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Commentaries: Bitter Angel

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BITTER ANGEL

You appear in a tinny, nickel-and-dime light. The light of turned milk and gloved insults. It could be a gray light you're bathed in; at any rate, it isn't quite white. It's possible you show up coated in a finite layer of the dust that rubs off moths' wings onto kids' grubby fingers. Or you arrive cloaked in a toothache's smoldering glow. Or you stand wrapped like a maypole in rumpled streamers of light torn from threadbare bed sheets. Your gaze flickers like a silent film. You make me lose track. Which dim, deluded light did I last see you in? The light of extinction, most likely, where there are no more primitive tribesmen that worship clumps of human hair. No more roads that turn into snakes, or ribbons. There's no nightlife or lion's share, none of the black and red roulette wheels of methedrine that would-be seers like me dream of. You alone exist: eyes like locomotives. A terrible succession of images buffets you: human faces pile up in your sight, like heaps of some flunkey's smudged, undone paperwork.

COMMENTARY

It's a little difficult to remember what in blazes I was thinking about when I wrote this poem, simply because the year it was written in seems so long ago now, that I almost feel as though I dreamed 1989 rather than lived in it for awhile, along with many other beings alive at the time. Stumbling down memory lane, scanning for landmarks, I seem to recall wanting to construct a poem that pondered a besmirched deity—one as imperfect, harried, and untidy as I usually feel myself. I wanted to postulate an "angel" prey to human frailty—not exactly a new idea, but I decided to try to construct my personal version.

There's a train in the poem because I love trains and have a bad habit of trying to insert them into every text I get my hands on. Ditto toothaches and moths. I'm pretty sure the title came from a mishearing. Maybe someone mumbled, "little arrangement" or "little ranger" or "twitter danger" or "bitten bagel" and I heard the phrase which makes up the title instead, and so began to wonder about ways in which one of God's messengers might be construed as "bitter."

It would likely be an angel assigned to the bad news delivery divi-

sion, I thought, a heavenly emissary who might be prone to bitterness temperamentally, and/or whose appearance might signal bitter tidings to those who saw him. A conflicted harbinger of misfortune, full of misgivings, with a crummy job and maybe even bad eyesight.

The early part of the poem is an attempt to play with images of whiteness I liked to use in poems at the time and then subvert, dirty up a little. It was also an attempt to set up a kind of "mood lighting," where the images in the poem are seen via a murky kind of light, not unlike the fading illumination in old, black-and-white movies which are aging poorly and therefore look dimmer and dimmer when projected. Hence the image of a silent film in the middle of the poem. I hoped that this type of uncertain, strain-your-eyes lighting would convey a sense of seediness and unease that was at odds with some conventional ideas of angelhood, virtue, or goodness.

The poem was an attempt to try to fuse the angelic and the tawdry; the holy and the lowlife; the earthly and the celestial. This particular marrying of seemingly opposite elements is an abiding interest of mine for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that such a fusion is central to my sense of what it's like to be human—to be a seething container of the mystic, the quotidian, and the sinister, among other things.

I like those who inhabit poems to be wrestling with themselves. I think the line about "primitive tribesmen who worship clumps of hair" may have been a reaction to reading *The Golden Bough,* which I believe I was skimming for images at the time, and in any case I have always been a sucker for primitive tribesmen.

"Bitter Angel," from the book of the same title, first published by North Point Press in 1990; reprinted by Carnegie Mellon University Press in 1997.