"The Redemptions/ Of the Moment"



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My personal favorite among George's poetry collections is the little booklet Voluntaries, published by Corycian Press in lowa City in 1987 and later included in Century Dead Center (Left Hand Books 1997). The first of the book's seventeen short lyrics. "Wellfleet, 10:30 AM 7/6/79, from the deck:" explains the sequence's title:

> Voluntarily. I'll submit to the redemptions of the moment. My will be done in whatever reaches me /

These lines provide a nice spin on Keats's *negative capability*--the "capacity of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Like his Romantic precursor, George takes poetry to be the antithesis of rational explanation, but his own "redemptions / of the moment" are the result of what he here calls voluntarism—the power to choose. George is, in other words, a poet who very much knows what he is about, whose guizzical ironies measure whatever is perceived and experienced, so that "My

will be done." In this case (#1), the activity to be observed is that of the squabbling finches / at the feeder," viewed from the deck of the poet's summer house in Wellfleet on Cape Cod. The "strifefilled world of birds" is regarded with bemused condescension until the poet sensibly reminds himself that "who's to say / it's that much smaller than our own?" And, with his "Antennae up!" (#2), the poet is willing to have it both ways:

Bird bath business

very good

though they also shit in it and drink there too.

George Economou is a poet of few illusions: "the thread of his lifeline," after all, was "spun out of the mountains of northern Peloponnesus all the way to the Rockies of the American northwest"— the rugged Montana landscape into which he was born to his Greek immigrant parents. Coming of age in New York City in the 1960s, he learned his poetic craft from the Black Mountain poets, the Objectivists, and especially from Robert Kelly, with whom he founded the magazine Trobar, and their mutual friends Jerome Rothenberg, David Antin, and Paul Blackburn. But perhaps because of his thorough grounding in Classic and Medieval poetry in Chaucer, for example—Economou's poetry has an especially light and ironic touch: his sensibility is less Charles Olson's than it is that of a New York contemporary not usually associated with him—Frank O'Hara. The pizza poem for Charles Bukowski (Voluntaries #6) is a case in point, and so is #8, a shorty lyric prompted by the Spencer-Tracy-Katherine Hepburn film *Adam's Rib*:

> Calling your book *Eve's Rib?* As if getting even were possible? You know as well as I a good woman is as hard to find though a woman's a woman for a' that an' a' that even one of those

> > stouthearted women

a woman o'war.

Just ask the woman in the street

Or the one in the moon.

How absurd, this little poem suggests, to insist on simply parity between the sexes! Poets and artists have made much of Eve's various bodily charms, but her rib? How does that figure? The proverb "A good man is hard to find," the Robert Burns refrain "A man's a man for a' that," the venomous Portuguese jellyfish pack known as "man o'war"—all of these make for absurd comparisons, but the piece de resistance is "the one in the moon." For if the moon is traditionally gendered female and the face we see in the full moon is traditionally said to belong to "the man *in* the moon," then the woman in the moon would be pictured as being inside herself. How would George mansplain his way out of that one?

The sequence is full of such witty and charming short poems but its piece de resistance is the elegy George wrote in 1979 for Paul Blackburn, whose brilliant translations from the Provençal he had edited posthumously in 1978. Here is the opening of #3:

Earlier over the first cup of coffee Browsing in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* my eye took in Paul's dates as page 1142 flipped by:

> November 24, 1926 September 13, 1971

> > He died 2 months and 11 days

short of his 45th birthday

having made much poetry

many friends

and his share of mistakes.

The precision, directness, immediacy, and candour of these lines are again O'Haraesque—but the link is literal as well as figurative. Like O'Hara, Blackburn was born in 1926; like O'Hara, Blackburn died quite prematurely: he was only forty-five (to O'Hara's forty), both poets "having made," "much poetry/ many friends / and [their] share of mistakes" in burning the candle at both ends.

But what makes the numbers especially telling is that George is writing the elegy

coincidentally

2 months and 11 days from my 45th birthday.

Our lives—

each one alone

and all together—

seem to make a pattern along whose edge we run putting in our bits and pieces until, overtaken, we become permanent parts of it

knitted up into a design those left along its edge keep glimpsing.

Why Paul and not me? George asks himself poignantly. Why did he have to be taken? It is the central question of elegy, and the poet knows there is no answer: the overarching pattern, the key design, is beyond human understanding: we can only "glimpse" it from the edges. Given his own origins, George turns instinctively to Greek mythology: he salutes the Three Fates—Clotho, who spins the thread of life, Lachesis, who draws it out, and Atropos, who cuts it off. One must submit to one's fate, however painful. And now the elegy concludes:

> So this Friday the 13th I write, make plans And think about the past.

> > By the force of what I

will call some kind of grace when I close my eyes tonight

I'd still see

the fields of seaweed at Wednesday morning's low tide and the luminous greens of the freshly-watered garden.

"Grace," as O'Hara put it, "to be born and live as variously as possible." From the perspective of his Wellfleet deck, the bereft poet contemplates the merger of land and sea, as the "fields of seaweed" blend with the "greens of the freshly-watered garden." Linear thinking--the list of dates, the specifying of "2 months and 11 days," the 45th birthday-- gives way to the circular design, in which each one [is] alone / and all together."

Reading this elegy for Paul Blackburn in the wake of George's own recent death has a special poignancy. "Clotho Lachesis Atropos": George accepted what he called, in his beautiful memoir of his dying father, "the gift of a condition" with a disciplined equanimity. *Ave atque vale*, dear friend, and may the Elysian Fields welcome you.