

Letter to Paul Cantrell

Dear Paul,

Saturday morning, the Hangout, after-class coffee with John Aden whose Comp class I am flunking, you join us mug cupped in both hands, stare at it, blow in it, look up and say,

*O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth....*

John is amused, but I watch your face light up with the pleasure of saying, and it is that I remember. It had for me "no slight or trivial influence." I've said those lines myself – once to a pretty girl who'd magicked my tongue – and it worked, a charm against witchcraft, and once in a cold place, in a cold time, I heard in them some deep longing of mine. Now I see you in the alumni paper dressed up as Lear, playing that last role before you retire.

I am 20 years older than you were when you joined us for coffee, have taught Lear for lots of those years, always with uneasiness, with a sort of apology for making the class read what was uncomfortable, unpleasant, – its magnificence my only excuse – that and the schedule – telling them that though I was certain Lear was something they needed to read, it was not clear to me they needed to read it now all when learning to free in themselves the energy of doing, wondering if I should tell such an unmarked faces that on the road to Dover, the best of us are blind or breaking mad, if I should explain how easy it is to be old before one is wise – how the word one wants to hear is the word to distrust – how virtue does not pay off in any simple coin, and wondering too if that were my job or just the arrogance of one too long paid to talk while others must listen.

Paul, what was it like to get caught up
in the wail of that great storm puddering
and spouting about our lives? I remember playing
old men for West Hill, my shoulders slumping further
with each production until I was ready
for the rocking chair before I could by legally
buy the bourbon that floated Saturday night
at the SAE house, so I know how even ordinary
language enchants the soul. Did the rage
of things possess you? Did you start in the night
to the rock of wild words – true but beyond sense?
At last, play's end, when you carried Cordelia's
tipped and emptied body, what in you spilled? What
knowledge came to you when on the stage you lay dead
and the world's unbelievable ongoingness kept on going,
and when you awoke to applause,

*I see West there, and Charlie, and their lovely wives,
and Barbara Hanson, I see them rising to their feet,
that fine new theater filled with the sounds
of clapping hands. From the balcony, your
students, self-conscious at first, – then one
faint "Bravo," another, then an ocean. At last one
wag cries, "Author," and the show subsides in a rustle
of laughter and a shuffle of feet towards the exit doors.*

What did it mean? What does it all mean?

Well, Paul, my 30th reunion this year. I guess I will
not make it. Broke and busy-yet your joke and those years
are not yet done with me. Strange.

With thanks,

Nils