

Opera For the Ghost of a Dead Poet

(fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh...)

The dance of solitude was just beginning.
It was Sunday morning.
Sunday morning coming down.
I put my Velvet Underground on.

I mean man, I was gonna make this a Rock'n Roll weekend after
all,
even if, even if it killed me.

I wrote the note.
Cleaned up the 1 room studio apartment.
Trashed a flattened stack of cardboard 6 pack holders.
Groomed deep. Marathon grooming.
A sighful half hour shower.
Fingernails toenails down.
Shaved my face and pulled back my hair.
Silk boxers (they were a gift) hand washed
and hanging over by the window,
catching some of that sweet Market Street breeze.

And I'm brewing up a batch of a special Hermetic tea.

Let me tell you about this tea.
It is to be a potent blend and starts off very hot.
To make it I infuse (but not limited to) the following:

1. Red-white and blueness root
2. Sharp vinegar
3. Sweat of the Sun and Virgin's Milk
4. The aromatic leaves of Nuwara Eliya
5. Lapis
6. Tincture of Quicksilver

(And don't forget the flavor of the day,
depending on the flavor of the day.)

And I just sat down in my chair.
Man, I just sat down in my chair,
and the ghost of Richard Brautigan
fell out of my ceiling fan.

Let me tell you about this ceiling fan.
4 lights, 5 blades. Wood grain and brass.
Sometimes, I make it go really really fast.

(fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh...)

Counter clockwise. Yeah.

And when the fan goes fast like that,
I look at it this way:

Head back, eyes unfocused past,
sitting in my big pink chair
watching it all go.

So the ghost of Richard Brautigan falls out of my ceiling fan
and lands smack dead in my lap.
I silently thought how fortunate for me
not to be in the throws of one last masturbatory release.
He was longer and heavier than I imagined.
He looked up over his wire rim glasses at me.
I looked down into his big blonde Haight-Ashbury mustache.
He flashed a quick closed lip smile and I screamed.

AHHHHHHHHhhhhhhh...

And instantly the ghost of Richard Brautigan
is hovering in my kitchen
floating over the stove,
messing with the Hermetic tea.

*"Acid. Ascorbic acid. Vitamin C. It is good for you.
Have you not read any Linus Pauling, man?"*

He's over the pot opening these capsules
and trinkling their contents into the boiling tea.
So I get up and go out there and I see
these super fine crystalline grains,
like a mist of tiny stars spiraling
in a churning mercurial galaxy.

Counter clockwise. Yeah.

*"It compensates for the damaging effects
of free radicals on the compromised immune system.
It is only vitamin C.
Trust me."*

So I trust him, see?
Then all of a sudden my clock radio comes on.
All by itself, the radio is blasting a song by the Dead,

and I can't believe it.

(I can't believe they still play the Grateful Dead on the radio.)

And instantly the ghost of Richard Brautigan is sitting in my big pink chair.

He is rocking back and forth, snapping his rotten fingers, shrugging his shoulders, making duck-lipped guitar solo faces.

"We live and die in the midst of Profound Mysteries, man. Napoleon Bonaparte wrote that in a letter to Josephine. What a pisser. So, how about some of that tea?"

I am speechless.

I get 2 mugs out of the cupboard and pour us some Hermetic tea with the vitamin C, return to the chair and hand a cup to my ghost guest, who doesn't take it. Rather, he glares at me. Fiercely.

"Man! I did not see you put any whiskey in that tea."

"Oh. No, I'm out. I'm all out. I've got some Popov vodka though..."

He nods enthusiastically.

I get the vodka, top off the tea, and put his on my writing table directly in front of him.

Let me tell you about this writing table.
15 inches high, 33 long, 17 wide.
Perfect for the Smith-Corona, my papers, the drink.

One more thing,
before I go on,
about the typewriter,
see...

It's electric. Old.
Industrial hard plastic.
I've had it for over 30 years.
When it's on, when it's running, it shakes.
It vibrates and makes a low frequency buzzing.
And then the table shudders and the papers quiver and the drink.
And everything continues this great humming mechanical drone
right down to the marrow of my bones like a sex machine
built from the purrings of a dreaming clockwork cat.
I love that.

