

ABSINTHE TONIGHT, HEMLOCK TOMORROW

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ACT I

Scene.

*Darkness.*

MENANDER  
So.

*Dim light, like dawn.*

MENANDER

(cont.)

The sun rises over the train station.  
The light took eight minutes to fall on our sky.  
We pass through time like an echo in the air;  
the same, the same, and then the end.  
The present is already the past.

But no more of that, no more great declarations.  
No more grandstanding as if before a jury.  
None of that.  
Throw the switch.

*Dimly: VIRGIL AUGUSTUS REVELWATER, advancing  
slowly to his position before the lights.*

MENANDER

(cont.)

A train pulls in. A man steps out. There he is. Now you  
see him. Sound the start-of-shift bell for our man,  
Virgil Augustus Revelwater.

*Bell.*

MENANDER

(cont.)

Sound it again for his Coming Doom.

*Bell.*

MENANDER

(cont.)

And one more just for sets of three.

*Bell.*

MENANDER

(cont.)

No more tricks, now.  
No more merchandising. No more discount tickets for the  
latecomers. No more great declarations. Now you see

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

MENANDER (cont'd)  
him: here his is.  
Knock 'em dead, friend.

*MENANDER takes the bell and retreats.*

VIRGIL  
Here I am.  
Collar buttoned, boots shined.  
Collar buttoned, boots shined, head high,  
and damn the dusty road: I'm  
walking on air  
if the air is dust alike I'll walk across the slender  
creek.  
My spirit is light,  
so buoyant an inch passes between my boot-sole and the  
soil.

*Punctuation. [Guitar tuning? Bell?]*

VIRGIL  
Soil? Naw.  
Dust.  
Red dust, hanging through the air like bloodmist.  
Crowding everyone.  
Turning vast spaces small.

MENANDER  
From the factory.

VIRGIL  
Making what?

MENANDER  
Bibles.

VIRGIL  
Bibles, says the man. That's the business of the  
Community Trust. You step off that train in the Lord's  
favored city! says the man.  
And you're no friend of Christ? Wait right there  
get the next train out  
bound to be worth the wait.

No sir.  
Not at all. I think I'll fit right in.  
I think I'll stay.  
How could He not love this town?  
Cinder Creek, Ohio.  
All that dust is a simple trial.  
Bear the trial, earn the mark.  
Wear the mark, walk victorious.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

VIRGIL (cont'd)

Factory looms.  
Paints the sky with rusty clouds.  
The long, low shape like a hearse.

Working voices come down. Metal on metal, strong arms,  
coal shovels in the furnace, the Earth turns clockwise.  
Times keep on getting better and better.

MENANDER

Better?  
Better-ish.  
Different.

*MENANDER coughs once and spits,  
like he's real used to it.*

VIRGIL

Watch yourself I say to him.

MENANDER

You do likewise. I'm watched over fine.

VIRGIL

Shows me the handkerchief he's hacking into.  
Two bright red spots.  
Keep your distance, I think but no. Say nothing.  
These are the ones whose mistreatment is punished  
hardest.  
I lay my hand on his head.  
Let me say a prayer for you, child, together the three  
of us set that bone-house standing strong again.

*MENANDER coughs and spits again.*

MENANDER

You know what they call that?  
The Dynamite Breath.  
All that dust gotta go somewhere, lungs never give up  
trying to get it out.  
God's mark.  
Every one in this town gets it.  
All are perjured. All faithless. All condemnéd now.  
Welcome, friend.

VIRGIL

Must be hard times.  
Empty storefronts, shuttered windows, dust on the  
merchandise. Postmaster turns away all comers, nothing  
for you today, maybe tomorrow a bill, but nothing  
today.

The taverns open just after dawn for the night-shift  
men coming down from the hillside. Money moves in those

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

VIRGIL (cont'd)

places. Bodies move in those places. Everywhere else,  
no sound, no motion. Must be hard times.

Where's the church?

MENANDER

End of this road.

VIRGIL

He points. And every Sunday morning it stands empty  
while one flock shuffles past on its way up the hill to  
the factory and another staggers past on its way down  
to the tavern.

Aye.

This is just the place.

MENANDER

So?

Got a roof to keep out the Fear?

Got a job to bribe the Coming Doom?

A glass of whiskey to wash the Dust  
from throat to belly  
like flood-waters?

