

New Poetry from Edison Jennings

A Letter to Greta

"...so pitying and yet so distant," Cecil Beaton

Among my father's posthumous
flotsam recently washed up in my house,
I found a letter, postmarked 1928,
addressed *Miss Garbo Hollywood Cal*
(*Private!*), stamped RETURN TO SENDER,
sealed unread and stored for sixty years
inside its author's desk. Held to light,
the envelope revealed a trace of earnest
cursive written to a star flickered
on a million screens. I set a kettle
on the stove to steam the letter open
and expose the heart of this dead man,
once vestal boy, husband to three wives—
one widow, one dead, one faithless
(also dead)—fighter pilot with cleft chin
and good teeth whose friends had died
from too much war or too much booze,
who, if asked, what happens when you die?
would sip his drink and say, "you rot."
When the envelope at last unglued,
I found a time-fogged photo of a skinny
school-age boy standing contrapposto,
looking straight into my eyes. I slipped
the photo and unread letter back inside
the envelope, taped it shut, and late
that night went outside and burned it all
as offerings to a heaven of Gretas.



Greta Garbo, circa 1930.
<http://flickriver.com/photos/26612863@N00/3432818194/>

Operation Odyssey Dawn, 2011[\[i\]](#)

See Naples and die, Johann Goethe wrote,
the deep-dish bay, smoke plumed Vesuvius,

the castle and the terraced hills, the fleet
at anchor, tended by a swarm of skiffs.
Gigs skim from ship to shore, filled fore and aft
with sailors, their paychecks cashed in lira
to spend on booze, tattoos, and prostitutes,
and reams of postcards they'll forget to mail.

At night the fleet is rigged with winking lights
and swings according to the wind and tide,
couched in swells of trough and crest, rocking
sleeping sailors above the sea scrubbed bones
of city sacking Ithacans who heard
the Sirens' hymn and never more saw home.

*[i] International military operation against Libya, including
elements of the American Sixth Fleet, homeported in Naples,
Italy.*

Dead Shot

Drunk or sober, but mostly drunk,
he had a knack for seeing
and a gun like twelve-gauge Euclid
to make the dizzy world cohere.
That he spent hours as a boy
splitting three-inch blocks his father tossed,
busting them clean with a twenty-two rifle,
one hundred, two hundred in a row,
is not explanation enough:
he became his sorry old man's trick.
Imagine this: a case of shakes, cross-eyed
from the night before, he'd shoot trap
and never miss, pump-twelve booming,
two discs shattered in one tick,
but never draw a bead on anything
that breathed, no early morning vigils

squatting in a duck-blind—too hung over
for one thing, and for the other,
his skill was calculating proofs
with rapid fire theorems as tangents
angled into exploding resolution—
until he drew one on himself.
At sunset he would drink and watch
the purple martins slice the falling light.
His last night he tacked a strip of tin
outside his room so he could hear the rain
rinse clean and clear the drunken dreams
in which he split the moon.

Chiaroscuro

for John Jennings

The muffled pull and puff of breath, the soft
insistence of his need, dispel my dreams
and I wake up as swaths of headlights sweep
my wife and child, composed into one shape,
gigantic night rebounding through the room
while they lie still, curled on the cusp of sleep,
mouth to breast and filling god with god.