"AHHHHHHHHhhhhhhh..."
cried the ghost of Richard Brautigan.

And I turn and I see
he's spilled the tea all over the writing table,
all over the Smith-Corona, all over my writing...
Jesus Christ my shoes!

"HOT! HOT!"
said the ghost, pointing his finger
dramatically, early silent hollywoody,
down the gullet of his ghastly wide opened venting mouth.

*"Your goddamn tea is too hot.
I burned my mouth."*

I run into the kitchen area to look for the roll of paper towels, even though I know I don't have any. I look anyway where I would keep a roll if I had one. I tend not to buy them. For one thing, they take up too much room in the grocery bag. They're also priced to encourage their purchase in jumbo packs of 3, which is not only way too big for the grocery bag, but essentially is telling the whole world I am expecting a hell of alot of spills.
Nope. No roll of paper towels here.

"There are no paper towels." I said out loud.

I grab a Zappa t-shirt from the laundry basket
and when I come back to the chair
the ghost of Richard Brautigan is down on his knees,
on the floor, wiping up the spill

with my writing.

He's grabbed the pages of the collection of poems
I'd been working on for my first chapbook,
Painting a Lion From the Claw,
scrunched them all up and is daubing the rug,
spreading the tea all over the place,
as if the pages of my writing
were the Bounty of paper toweling.
The quicker picker upper.
Strong! Absorbent! 2 ply!

"Richard, that's my writing, man!

My stuff! Jesus. Fuck."

Now maybe it was the Hermetic tea,
or my interrupted Sunday morning hara-kiri routine,
or maybe the fact that the ghost of a dead poet
just fell out of my ceiling fan.

Whatever.

Let's just say something inside went a little

haywire.

I grabbed the soggy pages from his grip
and kicked him as hard as I could in the ass.

"AHHHHHHHHhhhhhhh..."

bellowed the ghost of Richard Brautigan,
flying around the room like a cartoon balloon
expending all its air.

Counter clockwise. Yeah.

"Richard, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I kicked you.

"You *HATE* me!!!"

"No! I love you. I love your writing! I, I always defend you.
I've always believed in your work."

"My worth?"

"No. Yes.

I mean, when somebody would say you were,
at best, a 5th rate writer, a gifted hick,
I would tell them you were my favorite writer.
Well, at least, one of my favorite writers."

"5th rate? A gifted hick?"

*Hey, man! I do not need you to do me any favors!
...What do you say about me now?"*

"Richard! Spirit!

Oh God, please come down here..."

(He's bouncing all around the ceiling like a bat)

"I don't justify my beliefs to people these days.

I just don't feel like being challenged. I'm not up to it."

"Ha! YOU do not feel like being challenged!"

Let me tell you something about being up for the challenge, man! You have no idea what it takes to be great. It will kill you, because it needs your pain. Listen to you... 'do not justify my beliefs...do not feel like being challenged...'You have no clue as to what the Hell I was going through."

"Oh, Right. Right...Richard Brautigan.
Patron Saint of the American Male Suicidal Alcoholic Writer."

And instantly he is on the other side of the room laying on the floor, one hand supporting his big ghostly head, the other making these slow sweeping gestures over my collection of his books arrayed in a semi circle around him like a splayed tarot deck. His hand pauses occasionally 2 inches above one of the titles, hovers, then returns to the slow sweeping motion.

Counter clockwise. Yeah.

And then, quietly,
the ghost of Richard Brautigan begins to weep.

Inventory 1 (The Ghost of Richard Brautigan)

1. Falling out of my ceiling fan
2. Landing in my lap
3. I'm out of whiskey
4. I burn him
5. He spills tea all over my stuff
6. Uses my poetry to wipe it up
7. I kick him in the ass
8. Flying around the room
9. Laying on the floor crying

What do you do now? What do you say to something like that?
How do you comfort a crying ghost?

And then a Voice inside my head said:
(*when you talk with the dead, talk about the dead*)
So I listened to the Voice and I said,

"I was on my honeymoon in New York City when I found out you had died. It was October 28th, 1984. I'm crossing Broadway, midtown, looking through the Times, not really paying attention, and I turn the page and there maybe yay big is this sort of notice your publisher put in, and all it said was..."

