

Brief Meditations on a Woodcut

by Leonard Baskin

*The one who never looks up, whose eyes are lidded
And balled, like Blake's . . .*

from Sylvia Plath's "Death & Co."

I

We must be careful whom we choose
for inspiration or the muse
may turn upon us like an alien
that eats its victims from within

II

... eyes rolling inward see
round curve of skull the egg

the blank dome screen
with the nerves in pattern

like razorcuts over the bones
of those who yearned to be good

but never understood
their mothers husbands wives

whose lives boiling in loneliness
burned and sputtered against the wall

where the innocent and cruel line up
before the state's wrath the dogs of love

the invisible worm the mad
blind muse of Sylvia Plath . . .

III

Happy poems are hardest because
you come off like a dog wagging its tail
instead of a worried soul who reads
the papers and inhales the flaws:
the brutalization of the frail

starvation and pustulant disease
nature still red in tooth and claw
whipping us daily *How weary, stale,*
flat and unprofitable are these
hours days and years we stare across

And yet should we therefore fail
to see the young so very pleased
to be themselves? I say Praise without pause
a damaged world deserving our applause

The Graybeards

O see the graybeards lip-synch sacred songs
to the true gods who rule unruly earth
enforcing laws of messianic games

divided up in sides where rites and wrongs
are neatly balanced though No-one weighs their worth:

So how can we wonder why the world's in flames
when every faith implies an infidel
and every heaven sends someone straight to hell?

Marine Forecast

We wallow through the world white whales
in nature's gift shop thrashing tails
with jaws agape and stare surprised
when others curse our little eyes
that roll on either side but won't
see tentacles that lurk in front

and only Neptune who rules us all
cares that our hearts are large and full

Once haunted Ahab hunted us
for sins that ground his heart to dust
and those who hate like him will soon
be hoist upon their own harpoons
Though we can't predict how justice fares
we see our fate as linked to theirs:
Bound together sinking down
to where all whales and sailors drown

The Purity of Absolute Perfection

The purity of absolute perfection

has brought us to the Crescent and the Cross
 by siphoning the blood of martyred saints
 selling their bones like pretzels in the streets
 And the *certainty* of faiths in their selection
 works like a god's placebo: it takes the loss
 of common sense for granted painting
 painless heavens on tainted winding-sheets

Now they've woven rich embroidered tapestries
 of Magi stars minarets and virgins
 and thrown them over everybody's head
 which wouldn't be so terrible if only
 it would profit someone else besides the merchants

and didn't leave so many children dead

The Death of Friends

for W. S.

There are those who don't believe in death
It's natural they say God's way
recycling the universe: The breath
of jasmine *our* breath the jagged cries of jays
our cry This golden rain tree petal
floats slanting to our table here
because the ashes of our loved ones settle
deep into the DNA of everywhere

This seems both hopeful and scientific
which is to say American: I'm sick
of it Be logical until your brain turns blue
But he
will never come back Nor she

Nor I nor you