VIRGIL

First tavern down the road is called the Empty Chamber.  
Another fellow puts his hand on my shoulder.

Hey, son. You look strong. No dust in your skin yet.  
Lost a man today up hillside to the cough, you know.  
Need one to replace him.

Yes sir.

Sign my name.

Crack my knuckles.

Send me to the seat of the storm.

Empty room upstairs over the tavern, yours  
if you need a place.

Yes sir.

Sign my name.

*Bell.*

MENANDER

On the factory floor there are sixteen printing  
presses. Seven binding stations. In the work the floor  
gets buried under scrap paper and misprints, cut  
margins and shredded edges, and up and down each  
walkway a man gathers up the garbage by the fistful and  
carries it away. Best keep the place clean. Walk,  
hunch, gather, like a wild hungry creature, walk,  
hunch, gather. Hour, hour second, hour third, walk,  
hunch, gather, til the tenth.

(CONTINUED)

*Bell.*

VIRGIL

In the room there's a window up high,  
table, chair, bed.  
Naked floors, naked walls. Window's too high to look  
out of: not for lookin' out, for lettin' sunshine in. I  
return long after sunset. Barely got scrip for candles  
from the company store.

*His pockets are full of paper scraps.*

VIRGIL

(cont.)

But I nicked a pint glass from the tavern below.  
I fill it with those loose scrap papers and real slow  
and careful light up the top corner of a page, where  
the number is, and I learn  
as the nights pass

*Bell.*

VIRGIL

(cont.)

to practice this motion:  
let the end catch  
drop the pages in quick as the fire kisses my fingers.  
I know how turning time throws my shadows on the wall.  
I know just when to feed the fire.  
Again.  
Again.

By first winter I'm stronger. Strong back, strong arms.  
No cough  
though the dust has dug itself  
into my cheeks and fore-arms.

MENANDER

Snow lays the dust down.  
Buries it shallow like a criminal.  
If you got the pox say thanks for this relief, no dust  
now to aid that terminal disassembly.  
When the snow covers up the road,  
you can still find it by the spots of red  
spat down by those on their way from the factory.  
Three seasons of dust gotta go somewhere.  
The lungs never give up at getting it out.

VIRGIL

Winter the little flame in the pint glass  
ain't enough to keep a room warm.  
Holding both hands over the weakling flame all night  
I keep this private misunderstanding going.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

VIRGIL (cont'd)

Morning I wake up fingers red  
tipped white  
can't recall falling asleep  
glass knocked over,  
lap full of ashes.

And tonight  
comes Cinder Creek's greatest blizzard since the  
founding.  
Air frozen,  
stricken solid from star-heights to the surface.  
Horses standing dead frozen upright in the stables.

MENANDER

The snow wheels and turns like a dance from a time  
before language.  
At the heart of all beautiful things is death.  
At the bottom of all death is God,  
furnishing the underworld with decorative arrangements  
of bodies.

VIRGIL

I can see him coming down the road from the factory.  
He struggles to approach.  
He drives himself onward  
death-fear the purest whip  
but the snow beats him down to a knee  
and beats him down again.  
Keep on. Keep driving.  
No time to stop and rest.  
Not with Cold Death chasing.  
But snow and pain pin him still  
like a specimen.

I'll hurry.  
Hold on, good man, I'll hurry.

Every step through two feet of snow  
past my knees  
just right up to my balls  
but numbness banishes the pain real quick  
just a few steps

Some brave and ready fellow is after me.  
Catches me when my vision tunnels,  
feet give up  
knees strike the frozen dirt  
chin just above the piling snow

No.  
You traitor.  
If a man's life is his own let me spend it.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

VIRGIL (cont'd)

I'm not the one needs your help.  
It's him, lying out there in the road,  
the snow'll bury him quick,  
so hurry, go back.

They carry me back to the little room over the tavern  
and do not return for him

still lying there  
so close to where they found me.  
I am shivered out.  
I am still as the dead  
and twice as cold.  
Go back out. Find that other man.

MENANDER

What other man?  
You ran out with raised arms and bare feet  
to chase a wind-blown shadow.

