
POETRY

GEORGE STARBUCK

Selected and introduced by Anthony Hecht

Once upon a time, there was a poetry entrepreneur-cum-anthologist named Oscar Williams who was the maker and breaker of the budding careers of young poets by dint of his powers to include or exclude them from his *Little Treasury* series of American or Modern Poetry collections. To be included was to be noticed by the major book publishers and in due course to find one's way to a published volume of one's own. To be denied that recognition was bad enough, but to be "dropped," to have Oscar's Oscar contemptuously taken away, was like being consigned to a special poetic oblivion. This terrible fate befell the brilliantly gifted George Starbuck, whose bravura technique probably has no match among English-language poets of this century.

It was not for any incompetence that he was dismissed from Williams's pantheon. It was instead because of what Williams belatedly discovered in a Starbuck poem that he had included in a previous anthology. The poem was called "A Tapestry For Bayeux," and it was about intricate naval operations during World War II. Composed, dauntingly, in dactylic monometer (three syllables to a line, with the accent always on the first), the poem consisted of a dozen 13-line stanzas and had a needlework complexity even at first or second reading.

The wrath of the anthologist was provoked when someone eventually showed him that, along with its other complications, Starbuck's poem was an acrostic, with the initial letters of the first 78 of its 156 lines spelling out:

Oscar Williams fills a need but a Monkey Ward catalog is softer
and gives you something to read.

For all the charm of such a tour de force, simple considerations of length prevent its presentation here. Nor is there room for a double-dactylic poem 124 lines long; nor for a book-length poem entitled "Talkin' B.A. Blues; the Life and a Couple of Deaths of Ed Teashack; or How I Discovered B.U., Met God, and Became an International Figure"; nor for the remarkable "The Sad Ballad of the Fifteen Consecutive Rhymes"; nor for a poem called "The Staunch Maid and the Extraterrestrial Trekkie," subtitled "*hommages à Julia Child*." This last begins, "Stand back stand back, Thou blob of jelly./ Do not attack/ A maid so true./ I didn't pack/ My Schiaparelli/ To hit the sack/ With a thang like you," and continues four stanzas later, "You shall not lack/ For mortadelle./ You shall not lack/ For pâte-à-choux./ You shall have aq-/ Uavit quenelle/ Mit sukiyak-/ I au fondue." There are 14 stanzas in all, observing the same rhyme scheme and form throughout.

Starbuck's work is not confined to high jinks and hilarity. He has writ-

ten some of the most mordant comments on society's flaws and international blunders to be found in contemporary poetry. Of these, "Just a Little Old Song" is a powerful indictment of southern gentility, while "Of Late" seems to me, after many years of reading very bad poems of moral outrage on the topic, certainly the best poem to be written by an American about the Vietnam conflict.

Nevertheless, it is for the astonishing fertility of his wit; his easy traffic with vernacular parlance, regional speech, and idiomatic and demotic melting-pot American; his effortless technique in such forms as the ballade, the clerihew, and the double-dactyl; and his general cheerfulness and lively intelligence that Starbuck is to be read, and is likely to be remembered.

His *Who's Who* entry tells us that Starbuck was born June 15, 1931, in Columbus, Ohio, studied at the California Institute of Technology (his early aptitudes were in science and mathematics), Berkeley, Chicago, and Harvard. He spent two years in the armed forces and a year at the American Academy in Rome, has been married three times, and is the father of five children.

One catches glimpses of the man himself in the memoirs, letters, and photographs of New England literary life in the late 1950s and afterward. For example, there is a celebrated photograph of Robert Frost at Bread Loaf in 1959, resting against a huge boulder in the midst of a mown field and holding forth to a reverent group of aspiring young poets, including Starbuck and Anne Sexton, crouched on the ground before him.

For a few years, Starbuck, while working as an editor at Houghton Mifflin, was also a student in Robert Lowell's poet's workshop at Boston University; his fellow students included Sexton and Sylvia Plath. The strenuous demands of those classes would be followed by the three younger poets' ritual postmortem and "unwinding" over martinis at the Ritz. Anne Sexton would usually drive them there, and she would daringly park in the hotel's loading zone with the breezy assurance that "it's all right because we're here to get loaded." In the course of time, Starbuck himself became a member of the English Department at BU, and his lively presence in the literary life of Boston is affectionately recorded by Peter Davison in *The Fading Smile* (1994).

