Lay Me Gently Down

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NEIL LAMPER

Lay Me Gently Down

(counseling and guidance: a sometimes farce in sprung rhythm)

Come unto me, all ye who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you yakkety-yak.

Oh Mother, gently lay me down;
Do not bruise my little bones.

*Out of the Cradle Endlessly...*

*They enter the new world naked,*
cold, uncertain of all
save that they enter.

Into this dense jungle of illusions comes a well-lubricated ghost. (There is little left under the sun but to let the dead bury the dead.) He has a diploma which qualifies him to deal in transactions of the heart. And there came this weary one; his dignity denuded by neglect.

song of Tom

It was my first day in the new school. God! What a hick joint. Five hundred kids in the whole damn school. Back at Central there were that many in one grade. Dad and Mom didn’t want to live in the city any longer and they moved out to this stinkin’ suburban section. It must’ve been the first day for that teacher, too. He comes in with a big we’ll-all-gonna-get-along smile and writes his name on the board. Mr. Don Farrel.

“Mr. Don Barrel,” I says in a voice a little bit too loud. The smile kinda drops off’n this guy’s face and when it comes back, there’s a lotta surprise in it. One of them brown-nosing girls that always sit in
the front row gives out with a big, sexy smile and says, "How do you do, Mr. Farrel?" Already I was fed up with that jerk place. Five hundred kids, smelly little gym, and too many old lady teachers. But they got fed up with me, too. Later I beat the hell outta the senior class president, and one night I threw an empty beer bottle into the study hall. Some bastard squealed on me, and there I was: back in the principal's office. That was when they asked me to leave.

*I Think We are in Rat's Alley*  
*Where the Dead Men Lost Their Bones.*

The grotesque gestures of the holy man build a facade of phantasy. This sacred sachem in his scattered yard wags his broken jaw and with pen in hand begins his idiot's inventory, and harmonizes his treasured trash of talk.

*When I Heard the Learned Astronomer*  
*How Soon Unaccountable I Became Tired and Sick.*

song of Richard

I never could understand why the boys flocked around that Jane. I guess she was pretty, but I don't know how they could get any studying done. Goodness, some of our assignments were so long. And then the way they talked about her! It was utterly horrible. The fellows laughed when I asked them about it; they said I wouldn't understand and they grinned and asked me why I never went out for football. Mercy, I can't see any connection at all. My boyfriend Herman would get sulky when I tried to talk with him about it. I think Herman felt a little jealous. Poor Herman.

It really bothered me though; more than anyone knew. I couldn't help thinking of my mother and of how I loved her and how much she always did for me. She bought me all kinds of things, and she loved to go to the theatre with me. Sometimes she would take both Herman and I; she approved of Herman. She said he was quiet but likeable.

I loved my mother. I tried to be good and often I would put on an apron and help her with the dishes. And then we would have lovely
talks. Oh, she would tell me of all the wonderful things she wanted for me, and of how we would achieve them together.

So I just couldn't bear to hear the fellows talking the way they did about Jane. After all, she was a woman. The talk about her was downright filthy. I—I guess some of them even slept with her. I can't understand it. I suppose there are many disgusting people in the world.

_Dawn Has Yet to Clear the Doubt_

He has made his bargain with books, but people are strangers in the courtyard of his heart. Daily he rants over the ruin of the heavy-laden.

_I Have Seen Your Painted Women Under the Gas Lamps_

song of Herman

Maybe you never hated dames the way I did. Maybe you didn't have to; I had to, just to keep my Ma outta my mind. You shouldda known my Ma; no, I wouldn't wish that on anybody. She wanted my Dad out. My Dad was a easy-going guy, but she wanted rid of him. How Dad ever come to marry that bitch is a mystery. She laid my head open with a heavy belt buckle. Then she heaved a jar of cold cream at the baby. My Dad buys things like a lamp and a end table for her but she smashed the lamp and gives the table to the junk man.

I busted my leg practicing football at school. A guy named Farrel usta help the coach an' he took me to the hospital and calls my Ma. My old lady was into her daily bottle and she told Farrel to take care of his own goddam business; she couldn't be bothered with all this crap at school. I got so I hated that bitch so much I couldn't bring myself to have much to do with any dame. I ignored 'em in school.

Then this kid Dick kinda took to me and we became half-assed friends. I mean, he didn't like dames, either, but for different reasons. It turned out good for awhile because I didn't want any girls for friends and I didn't get along too well with the guys. Too quiet, I guess. Dick and me did all right, only he was one different guy. I can't even tell you about it all.

My Dad finally gave the witch a divorce and then things just went
to hell. I never knew where I was going to live the next week. That, and the Dick started gettin’ funnier ideas. I flunked a grade, and when I turned seventeen I headed for the army. T’hell with it.

... There is No Star
In All the Shrouded Heavens Anywhere

The counselor-god ground out a ream of rules. His brain could be heard ticking in his bloated head like a cheap alarm clock. In all his time and training he did not know that the helpless ignorant are like dead fish on the beach: forces first rot the meat from the eyes, the windows of the soul.

As Contagion of Sickness Makes Sickness,
Contagion of Trust Can Make Trust.


song of Charlene

“Where were you born?”

“On a doorstep.”

“Sure, everybody was. Don’t get smart. Now try it again.”

The girl leaned forward and tensed. Her eyes flashed. “I said on a doorstep, smart-ass, goddam cop.”

The night officer stood. “Look, you little bitch; I’ll—.”

“You’ll what? My uncle did this,” she beat her palm on her belly rounded by the six months of life in her. “What can you do, big man?”

The officer sat down and sighed. “O.K., kid. Then let’s start with your uncle. You live with him? Where’d he get you?”