"Richard Brautigan. 1935 - 1984."

"Yeah. Exactly. I thought at the time it was an ad for a new book you had coming out, like an auto-biography or a collection of poems or something. Later on that evening someone had said that you were dead. Self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. It was your obituary in the newspaper I had read."

Richard the Ghost was silent.

I walked into the kitchen and got the Popov.
I sat down on the floor next to my ghost guest,
who had stopped crying and was now wiping his glasses
with the tattered end of his blue denim shirt.
We each took a few good swigs of the vodka.
I felt like I should say something,
offer something tender from my heart.
And then I remembered my dinner with John Barth!

"One time, I had dinner with John Barth. His novel *Sabbatical* was just published and the English Department at my college had him come give a lecture and took him to dinner. My fiancé at the time was an English major and I was her guest. There were 12 of us at the dinner table. I remember I had the duck. Barth got some kind of steak. Anyway, at one point, the conversation started to get a little heady. Heavy. You know, here were all these English Majors, and here was..."

*"John the Baptist Barth! Giles Goat Boy himself! Whoo-pee.
What has that got to do with me?"*

"Well, there was an uncomfortable lull in the dinner conversation.

I had just finished reading your *Perverse Mystery, Willard and His Bowling Trophies*, and so I brought it up. I received a major collective English Major eye roll for that one."

*"That book can hold its own.
You know how them literary type people are.
It is not good until somebody they think is good
says, 'this is good!'"*

"Yes. No shit! When Barth heard me say your name, he became very animated, directing all his attention toward my end of the table. He began to fill the restaurant with an almost architectural narration about the body of your work. He punctuated the air like a symphony conductor, using his fork and

knife as baton. At one point, he spoke so excitedly, a piece of underdone potato flew out of his mouth and landed in the Department Head's rice pilaf. Nobody said a word.

"Long live the Underdone Potato!"

Barth was actually teaching a class on your writing at Johns Hopkins University. He had a great respect for you, Richard, and we spent a good while discussing your novels, well past after dinner bourbons."

*"John Barth's Richard Brautigan Class at Johns Hopkins!
I can just imagine. Well, actually I cannot imagine.
The imagination is one of the first things to go when you
go.*

*You know, I am really big in Japan.
What else do you remember about me?"*

"What else do I remember about you? Jesus Richard, these days all I do is remember you. I first came across your poems in a 10th grade Creative Writing class. Richard Sanders. He was the teacher. He would mimeograph a page of excerpts from different writers, Kurt Vonnegut, Kafka, hand them out, and we would use them as springboards to write our own short stories and poems. The very first one I read was the bus poem..."

"30 Cents, Two Transfers, Love"

*Thinking hard about you
I got onto the bus
and paid 30 cents car fare
and asked the driver for
two transfers
before discovering that I
was alone."*

"Rommel Drives On Deep Into Egypt."

*"Rommel Drives On Deep Into Egypt. After that, I had to get as many as I could. Eventually I was able to get all 15 of your books. You know, whenever I go to a bookstore, I start in the B's to see if they have anything by you, just to add to my collection. But there's nothing. Nobody carries your stuff anymore. Sometimes, I'll come across a well read yellowed *Abortion* at a flea market or yard sale, but how many *Abortions* can you have, really. I did find a decent first edition of *Trout**

Fishing in America once, but like an idiot I lent it to someone and never got it back.
Gone. Forever."

And instantly the ghost of Richard Brautigan is standing over by the stereo, flipping through my vinyl. He carefully pulls out an album, examines the front and back cover, takes out the record and holds it, between both hands, up to the light, as if he were trying to see through it.

"I still call c.d.'s l.p.'s," I said.

*"Mmmmm? Man, I love this Moby Grape record.
Do you have any 13th Floor Elevators?"*

Then we had ourselves some more to drink.
And then we had our selves some *more* to drink.
And then, I began to think.
(Not a good thing, to begin to think,
on a Sunday morning coming down. Wink-wink.)