The phrase *light verse* is often employed dismissively or contemptuously, though in our more private and honest moments we usually confess to an admiration for poets whose gifts are of this kind. Some of the very best light verse has been written by the likes of Howard Nemerov, X. J. Kennedy, Kenneth Koch, Howard Moss, Helen Bevington, Phyllis McGinley, Morris Bishop, Ogden Nash, and W. H. Auden, not to mention Cole Porter, Lorenz Hart, and Noel Coward, or, for that matter, Byron, Thomas Hood, and Thomas Hardy. Once you begin seriously to compose a list of admirable writers of light verse, you find yourself rounding all sorts of unexpected turns, and coming upon, for example, A. E. Housman. George Starbuck should certainly be numbered among that remarkable company.

What Works

(An admired *ko-an* of the Zen Buddhists goes as follows: *There is a live goose in a bottle. How does one remove the goose without hurting it or damaging the bottle?* An admired answer is: *Behold, I have done it!* John Holmes's poem "Poetry Defined" settled the matter thus, in its last lines:

I put it in with my words.
I took it out the same way.
And what worked with these
Can work with any words I say.)

I had a lovely bottle, bottle-blue
in color with a heavy bottle-shape.
It filled my kitchen table (window too)
as round, as fine, as dusty as a grape,
but not as edible.

Reading my friend
John Holmes's poem "Poetry Defined;
or a Short Course in Goose-Bottling by Mind-
Over-Matter," I smiled: I saw an end
to certain problems. Yes, a goose would serve.

Laying out axe and pot, steeling my nerve,
"Doggone, I've put this goose in this-here bottle,"
I said. And it worked: there she was—a beaut! all
white and afraid. Now:

"There she is!" I cried.
Thunk went the fatted shoulders. Well, she tried.
"There she is!" *Thunk*. "THERE she is!"
What the heck,
they came out, goose and bottle, neck and neck
each time. Seizing the pot-lid, *Thwack!* My eyes
buzzed as the blue-green bits like sizzling flies
diamond-drilled them. Oh, if words could show them:
fires, flares, rockets, the works! *There* was a poem!
(spent like a wish, of course, after one use)
but here, Kind Reader, here is our bruised goose.

Stockholm

Rabindranath Tagore
Made flowers bloom where there were none before.
"It's my green thumb," he said, "and with my tan thumb
I do stuff like the Indian National Anthem."

Working Habits

Federico García Lorca
used to uncork a
bottle or two of wine
whenever the duende dwindled for a line.

James Joyce
would have preferred a choice
of brandies in decanters made by Tiffany's,
but rotgut was the shortcut to epiphanies.

The Later Henry James
bet shots of rum against himself in games
of how much can we pyramid upon a
given *donné*.

Little Dylan Thomas
didn't keep his promise
to stay out of Milk Wood.
He tried to drown the fact as best he could.

Anna Akhmatova
Eyed the last shot of a
Pre-war *cognac de champagne*.
"So much for you, little brandy. *Do svidanya*."

T. S. Eliot
used to belly it
up to the nearest bar,
then make for a correlative objective in his car.

Proust
used
to
too.

Said

Agatha Christie to
E. Phillips Oppenheim,
"Who is this Hemingway,
Who is this Proust?"

Who is this Vladimir
Whatchamacallum, this
Neopostrealist
Rabble?" she grouched.

Of Late

"Stephen Smith, University of Iowa sophomore, burned
what he said was his draft card"
and Norman Morrison, Quaker, of Baltimore Maryland,
burned what he said was himself.
You, Robert McNamara, burned what you said was a concen-
tration
of the Enemy Aggressor.
No news medium troubled to put it in quotes.

And Norman Morrison, Quaker, of Baltimore Maryland,
burned what he said was himself.
He said it with simple materials such as would be found in
your kitchen.
In your office you were informed.
Reporters got cracking frantically on the mental disturbance
angle.
So far nothing turns up.

Norman Morrison, Quaker, of Baltimore Maryland, burned,
and while burning, screamed.
No tip-off. No release.
Nothing to quote, to manage to put in quotes.
Pity the unaccustomed hesitance of the newspaper editorialists.
Pity the press photographers, not called.

Norman Morrison, Quaker, of Baltimore Maryland, burned
and was burned and said
all that there is to say in that language.
Twice what is said in yours.
It is a strange sect, Mr. McNamara, under advice to try
the whole of a thought in silence, and to oneself.

Said

J. Alfred Prufrock to
Hugh Selwyn Mauberly,
"What ever happened to
Senlin, ought-nine?"

"One with the passion for
Orientalia?"
"Rather." "Lost track of him."
"Pity." "Design."

