felt,
And try to forget that which I attach to each adversity
In front of the phrase, "____, in your mercy."⁴

(1) "I Would Prefer Not To," is the response, which the main character in Herman Melville's short story, "Bartleby, The Scrivener" gives to people who attempt to engage him. Bartleby is a psychologically disordered, withdrawing individual: a person who has schizophrenia. In *Piazza Tales*, Edited by Hayford, MacDougal & Tansellee (Northwestern University Press; New York; 1996).

(2) "...Sinclair Lewis's street," refers to his satiric novel *Main Street*. Introduction by Thomas Mallon (Penguin-Putnam Inc.; New York; 1998 [Revised Edition]).

(3) The "Other" in this line is "the Wholly Other," described by Rudolph Otto in his book, *The Idea Of The Holy* translated by John W. Harvey (Oxford University Press; London; 1923), Second Edition, 1950 (pbk-1990) pp25-30.

(4) "____, in your mercy." refers to sections in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, (Augsburg/Fortress Press; Minneapolis; 1978) [I p65; p76; II p85; p97; III p106; p 119], in which the Celebrant chants that it is time to pray "for all people according to their needs." After each short prayer the Celebrant chants, "Lord, in your mercy." The congregation responds with, "Hear our prayer."

The absence of this word evokes Eckhart, who "insisted that 'God' is far beyond our conceptual categories, which are appropriate only for understanding creatures. Instead of speaking of God in positive terms, it is better to speak of Divine Nothingness. The Divine cannot be regarded, as a super entity existing somewhere else, but instead constitutes the unconditional openness or emptiness in which all things appear.... So lacking is any distinction between one's soul and the Divine, in fact, that one who is awakened to Divine Nothingness forgets all about 'God' and lives a life of release [Gelassenheit], moved by compassion to free things from suffering."

From "Heidegger, Buddhism, and Deep Ecology," by Michael E. Zimmerman in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, Edited by Charles Gurgnon, (Cambridge University Press; New York NY; 1993 (pbk)), p. 241.

There Are Still Tigers

For Allan Fong, *Debt Acknowledged*

The Bengal jungle is being turned into small farms. Soon the Bengal tiger will have to leave the jungle floor for the hills. In those hills, the tiger can easily be hunted to extinction.

There are still tigers
Who chill the marrow fibers frigid;
Tigers in the hill high lands
And once in onces of whims
And once in onces of whiles
One comes down
Onto and into the fields in heat
When the grain crows sigh high
When the grain grows scythe high.

Like the coming of the sun, his coming;
As orange as the sun, his coloring;
His eyes even thrown with the explosive flares of the sun,
He comes, down onto and into the fields in heat.
The orange-striped flame of his head
Fire-sways in the fleck-headed grain
As his path-tracing tail snap-snakes
To spill-melt the sweat-stemmed grain.

He flings-sifts into the grain.
And the grain churn-mills up to milk-white,
Bleached by the flush of the sun
Blanched shivering by the one still tiger
Come down from the hill high lands
Come down onto and into the fields in heat
When the grain crows sigh high
When the grain grows scythe high.

Mother India!¹ Rabi!² Indra!³
Give me the eyes not to see
The heads of still tigers hanging from walls.
Mother India! Rabi! Indra!
Give me the eyes not to see
The skins of still tigers draped from shoulders.
Mother India! Rabi! Indra!
Give me the eyes to see the sun stalking once again
Onto and into the fields in heat.
Mother India! Rabi! Indra!
Give me the sight to see
Bapugi's⁴ dream of those still tigers
Living with the already lambs.

(1) "Mother India" is the title of the national anthem of India written by Rabindranath Tagore, the poet who was the first Asian winner of the Noble Prize in Literature. He also is the only poet/composer to have written national anthems for two countries.

(2) "Rabi," in Bengali, means "the sun." It is also the nickname for Rabindranath.

(3) "Indra" is the name of the god of the vault of the skies, for whom the nation of India is named. It is also the god for whom the assassinated Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, was named.

(4) "Bapugi" translates into English as "little father." But it is also the word used to refer to Mohandas Gandhi, no relative to Indira Gandhi.

The Craving Aftertaste

For Margaret Stewart

You wrote your poem
In dark chocolate words
On white chocolate paper,
Which I slipped under my tongue
Like nitroglycerin
To melt into heart-felt warmth.
I am, now, addicted to the poem and even
Suck and lick my fingers after words.

Minä Mennä Marjaan¹

Your blueberry eyes elicit
A craving so strong
That my mouth opens
In surprise. It longs
For dessert in the desert
The way the bluebird homes
After hunting the wide day
For words which wiggle with life
With which to feed the sentences
Of that aching brood.²

(1) "Minä mennä marjaan," translated from the Finnish means, "I am going berrying."

(2) Two meanings of the word "brood" are "offspring" and "to think persistently or moodily about."

Severed Nerve

[One Moment Before Forgiveness]

Paper-cut of the soul, why don't you scab?
Is there only one of you or
too many to tabulate?
Are you a candidate for band-aid?
Music soothes, brings the savaged rest.
Through the filter of my earphones,
I drink pure, branch bluegrass,
But the sharp instrument even cuts this.
Why ache in the lyrics of the past?
My skin jumps back from
my ex-wife's words
As she rode the priest who married us-
Like a female, train fireman,
She fed the steam engines firebox.
While my whistle halted
them in their tracks,
It also penetrated my late
boundary to the ageless.
The throb still pulses with my lie:
That I am incapable of hate.

D. A. Hagelberg was born on October 18th, 1941 in Lunenburg, Massachusetts. His family moved to Berkeley, California, in 1947 and Don has been a resident of the San Francisco Bay Area, almost always, since then.

He came to the Civil Rights movement late. "When a picket line began to be formed for the secondary boycott of segregated seating in movie theaters, I took action. Getting rid of 'Jim Crow' at the movies sparked me to do social justice."

On November 22, 1963, he sat at his pre-induction physical exam when the insight of the day "hit" him. "The object of military training is to kill people." D. A. walked out of the Induction Center. He phoned his Draft Board office an hour after he was required to report for service. He asked, "Where do I report to be arrested?" He served 1964-1965 in prison for his refusal to be drafted.

He attempted higher education but only seemed to be able to complete Creative Writing courses with satisfaction.

In 1974 he created, produced and hosted "Live Poets," a two-hour radio program broadcasted weekly on a listener-supported Bay Area station.

A founding member of the Bay Area Poets' Coalition [BAPC], he supported the organization in trying to get dental insurance for its members as well as supporting its members' guerrilla poetry readings on BART's rapid transit trains.

The break-up of a special relationship prompted him to move to the California foothills. Her death coincided with his 1981 nervous breakdown.

"She refused to annotate her poetry for easier understanding. She also refused to get treatment for her mental illness or her cancer. I miss her."

He got into recovery for his dual diagnosis (mental illness/addiction). He's past his 20th year in recovery and still writes and works for social justice.

