Captain Ahab’s Oil (for *Moby Dick*)

He knew, somewhere deep within the bilious machinery

of an unburdened heart, that black money would mingle

with the bones and drowned souls of all his shipmates—

and himself. Ink spilled before it could begin unravelling:

all the visions and secrets of a thousand untold stories.

His commission, simply, to circle the Evil that hunted him

first, over oceans and across continents, avowed only to

the obscene spoils of revenge, an uncompromising conception:

Restitution—or else a reprieve—from the intolerable designs

of some remote deity, who torments everything He conceives.

To what end? A man’s delegation, like any honest accounting,

wants exposition, *attainment*—the promise all authors make:

Follow and read what I’ve seen, bear witness to everything

I’ve endured. Of course, Ahab’s enterprise assumed credulity

in the service of sin, accessories to the carnage he’d transcribe.

Great men often quell unquiet consciences with certainty:

in a cause or something appalling they’ve come to believe

is preordained, that grim force adjudicating earthly matters.

Thus, the sacrifice of those conscripted, the blood and blubber,

massed barrels brimming with dark proof of demons redressed.

And what of all the unused oil? Fuel that could feed families,

irradiate gloomy rooms, and compensate the keen industry

of those expendable hands on deck—driven by duty or else

more earthly matters: the typical costs subsistence extracts—

pliant men disinclined to resist such exorbitant sacrilege.

Chef’s Second Chance (for *Apocalypse Now)*

“Never get out of the boat.”

--Chef, *Apocalypse Now*

It never sat well that Chef, who endured so much

in the service of a suicide mission, found himself

smuggled as he slept, then sacrificed like a lamb shank—

collateral damage to the apocalyptic designs of Col Kurtz,

exterminating men with the carelessness of cooks, stewing

marbled meat until it sluggishly turns the color of steel pots.

So let’s suppose, in a slightly less insane sort of world,

Chef gets a second chance. Stateside, run through the jungle

and back in his kitchen, taking orders even he can understand.

Ponytail in place, primed gently by grill grease and sweat,

a different cauldron altogether, head counts & tickets clocked

one plate at a time: straight wages for sensible work.

Except something is off: he can’t break away from this place.

Not the job, but that unconquered country and the things he carries.

It couldn’t break his will but it’s slowly sucking on his soul,

his brain boiling with all he saw and can never not see.

The more he scrubs the less he shines (*Mistah Clean—he dead*).

Darkness stalking his heart, murdered babies beneath his boots.

Too many jobs lost to count, he’s changed but nothing else did.

A survivor but nobody warned him about no shit like this:

His sins can’t be forgiven. Fortunate sons smirk when he stands

at the bus stop, nowhere to go, no way to pay, so of course

cops come when he breaks down inside that bank, not trying

to hurt anyone, there’s no gooks here and the gun’s not even loaded.

(*Over there I could empty a clip and get myself a medal;*

*ain’t this a motherfuck! Five-to-ten for unlawful entry?*)

So here you are. Came all this way and you finally get it.

Maybe you should have gotten your ass out of that boat.

The tiger was God trying to tell you a thing or two—too late,

you’ll never know now—or else on a mission of its own:

finding you, afraid but still on your feet, some instinct

sending it up river to put you, at last, out of your misery.

After Chester Higgins’s *Bowery Denizen, 1985*

Those fingers: holding neither money nor a wallet hoarding it

*(hold*, as in the verb meaning to carry, to possess; also to hold,

as in keep safe, the way banks hold deposits like promises kept,

the way he can’t hold his liquor or too many times he was caught

holding drugs, or holding up his hands as if to say “hold on,”

showing he wasn’t holding a gun, was not holding anything

that could hurt anything worse than he’d hurt himself, on the street

at all hours because he can’t hold a job, the system with a hold on him,

meaning he’s logged some hours in the holding tank, being held

on suspicion of murder or vagrancy, laws holding him accountable).

Hold on: is this because he wasn’t held by his mother; why he can’t

hold his ex-wife but knows to hold his tongue, the same way he holds

his spot in line, waiting for a hot meal or cold cup of coffee, holding

his coat during a warm day in autumn knowing he’ll need it that night,

holding it close so nobody else steals it while he’s holding something

else, like hope, with his hand held out for spare change—the dirty skin

creased, chapped, and cracked during evenings when heavy skies hold

snow— held in contempt by those who presume what his future holds,

or assure him that Christ is holding a place in heaven for every sinner:

our reward for living in a world unable to hold the weight of its pain?

John Coltrane’s Ascent (from Coltrane’s *Sun Ship*)

First there’s a soliloquy disguised

as a solo by Jimmy Garrison: it is

urgent, yet calm, eloquent and convincing.

For five minutes its own statement

but still, obviously, an introduction—

like an MC announcing the main event,

getting the assembly ready to rumble,

or pray.

Then the sly, almost flirtatious overtures

from Elvin Jones—he who could and would

call down the fire and make it rain Light,

establishing a steady, swinging accompaniment.

And then—they’re off…

yet as soon as they accelerate, they slow up

and stop.

Enter Coltrane, another in a series of Impulse

Era, top of the mountain sermons:

there’s brimstone, hail, chunks of energy—

molten as if shorn from the sun itself.

And by the time McCoy climbs aboard

(like Elvin, capable of opening the floodgates

at any time, but content, for now, to ride

shotgun, providing comradery via counterpoint),

the engine’s already cooling, the race already run,

and won.

Then it’s Garrison, alone again—like a friend

meeting you in a darkened alley—and ensuring

you’re safely grounded as you attempt

to account for what’s just transpired:

At once reckoning and reconciliation—

believing once more in miracles

truer than Truth, as the ship ascends

into ether, orange contrails glowing in

its wake.