Inventory 2 (The Things I Begin To Think About)

1. Death
2. Dying
3. The Note
4. The Tea
5. My Mom
6. My First Wife
7. The Divorce
8. Our Honeymoon
9. La Boheme at the Met, Evita, Times Square, The Edison Hotel...

"Reading the New York Times."

"What?"

*"You were reading the New York Times, crossing the street.
I remember. October 28th, 1984. 4:32 in the afternoon.
You got half way and stopped.
I stopped you."*

"Richard, hold on. What do you mean you stopped me? How can you remember me, crossing the street, reading your obituary? You were dead. You didn't even know me."

"Well, you see, from the side of time I find myself on,

I could see you were in the path of a speeding motorcycle, about to be run down. It was not meant to be, and I was supposed to intervene. So, being somewhat new to this nether realm existence thing, I did the best I could and grabbed you by your leather jacket and yanked you out of the way."

"Whoa. Now I remember. I was reading your name and the numbers of your life, and something stopped me, like I hit a glass wall, and some asshole on a motorcycle went flying by, like 70 miles an hour. In Manhattan! I thought he caught something on my jacket cuz I remember I spun around..."

"Counter clockwise?"

"Yeah. That's what happened. I fell down and cursed the motorcycle guy. Ripped a hole in my jeans. Busted up my knee. My wife and I made it across the street, went into the bar at the Edison where we were staying. I ordered a couple Jim Beams."

"Nope. Jamesons. I had one too."

"Hmmm?"

"I have sat invisible beside you many and many a day."

"Jesus! So, my friendly ghost, you saved my life! I was in grave danger. I would've been killed. You intervened. Thank-you."

"ehhhhhh..."

"Dreadful apparition, why do you trouble me? What are you doing here now? What brings you back among the living."

*"Same thing.
Same thing."*

And instantly the ghost of Richard Brautigan is standing over me, resting the vestige of his upward palm upon my brow. And he said in almost fatherly voice, clearly, calmly...

*"It is not the memory.
It is how it reminds you
of the moment that you are in."*

No.

No wait a minute.
I'm sorry.
He didn't say that.
He'd never say that.

I said that.
I said it out loud to myself.
I wrote it down on a scrap of paper.
Later I will type it out on the Smith-Corona
and incorporate it into a poem or short story.
I will not be crying over it.
I most certainly will not be dying over it.

It's not the memory.
It's how it reminds you
of the moment that you're in.

And instantly the ghost of Richard Brautigan leaves. My Jacob
Marley gone. Just a swirling gyre of dusty vapors spiraling in
the air, disappearing in its becoming, winding backwards in upon
itself, like a slow motion explosion in reverse. The fading
relic of an antique dusty hurricane hanging there, caught in the
beams of Sunday afternoon sunlight entering the room through the
open window my boxer shorts are in.

I reach out to the dust.
I believe in you! I do. I must.
Reaching out for a final part.
Reaching out for the spirit's heart.
Reaching to the forgotten works I keep collected on a shelf.
Reaching from the darkness of my questionable mental health.

But the ghost is gone. Richard's left.
There's nobody here.
I'm by myself.

"Wait Richard Brautigan! Wait!
What do you write about now?
All you have is your bones!"

And then a Voice inside my head said:
(we all write about our bones, that's all that any of us can do)

We all write about our bones.
That's all that any of us can do.

Inventory 3 (additional endings
for Opera for the Ghost of a Dead Poet)

Ending 1. Now, every once in awhile, out of the corner of my
eye,
I swear I see the ghost of Lee Harvey Oswald, standing naked,
hip deep, in a misty trout stream, flying a kite.

Ending 2. Vitamin C my ass.

Ending 3. I'm just glad it wasn't Bukowski.

Ending 4. Boo, forever.

Ending 5. There are 186,000 endings per page, falling at 32
words per sentence per sentence. I straighten up, I go sit down.
The red digital numbers on the clock radio change from 4:33 to
4:32.

Head back, eyes focused ahead,
sitting in my big pink chair
watching it all go.

(fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh-fuh)
Counter clockwise. Yeah.

(c) 2004 (originally from the 1994 chapbook "Sinner.")