

1976

In Porlock

John Woods

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The purpose of the body is symmetry.
Hiding in bed at night with all my clothes on,
in a room with colored pictures of birds
on the walls, a thread of black perfume
hung around my shoulders, I need
to dance as many dances as I can.
I need to dance with you: take
my misery away. I need to think of myself
as an aging dancer; the only wrinkles I
will see will be those of my body,
that the waves will wash the smell of dead fish
away. That I've performed gracefully
more than one time at the cinema
and on a battlefield of tears.

Because the heart is complex and filled
with many rooms. And now that I've excused
my existence once more, over and over
and over again I will say my name,
like the marsh bird that calls to his brother
to feed him, like the molecule that dies
in the tenth of a second and is only remembered
for its uniform structure. I need
classical form, I need exemplary moves
that I myself have invented to harbor my mind
with the ease of a happy sleeping child
in the hull of a ship that makes a pretty noise.
I'm a vehicle of faith. Give me your word.

In Porlock / John Woods

*"He was unfortunately called out by a person on business from
Porlock . . . and on his return to his room, found . . . that though
he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the . . .
vision . . . all the rest had passed away like the images on the
surface of a stream into which a stone had been cast . . ."*

Coleridge, Preface to *Kubla Khan*

In Porlock, now, the black Mercedes
stops at the Board of Trade. The streets
are empty near the embassies because, in blue light,
the captains plot the crossing contrails.
Near the Skoda works, the already patched
apartments have been searched for radios.
Tetanus shots have been renewed in the lower grades.
What are the songs they jump to
over the blurring arc of the rope?

This is the Year of the Three Blights.
Whatever they're called, they strike bread.
The people line up silently, and are thought
to be patient.

The F-100's stand high and gawky
in the staging areas. Too many starlings, they say,
have drummed and darkened down from the foothills.
The sergeant grumbles as he strips feathers
from the teeth of the impellers. Red snow
falls near Newport News, where the Polaris
nightwatch shudder in their peacoats.

Make your story short, they tell the coderoom clerk
in the gay bar toilet. They search his rectum
for the capsule. He would be briefer. He would tell
through red-rimmed teeth that, in Porlock, now,
he will be cured with shock, and cold hose water,
and patriotic music smashed through color slides
of naked, hard-bellied boys.

A woman in Georgetown wants to come.
Ease, but the wave falls short in his numb lunging.
In Porlock the laser builds in the fog-hazed
cryogenic tanks, and the germ trucks
sneak past Elko in the dawn. She turns from him
to the wet pillow, and in Porlock the killer ships
grunt whale meat into the Mother.

Why is this closet full of gin bottles
on the morning of the paper drive?

Why are these young men braced against the wall
with riot guns cold on their necks?
In Porlock, the poppy crop is trebled, and the wires
run ten-to-one for off-shore drilling.
Why is there dried vomit on the red telephone?

The Khan is in the black Mercedes. He has sold
his mineral rights to the *Reader's Digest*.
Tomorrow, in the Pleasure Dome,
he will throw out the first ball.

The Twice-Born / Jay Meek

Once, I said, a right gazelle and a left gazelle
dreamed they went waltzing
on the king's wall,
and a child lay in bed under their shadows

until the room was dark and they became my hands
and separated clumsily. And then it was
the events of that night ended, like childhood,
and I remembered only the memory of it,

seeing my own child cast down in my shadow,
but years ago—

the baled hay banked against an old farmhouse
in winter, and under the yardlight
a wagon of cabbages
with something vague and memorable beside it
like a yellow gazelle in the snow.

And the hamadryad's sermon came from it,
the Sermon of the Wall:
I remember, but I do not remember exactly.