Twigs

for Lore Segal

Ludwig van Beethoven
Slept often and ate often,
Combed seldom and cared less,
Causing his friends considerable distress.

Baron von Richthofen
Urped often and hicked often.
His friends knew what to do.
They would sneak up behind him and go Boo.

Michelangelo
Could not be his Mummsy's daddy, so
He had to become Italy's
Praxiteles.

Translations from the English

(for Arthur Freeman)

Pigfoot (with Aces Under) Passes

The heat's on the hooker.
Drop's on the lam.
Cops got Booker.
Who give a damn?

The Kid's been had
But not me yet.
Dad's in his pad.
No sweat.

Margaret Are You Drug

Cool it Mag.
Sure it's a drag
With all that green flaked out.
Next thing you know they'll be changing the color of
bread.

But look, Chick,
Why panic?
Sevnyeighty years, we'll all be dead.

Roll with it, Kid.
I did.
Give it the old benefit of the doubt.

I mean leaves
Schmeaves.
You sure you aint just feeling sorry for yourself?

Boston

Mr. Paul Verlaine?
We've come to fix your cleriheew again.
No no no no, moi je m'appelle Verlaine.
Sure buddy, and I'm Richard Henry Dana.

Out in the Cold

All day today the seagulls cried.
All day they cried, if not because of you,
then not at least because I asked them to.
I've got enough poor bastards on my side;
I'm not a Greek, I can be satisfied
to share a chorus with the shrill sea mew
without pretending it's an interview
with souls plucked from the shipwrecked as
they died.

I've got enough cold company: the guys
you used to tell me how you used to see
before I came along and you got wise.
Where are they now, in what capacity—
those dear, well-meant, unsatisfactory
approximations of the eventual me?

Late Late

Where tomahawks flash in the powwow
and tommyguns deepen the hubbub
and panzers patrol, is the horror
I live without sleep for the love of,

whose A-bombs respond to the tom-tom,
whose halberds react to the ack-ack,
while I, as if slugged with a dum dum,
sit back and sit back and sit back

until the last gunman is drawn on,
last murderous rustler druv loco,
last prisoncamp commandant spat at,
and somehow, and poco a poco,

the bottles are gone from the sixpack,
sensation is gone from the buttocks,
Old Glory dissolves into static,
the box is a box is a box.

The Well-Trained English Critic Surveys the American Scene

"Poetic theory in America is at present in an extremely curious state, resembling that of England during the Barons' Wars rather than that of a healthy democracy or well-run autocracy. It is not even a decent civil war . . ."

—Thom Gunn in *Yale Review*

Sometimes I feel like a fodderless cannon
On one of those midwestern courthouse lawns
Fiercely contested for by boys of ten and
Topped by a brevet general in bronze.

Hallucination, naturally: no
Era without its war, and this has its,
Roundabout somewhere, some imbroglia,
Even if only run by starts and fits.

Limber me up again, somebody.
In with the charges! To the touch-hole! Wham!
Elevate me, ignite me, let one ruddy
Side or the other taste the thing I am!

This pale palaver, this mish-mash of factions:
How can you find employment in a war
Of private sorties and guerrilla actions?
Maddening! Maddening! It chokes the bore!

Great God why was I tempered of pure
sheffield
Unless to belch and fulminate and reek?
Never in England would I be so stifled.
Name me the nearest caitiff: let me speak!

Ballade of the Mislaid Worksheet

(for Bernard Weinberg)

Where are the notes I made last year
On the flip side of a popcorn package
Toward my perennial sacrilege
Upon the Muse: another near-
Translation of Villon? But where
Is Harlow? Where is Norma Tallmadge?
Norma Jean Baker? Norma Shearer?
What tantalizing curve or cleavage—?
Water under the bridge.

Back to my dog-eared Dictionnaire.
Back to my Fowler's *English Usage*.
But where is Mrs. Average
American? Remember her—
Smiling at her discoverer
The census-man—a Personage
At last? And Carole Lombard, where
Is she? And Mrs. Calvin Coolidge?
Water under the bridge.

Where are the powers I bargain for:
The Archimedean leverage
To raise at least my own dead language
Up? O Edmund Spenser, where
In the wildern woods of verbiage
Hath wonèd wended, and whither yore?
And oomph, and eld, and yesteryear?
And Bernhardt's voice, and Bernhardt's carriage?
Water under the bridge.

L'envoi

A thousand scattered cans of footage
Turning in unison yellower,
A piece of French Literature,
And this, a petty pilferage
On both, are yours awhile, and are
Water under the bridge.

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