

1977

# Talk to Me, Baby

Michael Dennis Browne

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Browne, Michael Dennis. "Talk to Me, Baby." *The Iowa Review* 8.2 (1977): 9-13. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2177>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

Look Papa I can walk, Sonja says. She takes two steps and falls down. The colonel squints his one sighted eye, helps her to her feet and they embrace for a second and third time.

You won't be neglected never again, says Colonel Cornell. I give you me word in front of the doctor. . . . Where is that big fellow?

His job completed, Mitchum has slipped out of the apartment unnoticed and down the stairs and out into the foggy Dover streets. He puts up the collar of his trenchcoat against the cold and lights a cigarette—two at once—in the shadow of The Queen's Cross.

It has been a long emotionally draining day and night for the itinerant alienist. He has loved and lost three times. Three women have entered and departed his life, leaving him with a sense of void.

Who is that bloke? someone in the pub asks someone else as Mitchum shuffles by on the way out.

I never did get his name, says the other, but that big fellow is the god-damndest mind doctor you ever want to meet.

Mitchum climbs into his rented Vauxhall and drives off past the cliffs of Dover into the muted English sunrise, another chapter of his life behind him.

---

POETRY / BROWNE, COOPER, SANER, RAMSEY

---

“Talk to Me, Baby” / Michael Dennis Browne

1

A friend at a cocktail party tells me  
of being on a fishing trip up North  
and meeting some men from Illinois  
who showed him how to clean and filet a fish properly;  
and of how, when one particular pike  
was stripped almost clean, almost all of him gone,  
the jaw with the razory teeth opened  
and some kind of cry came from the creature,  
that head on the end of almost no body;  
and the man with the knife said:  
“Talk to me, baby.”

2

Up in the Boundary Waters last weekend  
I hooked a trout, my first, and played him.  
I got him to the shallows  
and tried to raise him. And the girls  
got down into the water with my leather hat—  
we hadn't brought a net—and I was yelling  
"I've got a fish! I've got a fish!"  
out into the evening, and the girls  
tried to get him into the hat, and did once,  
but then he was out again—a wriggle, a flap—  
that fish jumped out of my hat!—  
and the line, gone loose, jerked, snapped, and he was back  
in the water, the hook in him.

And he didn't turn into  
a glimmering girl, like he did for  
young Willie Yeats,  
nor was he a Jesus, like for Lawrence;  
he just drifted head down near the shallows,  
huge, the huge hook in him.  
And Louis and Phil came up in the other  
canoe, and we got the flashlight on him,  
and tried to get hold of him. But then, somehow,  
we lost him, drifting about, he was not there  
but gone somewhere deeper into the water,  
every minute darker; my hook in him.

I hooked five or six snags after that, yelling  
each time that each one was a fish, bigger  
than the last. But I brought nothing living up.  
And the other canoe went ghostly on the water,  
silvery, like a dish with two quiet eggs in it;  
and the pines were massed, dark, and stood and smelled  
strong, like a bodyguard of dried fish.

3

Breathing, my brother in my house,  
and breathing, his wife beside him.

Breathing, my brother in America,  
his body in my bed, her body.

Their tent the color of the sun in my garden.  
And they are riding West.

And both of us riding West, brother,  
since we swam out of the father,

heading, six years apart,  
the same way.

The dog stares at me, not knowing  
why I have not fed him.  
The cat crying to come in.

Whom we feed, sustain us.  
Who need us, we keep breathing for.

I have seen you, at supper with friends,  
put your hands to the guitar strings

and bring strong music out, seen you  
sit and pick out

a tune on the piano,  
on a friend's penny whistle.

To hold an instrument, to play.  
To hold a pen, to write.

To do as little harm as possible  
in the universe, to help

all traveling people, West, West;  
you are not traveling alone,

not ever; we all go with you;  
only the body stays behind.

4

When I stand on my island, a Napoleon,  
one hand nailed to my chest,  
the writing hand;

when I can only *stare*  
at the ocean, at the birds  
running and turning against the light . . .

When I am  
the Illinois man and his kind,  
“Talk to me, baby,”

the one with the knife inside, sometimes,  
the one you may meet on your travels,  
the one behind you in the line to get on the bus,

the one arranging a deal in a phone booth  
as you drive past,  
when I become that thing I sometimes become,

I will go into  
the green of this visit, the green  
you asked me to try to see

after my earlier, darker poems for you—  
and this, the fourth one, darker  
than I meant, since the man with the knife

swam into it—O when that killer  
stands over our city, our sleeping and loving places,  
tent, canoe, cabin of sweet people—

I will hear with your ears  
the songs of the birds of the new world  
that so quicken you, and look for

their wings that flame and flash—there! there!—  
among the leaves and branches . . .

5  
Too often I have wanted  
to slip away, the hook in me,  
to roll off the bed  
and into the dark waters under it;  
to drift, head down,  
hide, hide, the hook in me;

to roll  
in the wet ashes of the father,  
wet with the death of the father,  
and not try  
to burn my way upward; the son, rising.

I swear to you now, I will survive,  
rise up, and chant my way through these losses;

and you, you, brother, whatever that is,  
same blood, you who swim  
in the same waters,  
you promise me to make *your* music too,  
whatever the hurt;

O when we are almost only  
mouth, when we are almost only a head  
stuck on the pole of the body,  
and the man says "Talk to me, baby,"  
let's refuse him, brother, both, all of us,  
and striking the spine like an instrument, inside,  
like birds, with even the body broken,  
our feathers fiery—there! there!—among  
the leaves and branches, make  
no sounds he will know;  
like birds, my brother, birds of the new world, *sing*.

### S. Eliason 66: Double Portrait of Emily Dickinson and the Rev. Charles Wadsworth / Jane Cooper

She is just leaving the room.  
He fades to a china cup.

Velocity fraught with gold,  
with *menace of Light*, atomic secrets—  
An aroused skin opens over the Great Plains,  
October leaves rain down.