
POETRY

L. E. SISSMAN

Selected and introduced by Anthony Hecht

The poetry of Louis Edward Sissman has not lacked admirers, among whom perhaps the most dedicated has been Peter Davison, his editor at what was then Atlantic-Little Brown and himself a poet. Others include Hilton Kramer, James Dickey, Howard Moss, and S. J. Perelman, who enthusiastically declared: "Unquestionably a major poet and a man of dazzling talent. Sissman's range of evocation, his wit, and his sensitivity would clearly have appealed to T. S. Eliot, whose influence is manifest."

Perelman was right. And yet, sadly, Sissman is ignored by most poetry readers. He has remained the possession and delight of only a tiny cult, a miniminority. When his first book was still in galleys, it was submitted for the Lamont Poetry Prize. The jury of five included James Dickey and me. We two were the only ones to favor Sissman, and by majority vote the prize went to another poet, whose work has not held up as well. Only in the very long run, perhaps, is majority rule capable of doing justice to the arts.

Sissman's first book, charmingly, wittily, movingly titled *Dying: An Introduction* (1968), was written by a young man who had learned two years before that he had Hodgkin's disease. What was startling about the book, apart from its manifest and mature skills, its resonant borrowings and echoes, was its sheer exuberance, undefeated by the author's knowledge that he was the victim of an incurable illness. The poems, even the title poem (with its epigraph from Philip Larkin, warning about picking up "bad habits of expectancy"), were alive with a youthful gaiety, a love of the inflections of language, the nuances of college-age frivolity, and the lilt of jocund lyricism. They expressed a unique kind of pleasure associated with the very act of the imagination. Consider, as a modest example, the following, from "The Tree Warden," a sequence of sonnets:

III. DECEMBER THIRTY-FIRST

The days drew in this fall with infinite art,
Making minutely earlier the stroke
Of night each evening, muting what awoke
Us later every morning: the red heart

Of sun. December's miniature day
Is borne out on its stretcher to be hung,
Dim, minor, and derivative, among
Great august canvases now locked away.

Opposed to dated day, the modern moon
Comes up to demonstrate its graphic skill:
Laying its white-on-white on with a will,
Its backward prism makes a monotone.

In the New Year, night after night will wane;
Color will conquer; art will be long again.

There's much to admire here. With his first line the poet adopts, by the word "drew" and the phrase "infinite art," the metaphoric premise of his poem in which painterly and calendrical terms move hand in hand throughout as cordial equivalents. The "art" of time is exhibited in the subtlety of its minute diminutions, both of the length of the day and the vividness of color. By December the days are miniatures, the wooden stretchers of their canvases serving also as the medical stretchers of enfeebled casualties, unfavorably compared to the richly colorful ("august," both as majestic and autumnal) canvases of the fall season. "Day" is dated because of the calendar and because in winter it becomes almost passé, the sun giving way to the moon as presiding source of light. The moon is "modern" both because it is up-to-date and because its "white-on-white" is the title of a Kazimir Malevich painting (which critic Robert Hughes described as a work that seemed "to mark the farthest limit of painting's escape from its depictive role"). The moon's prism is "backward" because prisms break up ordinary light into a rainbow spectrum, whereas winter moonlight condenses all hues to a more-or-less uniform white.

The poem ends with an echo from Seneca. But when we recall the whole of that phrase—*Ars longa, vita brevis est*—we suddenly realize that delicately folded into all this wit lies something deeply personal. That stretcher in the second quatrain, that bloodless white in the third, the intimation of life's brevity at the end—all this is tactfully muted by the poet who does not initially appear to be writing about himself. His control throughout is superb.

S. J. Perelman was right: Eliot not only would have liked his poetry but would have found himself echoed and imitated in Sissman's work. The opening lines of Eliot's *Waste Land* contain fragments of conversations overheard in the Hofgarten. Sissman made whole poems of fragmented conversations, one of which, set in a Provincetown, Massachusetts, bar, and filled with literary quotations, concludes this way:

"Shut up." "There's something calm about you." "Where?"
"At the first turning of the second stair."
"Please, Michael, don't." "The Louvre." "Let's go outside."
"Her diction stinks." "My analyst just died."

But his allusions, far from being confined to Eliot (as in the second line above), range over the poetic gamut, from Scottish poet William Dunbar (c.1460–c.1530) to the moderns, with elegant homages along the way to Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, the whole lot. And a small though sa-

lient pleasure of this poetry consists in what Melville and later Edmund Wilson called "the shock of recognition." Sissman writes not only with an agile but with a well-stocked mind.