“He’s not my uncle. He wants me to call him uncle.”

The officer laid his pen down and flicked an ash from the desk blotter.
After a moment he raised his eyes to the girl and tried a smile. “This—fella. Who is he?”

“George Milnor. Uncle George Milnor. He’s a phony.”

The officer did not reach for the pen. He folded his hands and said, “Tell me about phony Uncle George Milnor.”

The girl leaned her head back against the file cabinet. “Uncle George rescued me from a big, redbrick building where I was carried by a milkman who found me instead of an empty milk bottle on a step in an alley. I screamed all the way. Newborn babies often scream; especially when hatched by milk bottles.” She looked down at her stomach. “This one won’t see any milk bottles but it’ll scream. It’ll scream because it’s born.” The girl let her eyes rest on the picture of the Commissioner of Police on the opposite wall. Her eyes were large, dark, and just moist enough to shine about as much as the glass over the photograph of the commissioner.

“And Uncle George?” the officer asked.

“Uncle George is a phony, like I said. His wife is a bitch so he handles every dame but her. His meaty clammy hands drove me nuts since I was nine.”

“How old are you now?” the policeman asked quietly.

“Fourteen.”

They sat silent. The snap of the automatic Western Union clock sounded like a cannon. “Did Uncle George name you so I can call you something but ‘kid’?”

“Charlene. He leers with his brown broken teeth and says, ‘smilin’ Charlene.’ The lousy stinkin’ smelly rotten bastard.”

“Charlene, don’t get mad now but whyrya’ here?”

The girl’s eyes jumped to the officer’s face but she saw he was quiet and waiting. “Believe it or not I go—I went to school. They thought I was gettin’ fat.” She laughed with a sound like a needle scratching a record. “Then the schoolmar’m’s caught on and said, ‘Out.’”

“What did Uncle George say?”

Charlene looked away and the officer counted three swallows sliding
down the slim throat. "He said," she stopped and this time a kind of water ran over the surface of her face. The officer waited without speaking. "He said he was no damn midwife and hasn't got any money for little bitches that can't keep their pants on. And he said nobody'd believe it was him and maybe it wasn't him. But that's not true. His wife was right in the kitchen and he slammed me hard against a hot radiator and it hurt so I didn't care what happened. And now school and—and, I came, h-here I am—."

She laid her cheek on the desk blotter and every muscle in her body let go. The blotter dissolved and the helpless night desk officer let his hand rest lightly on the girl's head.

*And Why Do You Cry, My Dear, Why Do You Cry?*

*Little Girls on Hands and Knees That Throw Their Hair Before Them Over Their Heads to Dry in the Sun.*

*(Little Girls, Oh Little Girls.)*

The sobbing air is too much for all the automated Kleenex. ("Ne cherchez plus mon coeur; les bêtes l'ont mangé.")

The eunuch of kindness sets up a twang of cunning cacophony. He wishes he had but to balance the attendance records. Problems depress him, and he must prepare a speech for PTA.

Oh Teacher, deal with me kindly;
I can only try again.

*We are the Greatest City*

*The Greatest Nation,*

*Nothing Like Us Ever Was*

*And the Only Listeners Now Are . . . The Rats . . . and the Lizards.*

song of Jimmy

The kid was a bully—a big, hulking guy that pushed little kids around. He had fuzz on his upper lip but wasn't a bad looking guy. The
principal called him in when he had something on him. It didn't make any difference that Jimmy sat with his hands deep in his pants and a scowl on his face. The principal reached for the record file.

"Living in town, I hear," the principal waited. There was no comment. "Is that true?"

"Yep."

"Who do you live with?"

"My aunt."

"But your folks live out here." Again no comment. The principal could afford to smile. It was Friday and he wanted to get home. "Well, Jim, this is your last day at Oakview school. We're overcrowded and you don't live in the district." He looked up at a sound and was surprised to see Jimmy crying. This was new to the bully role.

"What's the matter?" the principal asked. Jimmy cried and laughed at the same time. "I wouldn't laugh," the principal said; "this isn't very funny."

Jimmy sat up. "I can't live at home. There's too much racket."

"What kind of racket?" the principal asked.

"Drinking racket and fighting racket." He began to snivel again.

The principal noticed two teachers waiting in the outside office. He lowered his voice. "Jimmy, would you like to settle down over the weekend and talk to me again Monday?"

The boy raised his head and nodded. The principal noticed he didn't look like a bully.

*The Emptiness of Ages in His Face,*

The doctor of discard thumbs his files. Tests and scores hammer people into place; these files fit each man to his appropriate statistic.
song of Charley

I thought I'd die laughin' only Miss Deck didn't think it was very funny. She turned red and pink and brown and didn't say nothing. She was O.K.; she just didn't know much about where Ol' Wash lived. But she give us this assignment in Art class for Monday night.

"Draw something for me tonight," she says. "Draw something you see around your house." Geez! She sure didn't know Wash.

So Wash goes home and looks around the house at night. There ain't no pretty flowers, or pianos, or nothin' like that. But in the corner of the other room—Wash's got two rooms—sits this pail with a cover they use for a can. Wash really does it up brown. He draws the pail, handle, toilet paper settin' alongside n' all. He even has this little bitty puddle on the floor where somebody missed. Wash was pretty proud when he shows this to Miss Deck. But like I say, she asks what it is and he tells her. She turns red and I hide behind the closet door and die laughin'.

* What is This I Hear of Sorrow and Weariness, Anger, Discontent and Drooping Hopes?

* * *

Life Is Too Strong For You—
It Takes Life to Love Life.

Oh God, consider my condition;
Ere I come to curse Thee, too.

(Office hours: 10 to 12; 1 to 3)

My Lord, What a Moanin'

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