The snow melts.  
Floods.  
Creek rises.  
O, you children, don't go playing in that waist-deep  
road  
for the current might turn and take you out to sea.  
Now the men go in beaten waders  
up the hill back to the factory  
which cranks and belches such as it does  
safe on the high ground while the city below  
pisses itself clean  
lifts blood from dirt and ships it west.

VIRGIL

The men go in beaten waders and I  
stand on my little chair and look out the window  
at the church at the end of the road.  
I memorize the number and grain of its slats.  
I deduce the shape of its dug foundation.  
I look into the far church window and stamp my memory  
with that particular darkness.

I look into that far church window and stamp and stamp  
my memory with that particular darkness.  
They bring me food I ignore it.  
They bring me whiskey I pour it out.  
Soon the blood sings through my flesh again.  
My limbs are returned to me from  
Death's icy grip,  
which shot through my arm  
shook this fragile bone cage  
and reached up for my neck.

(CONTINUED)



So I live,  
my body-wealth formidable.  
Strong lungs.  
Like Job I go on.  
Like Isaac I go to the top of the hill.  
Like Abraham I gather up my bounty and return.

And with my little cup of fire  
I look out my window seeking the  
darkness behind the walls of the church  
measuring the difference between that darkness  
and the starless sky.

MENANDER

Light appears in that far-off window.  
Something gazing back.  
At this distance, through two panes, it's a murky  
shape--

VIRGIL

Lit just by star and candle it's a spilling shadow but:  
a face.  
The second man from the storm. His face appears in the  
church window. Mine. A perfect reflection.

Out, devil.  
I'm not one to go for crafty tricks and false visions.  
What revelation would come in that shape? Nothing but  
foul temptation. Some bait for foolishness.  
We watch each other a long time, I and myself, the  
dust-n-blood road laid down between us.  
I put my hand over my little flame.  
Hold there til darkness swallows it.  
Safe alone in the dark room.

A blistered circle rises in my palm.  
Yea, now life is restored, by simple pain.

I lie on my back.  
I measure the distance from my eye to the ceiling  
from the ceiling to the sky  
from the sky to the heavens.  
I trace the fevered circle in my palm.

What do you call a circle with a beginning and an end?

MENANDER

Day.

VIRGIL

I drag the chair to the window, look out.  
The church window.  
Empty.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

VIRGIL (cont'd)

Press my hand on the glass.  
Warm with the sunshine.

See?  
See how with violence against the body I restore  
order  
clarity  
and banish false visions from the city.  
See how evidence corroborates faith.

My lungs are strong!  
My hands are strong!  
My hand through the fire, stronger.

I go to the top of the hill with the men.  
They walk sentences of silence  
and punctuate with red coughs.  
I gather my bounty and return.  
Put fire in the glass and look for the face in the  
window.

Nothing.  
Darkness behind the glass,  
darkness beyond,  
darkness there in the church structure.

Amen, friends.

I head below.  
There's dancing.  
There's hollering and heavy-handed pours.

I'm ready for their anger:  
stupid fool running after a shadow in the snow  
chasing death  
needing rescue

But no.  
Not this time.  
They raise their arms,  
they smile.  
The music plays and they bring me in their circle.  
The dance turns and wheels inside itself.

Amen, my friends, amen!  
Fine days ahead.  
They hand me the guitar  
from over the bar:  
five strings, rusted frets, pure decoration  
and though it hurts I play.  
Because it hurts, I play.  
So may it never end.

(CONTINUED)

MENANDER

So may it never end!

*Music.*

VIRGIL

So may the spring come  
and this long and singular season  
in Ohio never end.

MENANDER

June.

VIRGIL

In the song my voice breaks.  
Breath strikes something dead  
and square  
in my throat.  
Cough.  
Spit.  
Red.

And they want to raise me up again!  
Make their circle  
with rowdy chords and stomping feet,  
generous pours and firelight.

MENANDER

You're arrived now.  
Now you call this your home,  
and us your people.

VIRGIL

But this time no.  
The sickness is coming for me,  
and that man in the church knows it.  
He's to blame for my frostburned feet and scorched  
hand. It's him who's wrecking my lungs with the dust.

I go.  
Through the doors, into the summer night.  
A breeze from the east  
agitates the dusty street.  
I stride through the inch-high storm like a titan.  
  
Church door's heavy but unlocked.  
No need to lock it up I guess.  
The pews are rough pine, like to put a splinter in your  
ass  
the pulpit:  
rough pine, draped  
with that banner I've seen over the factory floor.  
Icon of the Community Trust.