He was born on the first of January, 1928, in Detroit, and died at the age of 48. He had been a Quiz Kid on national radio, a student at Harvard University, an advertising executive, and a writer for the *New Yorker*. His three books of poems, together with a posthumous collection, were assembled under the editorship of Peter Davison in an invaluable volume called *Hello, Darkness* (1978). That book and its author deserve far more notice than they have received.

The 20th Armored: A Recurrent Dream

Ah, sinners who have not to Ossining
Gone in the rank inconsequence of spring,
Hear a returning traveller: you cannot know
What—past that sickening old apple bough—
Magnificence flares forth, like shook Reynolds Wrap,
From that think tank atop the liberty cap
Of Overkill, Dutch sabot of a hill
Above the obsolescent rocks and rills
Of the outmoded Hudson. Turn, instead,
To our greater-than-Arlington factory of dead
Americans, where quick machines give birth
To the ultimate inheritor of the earth:
A cortex of shelved, tabled facts, a core
Of memory. My classmate, Major Hoare—
A 20th Tanker all of his natural-born,
Mechanically corrected days since horn
Of Roland stirred him in the passages
Of A. MacLeish, shows me the messages
Out-printed by the printout where the in-
Put of the thinkers comes full circle, and
Elicits answers from thermistors; where,
Short years ago, the warren of the hare,
The nest of pheasants, the rough shoot of owls
Made way for war rooms in the balmy bowels
Of Overkill, where G-6 officers
(The Hardware Corps, all hardened sophisters)
Now hold forth and hold out until the day
When miracle machines will have their way
And sweep us all, even their armorers,
Under the land, like Housman characters,
Under the beetling forelock of the hill
Once known to men in Dutch as Overkill.

East Congress and McDougall Streets, Detroit, May 25

Now winter leaves off worrying our old slum,
And summer comes.
Already docks,
Daisies and dandelions, thistles and hollyhocks
Begin to camouflage the tin in vacant lots.
(Some vegetable god ordains these plots
Of plants to rule the earth.
Their green clothes mask the birth-
Marks of a blight.)
Look down the street: there is nobody in sight
As far as Mount Elliott Avenue (where
We kids in knickers took a double dare
To hop a Grand Trunk freight;
Where, every night,
Those marvellous whistles came from).
This dead kingdom,
Composed of empty shanties under the sun,
The arc lamp swinging overhead (the one
That hung there in 1930), the same sidewalks
Of dog-eared squares of slate marked with the chalks
Of the persisting children, the sad board
Fences which shored
Up private property falling into the alley,
This was Jerusalem, our vivid valley.

In our dead neighborhood
Now nothing more can come to any good.
Least of all the Victorian orphanage that still stands
Behind an ironic fence on its own grounds
Diagonally opposite.
The convict children have forsaken it:
In one mad prison break, foiling their guards,
They burst out from its wards—
Long as the Hall of Mirrors, high as a kite,
Carved like a cuckoo clock, capped with grey slate—
Leaving an archive of curses on its walls,
A dado of dirt at hand height in its halls,
And a declivity in each doorsill.
Now the street-Arabian artillery
Has lobbed a brick into each gallery
And opened every window from afar.
Each outer door, ajar,
Is a safe conduct to the rat,
The mouse, the alley cat.
Under its exaggerated eaves,
The orphanage endures. Here nothing leaves,
Nothing arrives except ailanthus trees.

My thirst for the past is easy to appease.

From Provincetown, 1953

III. MANN'S PLACE

"Have you met Sondra?" "The entablature
Is filled with generals in relief." "I said, 'Look—
You can just shove your fellowship.' " "I love
That yellow maillot. Saks?" "The Pleistocene
Or earlier." "No. Double bitters." "Ham
Has played the Cherry Lane." "A Ford V-8."
"He had this great dead fish, my dear." "Solfège."
"No. She was Peter's cousin." "You have such
Astonishing green eyes." " 'Stuprate, they rend
Each other when they kiss.' " "No, please, no more
For me." "You just try teaching 101."
"Pure crimson lake." "Fourth down and two to go
And getting dark." "Say, who's your friend?" "Casals
Just swallows you in tone." " 'I do not hope
To turn again.' " "Oh, Harry's not so bad."
"Shut up." "There's something calm about you." "Where?"
" 'At the first turning of the second stair.' "
"Please, Michael, don't." "The Louvre." "Let's go outside."
"Her diction stinks." "My analyst just died."

