

## **I Read Like An Animal,**

all tongue and claw and eye. Bargain bin classics for fifty cents once scripted by hand, transported in oil-skins rare as gold. In the old days, you could be burned for hiding the wrong book in your secret chest, ratted on by a scared neighbor. Now, I grab a *New York Times* bestseller about Galileo and his secret letters from a dusty cardboard box beneath a table of bright orange tie-dyed T-shirts in the corner retro-hippie store on the Haight in San Francisco. Walk boldly to the counter and palm two quarters onto the beaten wood.

It is stunning not to be afraid, after so much death over a few heretical words. Now, it is what to read in the face of dizzying plenty. Like Lewis and Clark traveling by keelboat up the Missouri, glimpsing Eden—the parchment inked that evening by quill more precious than the tobacco, powder and ball, axe and whisky they carried through storm.

And here I sit on a Sunday with the pages of their world lounging in my hands like a fresh bible, like a religion. And what shall I read today, books spread before me like the Empire-Chinese-Japanese-Thai-Korean Buffet I discovered while lost in Gilroy amid giant wholesale stores, stumbling upon rows and rows of sushi and orange chicken and bamboo shoots and garlic beef so immense my appetite seemed inadequate for such a feast?

If there is an imperative, a morality of reading, I am searching for it. Because if I don't read about how the young Arab woke up naked, strapped to a chair in a white room, fed only Ensure and water for weeks while bombarded night and day with air-conditioning and loud chaotic music at an American *black site* in Thailand, then how can I bear witness? And if I don't know that Hemingway stumbled back down to the docks at midnight to pummel again with his fists the great marlins he'd landed by day, then how will I ever find this pathos in my own body?

Oh Galileo, lend me your eye! Hemingway, your heart! Meriwether, your indomitable hand! I consume you hungry as the coyote that chews off its own leg to be free from the iron trap of small minds, or the jealous god baiting me to ignore the one tree worth its weight in fruit in the goddamn center of Eden.

## Butt Crack at the Poetry Reading

It was an Oscar quality crack,  
completely itself, naked, sincere.  
The man on whom it was adorned  
was a lover of poetry  
whose immense buttocks were worthy  
of a heavyweight plumber down on his knees  
in the kitchen, listening to the sound  
of pipes, lost in their leaky articulation.  
His ample torso crammed into the black  
plastic folding chair with the empty space  
between back and seat framing like a TV screen  
his buttocks' red fleshy cleavage.

Lifting my gaze from his hypnotizing masterpiece,  
eyes roaming over shoulder muscles thick  
as barn beams, broad bald head,  
flared red ears fanned like satellite dishes,  
I found myself applauding.  
The pugnacious suchness of this man,  
leaning into the sound of sentences,  
his body the perfect tool  
to bear literature's weight,  
the tonnage of meaning  
down to the evening's last  
iron word.

## My First Day Working at the Psych Hospital

I knew there was something wrong  
when I peered through the small seclusion room window  
at my friend from high school sticking  
his finger up his anus then licking it  
while staring at anyone who looked.  
As though life was shit and he knew it.

I was only twenty, but suspected the brain  
might be a bully menacing the best of us  
when the charge nurse said the head psychiatrist  
had hung himself in his garage days before.  
The world

harrowing in its raw nerviness, like  
a bad game show where friends  
and bosses are playing for their lives,  
and maybe me too, only it's unclear  
what's behind Door Number Three,  
maybe death, or a refrigerator, or  
an all expenses paid trip to Miami  
with the girlfriend who later ends up  
marrying the prick from high school,  
all three of us wondering what the hell  
happened to the simplicity of geometry,  
skipping gym class to kiss and smoke,  
and what the hell to do with the rest  
of our lives. After working summers

at the tomato cannery in town, I'd had  
enough, took this psych-ward job knowing  
there was something wrong with the brain,  
how it worked in small towns, how  
the world could crush it like a plum  
in a fist unless you understood how  
the bully worked. Knew I needed to  
show some nerve, pick a door, any door,  
and walk through it like I owned  
the whole god-damn world.

## **Why There is a Permanent Investigations Sub-Committee:**

Because the heart cannot be trusted.  
Because hearts must be legislated.  
Because any one of us might be dirty,  
because the mind is a labyrinth of secrets  
and one of us is hiding.

Joe McCarthy ransacked libraries for seditious books,  
including *The Selected Works of Thomas Jefferson*.  
Maybe he was right, there's sin in each citizen,  
we cannot be trusted, revolution lurks  
round every corner. So bring on

the orbiting satellite cameras, the threads of high speed  
optic fiber surveillance, the computer analysis  
of library books read and internet sites viewed,  
control the gods to whom we pray,  
the genders we love, each secret dream.

Because we are not just going to hell in a hand-basket,  
we are on a runaway train towards the fall  
of Western civilization.

Investigate me, please, because Armageddon is lurking,  
the brimstone is burning, because my contrary  
wild heart is breaking.

*Note: McCarthy used the Permanent Subcommittee of Investigations (still  
active today) to launch his anti-communist vendetta in the 1950's.*