(CONTINUED)

Cough.  
Spit.  
Red.

MENANDER

Like it would be this easy.  
Like this still and haunted place might quick  
blow out that fuse already burning in your gut.  
Well. Some churches are best as kindling.  
What's wrong with your hand?

VIRGIL

Nothing.

MENANDER

Not nothing.

VIRGIL

There was a man here.

MENANDER

You?  
See the congregation of Virgils. A man is a herd of his  
selves, and only the best of him can outrun the  
predators.

VIRGIL

He burned my hand. He waves at me from this window with  
a crown-scarred palm.

MENANDER

Nothing ever heals.  
You take something apart and put it back together, even  
if it works as well, it's not the same thing anymore.  
Some churches are best as kindling.  
Dust will wreck the lungs. Smoke can't make them worse.

VIRGIL

Nothing ever heals.

MENANDER

Dawn.  
Now the wind has passed through like a train,  
and the air is still  
like the silence at the end of a song.

The street lies there like a snake  
either dead or just seeming dead.  
Bloodspots covered over with fresh dust.  
Up the road again,  
up the hill,  
to the hours and the paper and the smoke and the heat  
the stoop reach stack and devour

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

MENANDER (cont'd)

the hoard and incinerate  
the stitch and the bind  
the word and the act and the grace and the glory.

The hours and the paper and the smoke and the heat  
the stoop reach stack and devour  
the hoard and incinerate  
the stitch and the bind  
the wait the long wait the wait the long wait for that

paper hour smoke heat  
stoop reach stack devour  
hoard incinerate  
stitch and bind  
word and the act the grace the glory  
the grace of the long wait and finally

*Bell.*

VIRGIL

Long road home.  
Cough.  
Spit.  
Red.  
And before I make my way to the Empty Chamber  
to play my eight songs  
in exchange for that tall pour of whiskey I  
go to the end of the road where  
the church stands in silent judgment

empty my pockets on the floor.  
I let the pages fall  
one by one like autumn leaves,  
like handfuls of grave-dirt,  
like wedding flowers.

So it goes.  
So it goes, goes, goes,  
the long hours up on the hill  
the stitch and bind  
here up the aisle and back down the alley I  
leave page and page and page and page  
cover ground with paper and dust with word  
so it goes, goes goes

And there he is,  
up in that window over the tavern  
a dirty face lit by a fistful of flame.  
Hello, my man,  
grave imposter,  
my B-side self.  
Hello,

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

VIRGIL (cont'd)

hello up there.

Two sides of the same single.

Won't know which is which til the music starts.

What do you call a circle with a beginning and an end?

MENANDER

Autumn.

*Bell.*

VIRGIL

Wall to wall I paper the floor of the vacant church.

And watching me

night by night

is that man in the window

wearing his mask in the form of my face.

Every night I lay out what I've brought from

up on the hill and

the firelit vision persists.

When I return to my little room he's gone,

wearing some other mask,

supervising some other rotten business.

O, my impostor,

O, persistent devil I'm onto you now.

I am making ready for the cleansing,

making ready for the second fire.

I know my weaker self fears pain.

I know by fire I can cast him out.

I set pages in orderly rows on the pews.

I stack scripture in the pulpit to the height of a man.

I paper the walls.

MENANDER

Cough.

Spit.

Red.

VIRGIL

Last I lay a circle round the entire property.

I make sure he's watching.

Then I am quiet for a long time,

waiting out Abraham's breathless pause

with the knife raised

When Sunday comes

the sky is low and filthy and grey.

I smell the promise of rain.

(CONTINUED)

The sky keeps  
 close to the ground like a hunting dog's snout.  
 The rain comes.  
 The drops ain't got far to fall.  
 The ink spills.  
 The mighty circle melts apart  
 collapses under the weight of so many impacts.  
 Like flesh cooking off a bone  
 all comes undone.

*Bell.*

*Bell.*

VIRGIL

So take this work! And run it off into the creek.  
 Make You a little flood  
 to punish one wayward fool.  
 Spin him round  
 to dodge what judgment follows  
 turn after turn  
 revolution, revolution  
 Back to the beginning:

lowly and haunted  
 given to nightmares  
 fuse burning from throat to gut  
 where the soul is seated.