From In and Out: A Home Away from Home, 1947

4. *Five-Fifty*

Later, as racy novels used to say,
Later, I turn to see the westering sun
Through the ailanthus stipple her tan side
With yellow coin dots shaped to fit her skin.
This Sally now does like a garment wear
The beauty of the evening; silent, bare,
Hips, shoulders, arms, tresses, and temples lie.
I watch her as she sleeps, the tapering back
Rising and falling on the tide of breath;
The long eyelashes lying on her cheek;
The black brows and the light mouth both at rest;
A living woman not a foot away.

The west wind noses in at the window,
Sending a scent of soap, a hint of her
Perfume, and the first onions of the night
Up the airshaft to where I lie, not quite alone.

From Small Space

III

MAKE THESE THREE
MISTAKES IN SPEECH?

Hear them mermaids
On the beach
Singing real low
Each to each?
Had I ought to
Eat a peach?

Safety at Forty: or, An Abecedarian Takes a Walk

Alfa is nice. Her Roman eye
Is outlined in an O of dark
Experience. She's thirty-nine.
Would it not be kind of fine
To take her quite aback, affront
Her forward manner, take her up
On it? Echo: of course it would.

Betta is nice. Her Aquiline
Nose prowly marches out between
Two raven wings of black sateen
Just touched, at thirty-five, with gray.
What if I riled her quiet mien
With an indecent, subterrene
Proposal? She might like me to.

Gemma is nice. Her Modenese
Zagato body, sprung on knees
As supple as steel coils, shocks
Me into plotting to acquire
The keys to her. She's twenty-nine.
Might I aspire to such a fine
Consort in middle age? Could be.

Della is nice. Calabrian
Suns engineered the sultry tan
Over (I'm guessing) all of her long
And filly frame. She's twenty-one.
Should I consider that she might
Look kindly on my graying hairs
And my too-youthful suit? Why not?

O Megan, all-American
Wife waiting by the hearth at home,
As handsome still at forty-five
As any temptress now alive,
Must I confess my weariness
At facing stringent mistresses
And head for haven? Here I come.

Amazing Grace, 1974

In this night club on Fifty-second Street,
An aeon after Auden's suppressed sigh,
A singer, warming up the audience—
A congeries of critics here to judge,
A bleating herd of suckers to be fleeced—
For the top comic, lone star of the night,
Goes out, infantrywoman, to the point
Of contact with that mumbling enemy,
Her many-headed hive of auditors,
And lays her unfledged talents on the line
Between *réclame* and dank ignominy.
She belts out songs into the banks of smoke
Caught by the same spotlights that capture her
Innocent sequins, peach, green, peacock blue,
And innocent features, pink with makeup, white
With apprehension, peach with youth. The mob
Is plainly restive—where is their overdue
Impressionist, for whom they have endured
Hours in this noisome cellar, *prix-fixe* meals
Made out of orts of cattle, melting drinks,
And unexamined decibels of sound?
She sings on doggedly. "Amazing Grace"
Is her next text, and, with amazing grace,
The social contract holds; she sings as if
The audience were hers to have and hold
In the perspiring hollow of her hand;
Her listeners, rising to her distress—
Theirs also, but for grace, at any turn
Of any corner, clock, or calendar—
Hush their cross talk and manfully applaud
As, on a reedy note, she finishes
And flashes her back's sequins (indigo,
Rose, rust) in a half bow that could also
Be a half sob. Applause. Amazing grace
Laves all of us who, chivvied by unchance,
Anxiety, disaster on our way
Out of the wide world, pause to clap our hands
For one who fails full in the face of us,
And goes down to defeat to our applause.

From On the Island

To an isle in the water
With her would I fly.

—W. B. Yeats

1. Friday Night

We issue from the meat of Pineapple Street,
Skipping in unison in the jet rain to
The cadence of our footsteps left behind
Just momentarily as we bound on
To water, laughing, soaked, four-legged and
Three-armed, two-hearted, Siamese, unique,
And fifty put together. On the Heights,
We embrace like trenchcoats on a rack at Brooks.
You taste like lipstick, wine, and cigarettes,
And, now quite irrecoverably, you:
A tear in the material of memory
No reweaver can match. Nevertheless,
I feel your rainy face against mine still,
Hear your low laugh join boat hoots in the night
(One Song, one Bridge of Fire! Is it Cathay?),
And see, just past the corner of your eye,
Our city momentarily at bay.

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