As though I were the reflection.  
 As though I were the false vision.  
 I was ready to light up the church,  
 the city,  
 and this poor body all at once  
 one of us to be the sacrifice  
 to burn this self in order to save it

I wait in the rain for a long time  
 watching these ink beliefs wash across the earth.  
 Time is no still soil,  
 nor belief a solid trunk there rooted.  
 Time is a turning circle,  
 belief an inscription on its fragile surface.

Wash all to the West.  
 Those who brave it,  
 Thus come the flood.  
 Out of water, life.  
 Out of water, the new life.  
 Out of water, life.

MENANDER

In the year 1890 the United States Census  
 declared the frontier closed.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

MENANDER (cont'd)

California was settled to the coast  
stripped of its gold twice and three times  
over, Texas' flesh raped and made necrotic  
with the claw and drill for oil.

Every settler headed west  
hiked through knee-deep dead.  
Might the warm Pacific waters  
undo the bloodshed?  
But Oil and Gold do not go back into the ground,  
the blood does not flow back into the wound.  
The fire does not go back into the match.  
But:  
The floodwaters will return to the sky.  
The floodwaters eventually return to the sky,  
to fall,  
to fall,  
to fall again,  
and put the fire out,  
to make this landscape safe for habitation.  
Out of water, the new life.

VIRGIL

So.  
What left to do but walk again  
to the top of the hill.

Cough.  
Spit.  
Red.

MENANDER

The road to the Garden  
passes straight through Dis.

VIRGIL

Return and return to the top of the hill.  
Today  
stands a gallows  
attended by seven strong bodies  
plus the lucky winner in his black hood  
and the Trust Overseer, making ready for a sermon.

MENANDER

The hooded bastard's hands still black with the  
gunpowder he packed into the boiler.

The sound no more than a pop,  
but the blast tore those bolts to shrapnel,  
sent them flying.  
Sliced three fingers off our stoker.  
He pressed on the wound with his good hand

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)



MENANDER (cont'd)

but the blood spilled over and left snake-shapes on the floor.

We looked for his fingers.  
We only found one.

Is he lucky he lived? Don't know.  
Hope he finds some profitable spot  
to rattle his can of pennies.

VIRGIL

That hooded bastard coughs and coughs  
his black hood aflutter  
like a feeble flag.

MENANDER

We'll be shut down six days.  
Without a power source we're stiller than roadkill.

But: no use trying to repair that coal furnace.  
Blow it up. Clear it out.  
Ready the dynamo.  
Next week we'll be all electric.  
This is the seat of progress.  
The dynamite breath  
will be a thing of the past.

VIRGIL

The men cheer.

MENANDER

As for him,  
what punishment could possibly suffice?  
Our poor ingenuity  
can only pass his case on to a higher judge.

VIRGIL

The men cheer.  
The grim congress hauls the rope.  
Our hooded bastard swings  
kicks his filthy boots at the air's suspended dust.  
Kicks.  
Kicks and gasps, and refuses to go.  
They bring him down and set their bodies again,  
haul him up and jerk,  
the body bounces like a toy.

And he refuses to go.  
The rope and structure groan together.  
Protest the weight.  
Protest the force.  
Protest the repetition.

(CONTINUED)

MENANDER

In the crowd we pray  
for some larger sound  
to fill this silence  
the blank zone upon the moving surface of time  
silence large and serious as the moon

Snap.  
The rope breaks.  
He hits feet-first,  
cries out when his ankle breaks  
inside his filthy boot.

VIRGIL

I say spare him.  
Spare him!  
The punishment was hanging and he hanged.  
You set for an execution and done it.  
Just cause he's not dead  
don't mean you get to kill him twice.

MENANDER

The hood twitches.  
Betrays life there,  
for now he's got his way.

Bring the second rope.  
Who expected otherwise?  
Take off the hood, now,  
let's see the face of  
this double-jeopardy  
Lazarus man.

VIRGIL

Please, no, not this:  
Let me instead be hooded,  
let me instead be stricken blind  
than see the face.

I can't bear to see, so I must look:  
His face is not my own.  
Somewhere else that troublemaker still toils.

Small man, shaved head,  
he looks out into the crowd

squints in sudden daylight  
and searches for the one who wanted him spared  
Passes over my face like all the rest.  
Silence be my disguise.

(CONTINUED)

MENANDER

Make ready the second rope.  
No hurry. We got eleven more.  
One of these tries we'll see the fucker swing.

Live once more,  
and kill once more.  
Live once more,  
and kill once more.

VIRGIL

even in the best of times  
a chanting mob is crass

MENANDER

Live once more,  
and kill once more.  
Live once more,  
and kill once more.

Slow this time, he orders,  
string him up slow.  
Straight up  
quieter this time and still,  
boots steady but he don't quit blinking.

Face red then purple.  
Color of foul old wine.  
Keeps blinking, as if death  
were but a speck of dust in the eye.

We laugh.  
It's funny, so we laugh.  
It's funny that he so dares to hope  
and blinks and blinks.  
There's rhythm to it--  
he describes in his only available language  
that life is persistent  
his efforts most conscious  
his ending deliberate.

Overseer goes to him.  
Embraces his legs.  
Pulls down.  
Tries the strength of spine and skin  
til those eyes open for the last time  
and remain.  
Steps back and looks into that lifeless gaze.

'Circle down, ye vultures.  
First of you to snatch the eyeballs  
and how many more will feed in darkness.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

MENANDER (cont'd)  
Applaud.

*Hold for applause.*

MENANDER

(cont.)

You want to bury him, bury him.  
I won't stop you.  
But do it while he's fresh. Jobs like that  
don't get easier with time.  
Come back next week.  
The future's bright,  
as bright as lightning.'

VIRGIL

And he's gone.  
And the split-finger cripple sulks off toward town  
to give back his  
severance pay  
to the company saloon.

The crowd follows  
but for three kids who race forward  
to raid his pockets  
take his boots and clothes.  
I let them do their business.

Night I keep watch.  
Vultures come.  
I let them do their business too.  
My self they refuse.  
Haven't earned that hatred proper.  
By morning the body is shredded up and down  
as though dragged by steam engine  
over fields of sprouted teeth

both eyes long gone but  
I still feel that gaze.

Now I approach.  
Cut the rope he hits the dust  
his second time.  
Let that blood mingle with the Earth's and mine.  
Where I lift him I touch bone.  
I carry him back.  
On this ground  
one man and one shovel can't beat the vultures  
so burn him.

Down by the creek,  
lay him down in a stranger's canoe.  
Guide him in the current's direction.  
Wade out with matches held overhead.

(CONTINUED)

This'll do you good.  
 Dust wrecks the lungs;  
 smoke can't make it worse.

Wade back.  
 Watch.  
 Send that ugly day beyond the water's end.  
 Be a part of someone else's past.

I am alone.  
 No grim watchman with a face like my own,  
 no swinging victim with a cold stare,  
 only my exhausted hands and useless voice.

Go, smoke and shadow,  
 thou organic pollution  
 belong there  
 and never come 'round again.  
 Mark our every yesterday with dust.

\*

MENANDER

The factory is to close for seven days.  
 No more coal, no more dust.  
 All lightning and wire after.

*Bell.*

VIRGIL

Day one.  
 Sudden silence. It was so loud  
 we forgot it was so loud.  
 Now I remember how to whisper.  
 I sing a quiet song  
 and have my quiet thoughts.  
 Candles in place of conflagrations.

Day two.  
 Clear skies.  
 And quiet air.  
 I look to the hill only once.

Day three.  
 Hail, you crystal sky,  
 and thanks, O gracious Lord.  
 For your cause and effect  
 for the slow revolution  
 what put us in your graces?  
 Some sacrifice.  
 Some gesture.  
 Some fire upon the water.  
 must have been mine.

( CONTINUED )

Day four.

I head up the hill in the morning  
strong in that weightless air  
see the factory like an empty golem,  
waiting for lightning's animation.

Wait, look:

motion inside and sound:  
tools hefted from the concrete floor  
a metal surface strikes another

I go to the open door  
see a working man  
lit with arcs of deadly white and blue  
this is the progress  
lighting, tamed

and I know whose face I'll see when he turns  
only the best of me can outrun the predator

I'd never kill a man just to watch him die  
but I'd kill myself just to see what happens

Day five.

Any problem that can be solved at all  
can be solved with a great big fire  
sometimes that's the only thing what can

blades and bullets make messy work of bodies  
Our God Is Modern  
He Does Not Care For Blood  
so he uses rushing water  
deep snow  
gravity  
red dust:  
and now and again  
from heaven sends  
this electric agitation.  
A death by hanging  
spills no blood and even better  
a death by lightning  
snaps no fragile parts.  
If the timing had been right  
His Son would have died seated.

Day six.

We are silent for a long time.  
Silent until it's time for the music to start.  
Silent even then.

MENANDER

1857.

The first device ever to record sound could not play it  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

MENANDER (cont'd)

back.

The phonoautograph created recordings  
only for visual study.

Tiresias and Beethoven smile.

1877.

Edison's phonograph could both record and play back.  
Air pressure moves a stylus against a wax cylinder,  
carving grooves.

We speak of capture,  
but nothing's captured  
that doesn't want to be free.

Our God is Modern.

Our God has an automobile.

Our God inscribes data.

Our God runs on coal no longer  
but harvests lightning

Our God receives the U.S. post.

Our God endorses a breakfast cereal.

Our God rehearses his revolution.

Directs the picture show.

Diversifies his investments

preparing for the decline of the legitimate stage.

Listens, remembers, and repeats  
that Replication is the fundament of modernity.

Our God rehearses his Revolution

turns the vinyl wheel of Time

records what he says and plays it back

again and again for our benefit

round and round

VIRGIL

Day seven.

The sun rises, then sets.

In darkness I go up that same blood-spotted road  
with my pockets full of matches  
my fistfuls of patient fire.

Light up, you dismal golem.

Remember fire.

This we reserve for heretics and witches.

I sentence thee.

*The fire.*

VIRGIL

It blooms in a pint glass

it sounds from a pulpit

It carries the still body down the river

light em up

(CONTINUED)

VIRGIL

time to let the lit match fall  
and the flames speed  
from the back of the floor across the nineteen binding  
stations and the forty printing presses and the glue  
mixer six stories high

creeping like a hunter in tall grass  
picking the next position  
and next and next and next  
to exercise most efficient violence

it reaches every wall  
it invades the untouched spaces  
corners unkindled air in every combustible closet and  
corridor

as the roof begins to tumble  
I hear it ringing from the inside.

*Bell begins.*

VIRGIL

(cont.)

I swallow  
the growing certainty  
like a knot of blood

and how will you defend yourself caught with your fists  
full of fire and the trail of burned up matches behind  
you like breadcrumbs

that bell's ringing, son, Virgil Augustus, that bell's  
ringing and ringing, the last man's choking inside,  
choking fractional breaths through a mouth like yours  
and lungs like yours and he's wearing a face like yours  
and he'll ring that bell til the firemen come, or he  
won't: maybe he'll give up long before that. What  
lightning and fire can do to an unshielded body. What  
fear must be, O, what fear must be. There he goes, the  
man with the face he thought was his, chased by himself  
across the turning surface of time, sounding help and  
goodbye in his only available language.

*Bell ceases.*

MENANDER

Night of July 12, 1890.

VIRGIL AUGUSTUS REVELWATER

lit his last cigarette  
from the great fire at the top of the hill  
in that clear sky the fire touched the heavens  
and joined up with the burning stars

(CONTINUED)



VIRGIL

(cont.)

A Modern God cannot be burned  
Only His Earthly Idols  
A Modern Man's life is not his own  
Not when there's work to be done

MENANDER

In 1886, Governor David B. Hill of New York created the  
Gerry Commission on capital punishment in order to  
investigate more humane ways of executing our  
criminals.

More than once a stout branch had broken and dropped a  
man on his heels in the dirt, two sprained ankles and  
another long hour to live.

A vigilante court would leash the condemned man and a  
dozen drunk jurors would throw the rope over a branch  
and haul him up,  
drop him,  
haul him up,  
drop him,  
yank the long tail  
and let him fall again and again. Might take thirty  
minutes.  
Sometimes a rope was too long.  
The bastard would scratch his feet against the ground  
and claw at the knot which had not broken him instantly  
as intended,  
but had to wring the life out of him  
over some several minutes.

It was an ugly scene.  
Things are different now.

Governor Hill's commission surveyed the experts.  
They sent a questionnaire to lawyers, government  
officials, and medical experts  
to ask them how best to kill.

Here we are.

Welcome to the seat of the storm.  
The lightning strikes twice.  
First current you're unconscious.  
Second the organs are critically wrecked.

But maybe your electrician's hung over and the circuit  
won't quite close.  
Maybe they take you for your autopsy and notice you're  
still breathing,  
they gotta call back the electrician and set the whole

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

MENANDER (cont'd)

contraption up once more.  
Even if you die before he gets back  
it's their duty to strap you in for another ride.

And if your body just clings more fast to life than the  
fellow they fried this morning  
good luck  
you'll have two full minutes to jerk and howl  
'fore they let the generator rest.  
Have at it again in a minute or so.  
But this'll do.  
This'll do just fine.  
All circuitry in place.  
All tested and certified to deadly specification.  
We know it works because we killed a horse this  
morning.

VIRGIL

Heretics.

MENANDER

Yes.

VIRGIL

You heretics.

MENANDER

Amen.

VIRGIL

This was the broad circle, so large I thought it was a  
straight line.

MENANDER

It's still death, but it's different now.  
It's better.  
It's different.

VIRGIL

Though you harvest your lightning  
to read by in the night  
and though you weave the rope to hang your sails  
both you do because you could not stand the sight of  
blood.  
Both you do because you think knives belong in the  
kitchen  
and axes in the lumberyard  
and swords buried with their bearers on the ancient  
battlefields  
and if so  
if all this is true  
what sanitary tools are left to do this job? What

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

VIRGIL (cont'd)

modern device can the modern man use to make pleasant  
sacrifice to his Modern God?  
Throw the switch.

MENANDER

You heard him.  
Throw the switch!

*Electricity. Pandemonium.  
Darkness.*

*Perhaps again, or a few more times.  
Then darkness.*

*Light.  
VIRGIL.*

VIRGIL

If I had a fortune it'd be the ill-gotten kind.  
Doom's coming, children. You feel it. It's  
in the American blood this oncoming doom

here it comes, the sound of it is  
the sound of the stone striking the bottom of the dry  
well and all that  
bone-guilt

but doom postponed grows louder and more forceful  
time feeds it  
the echo swells, grows louder  
with each repetition  
just backwards of how it ought to go

and as it roars back unto us  
The Coming Doom will swallow up  
our less substantial  
topics of conversation  
I'm talking about pornography  
I'm talking about guitar music  
and naked bodies touching each other through the  
cathode window

canned cheese !  
stealth bombers !  
polyester !

well Friends  
no black hood for me  
I want to see them  
I want to watch Beatrice and President Harrison  
sweating through the makeup on the seven-thirty  
broadcast

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

VIRGIL (cont'd)

because somewhere dormant in those pale and lumpy  
bodies in the blackest marrow and weakest cell there is  
that bone-guilt  
that small stone  
the echo rising from the depths  
rising up,  
up,  
up

crying:

'This'll hurt but this ain't yet the big one  
so let bygones go on and on  
ain't yet the big one but this'll hurt  
hurt  
the big one  
this'll hurt  
on and on and on...'

I want to be saved but I only want to watch the service  
by cathode tele-broadcast. I want to be saved but I  
don't want to watch the service at all. If I must die I  
want to go to heaven. If I must die I will to go to the  
vestibule of heaven's antechamber, where my radio-wave  
piety shall meet its last reward. That's the heaven  
I'll get watching the church on TV: my own electric  
window, through which to watch the deathless frolic of  
superior souls.

And that doesn't sound so bad. Encircled with words,  
anything is tolerable, even Hell.

You can go.

*MENANDER exits.*

VIRGIL

(cont.)

If I were any better with a bow I'd shoot the sun and  
pin it to the sky. I'm better with a firearm but it  
would be no good simply to blow the sun away. I'd stick  
it there to its background, like the label on a  
gramophone record, and we'll turn on and on, tricked by  
the scale of the circle into thinking it's a straight  
line. But this is the circle, that was the beginning,  
and I am the end.

But no good. All I might do is to raise the Colt  
Peacemaker and lay that front sight on the sun rising  
over the train station. A train pulls in. A man steps  
out. I squeeze the trigger and complete the darkness.

(CONTINUED)

*He raises his hand in the shape of a gun.*

VIRGIL

Click.

Bang.

*Lights out.*

*End of play.*