

Frederick Pollack

Good to Go

1

There is a sensation that comes with completing
anything – whether downsizing
a firm, or clearing a drain
that was stuffed a month, or acing
a test or closing a deal
or a poem. It's the
clean T-shirt feeling,
and feelings from a walk in it, even far
into fall – not so
strenuous as to waste
a shower or feel anything
but a breeze; but the breeze
is there. The temperature sinks,
leaves loosen,
the sun comments on each leaf,
and lucky thought doesn't think beyond
the light-effects, the task completed
over and over in the mind,
the body.
Thinks of no larger end.
Other people in the shortening twilight,
with dogs or without,
walk slowly or quickly
and belong to each other or not
as much as need be, being without need;
and the cars pass in admirable order,
and everything seems possible
since nothing for the moment occurs that isn't.

Blood on the stool, and an occasional throb
 in the lower right quadrant
 (from which appendix vanished long ago),
 then an intermittent bar
 to breathing in the upper
 left. Casually to speak of “tests”
 demeans the weeks between them,
 which increasingly become a performance,
 which increasingly frays.
 The beige and blue of waiting rooms
 with their loud televisions
 for mouth-breathers.
 The “referring physician,” a cold and knowledgeable child.
 Then: ass in the air for barium; then
 the voyage up-colon, live
 on monitor; pause and silence
 for each excision –
 thinking how *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*
 is marred by the promise that pain stops
 and light and the afterlife take over;
 how one should have achieved
 more, how little one cares;
 how that simplest shield against circumstance,
 more difficult for the sophisticated
 to conceive or procure than for any
 child of the poor or scary (a
 gun), wasn’t
 procured, so that
 now there will be only pain
 and an expanding condescension.
 Both occur in that room
 where one ingests
 chemo, but only one’s
 intolerable. Choked apologies, assurances,
 gruesome triumphs of the spirit,
 the smell, and a new twanging, all
 night, of the nerves in some limb ...
 There is no point to this process,
 any more than to this passage, no
 theme. The one thought from the bed
 that goes up and down,
 terribly, beneath the hasty hands
 of the nurses – apart from
 the total futile wish

for home – is how one
should have achieved
more, how little one cares;
how amazing the twanging and stabbing
become, with the least breath
inflected with shit and a reflux of betrayal.

3

I gave up on democracy in '80.
More abruptly and consciously
than I abandoned The Revolution.
People ran, dark shapes, in the streets – so many
they had to represent the times.
They chanted the slogan of Mrs. Thatcher:
“Only the individual exists!”
I thought I noticed a contradiction
but, typically, kept it to myself.
I sat in cafés with my friends,
who, if they had any gumption,
brains, talent, contacts, were preparing
to sell out,
while the rest of us dreamed of camps –
honorably freezing in the Gulag,
or gassed,
or baked in the huts reserved for us
in Nevada.
(In LA, Phylis, whom I hadn't met,
thought “No more we, only me,”
with the simplicity her thoughts have
when she is very sad.)
A young torchbearing enthusiast
confronted us, me especially,
in the coffeehouse.
He told me to get with the program.
Spoke with visionary smugness
of the fall of the Soviet Union
and all walls.
Proclaimed *à haute voix* that he and
his cohort would no longer
live for me, fight my fights
in the future, like the kids I should have had.
I started to stammer denial, my young jowls shaking.
He said I despised the people.
I realized he was right,

and hugged this alarming recognition
to myself as the place closed, and the lights dimmed;
paradoxically it protected me
from the rest of what he said
and the next several decades.
The days go by.
In 10^{65} years, quantum tunneling
will dissolve the pitiful remnant
of my hopes.

Refuse

1

They were welcoming me home.
– Cold, but my greatcoat (bare
of self-awarded medals)
was thick. I removed
my beret at the strains
of the anthem. “*I Have a Friend.*”
The wind snapped
my beautiful flags.
How many there are, I thought, and how few
designs are immediately clear:
that Atlas figure, balancing two worlds;
that somber wheel; that sword in clouds.
They gave me something to look at,
taking the salute.
To think about, as a thousand voices beat
the wind back with the interminable Hymn.
Something, I mean, besides my House,
with mountains and sky behind it,
and the portico and broad embracing steps
where robots sang.

2

A great-aunt cried repeatedly
towards the end, “I don’t UNDERSTAND!”
and bowed her head and clasped one hand
in the other, tightly.
The gesture struck me –
the words were already mine –
but Mother hurried me away, I think
so we might not commune, compare, define.
Alone, great-aunt grew calmer.
The whoosh of the freeway,
where her loveless children passed,
died. The plates on her shelves grew sparse
and split into two piles.
The fridge turned humble, with a crown of coils.

The palm-trees withered and an elm appeared,
and from her window, cramped and high
and intimate again, she watched
a line of jobless friends and suitors inch
forward for sandwiches
among the coal-carts and the boys playing stickball,
and sighed, and (though it was shabbas) crossed
her faded carpet towards the radio.

3

The “I” was decaying, the Faustian Western “I”,
and summoned these to be its gravediggers ...
At first you stare at them, but when
they hand you that seamless,
transparent, indestructible block you look
at it. The polyp, the original cancer cell
that would have killed you,
your enemy’s secret face in a true mirror,
the broken spring that kept you from your love,
all in a paperweight, a souvenir.
I threw mine out.
Stocky as former-East-German weightlifters,
with that world-lighting smile the masses trust,
they talk to people and,
always from blocks away,
I see people weeping, embracing them.
And then those visitants, our guests or hosts,
sincerely, grandly wave them through
a kind of hole they open in the air,
out of the world.
I roam the streets avoiding them
as the streets empty.
I like to think myself a wanderer,
but can one “wander” in a city?
There are only good neighborhoods and bad ...
Perhaps, as population lessens,
the latter become mysterious
and wandering possible.
I fill my head with thoughts like these
to maintain human dignity,
till one of the aliens (if that’s what they are),
observing me, does not approach,
but smiles and massively winks,
as if amused at what I flee him for.

In Ocho Rios, mansions rise
through trees above the town,
which appears pleasantly funky from the rail.
The liner docks; crewmen at liberty
bear boomboxes to the greasy beach,
while a few tourists without tours
follow a pink path lined
with razorwire and, beyond it, timeshares.
And suddenly everything is there,
but only one of anything that matters:
Macdonald's, Pizza Hut and Burger King,
a police station, a failed-looking resort
behind the older type of wire fence.
The rest exists in bulk: people, babies;
cars motionless in streets the Brits repaired,
perhaps, before they left;
Hindu jewelers; skeletal cows and dogs;
vague compounds where each stall sells
identical crap. I wonder: why giraffes?
Who was it first decided on
hand-carved, red-green giraffes?
At which point, one of the beggars on that stretch
of pavement, limbs and eyes
awry, gives me a three-toothed grin and says:
"You need not look so icily upon
our works, for they are yours."
I stand amazed. "A homeless man back home
would not speak thus." "Because it's not his role;
he is a kind of policeman, guaranteeing
your effort. Here, where you enjoy its fruits,
you can regard me as a man."

Terra Amata

From time to time I meet the Kid
roaming from settlement to settlement
with a knife.
“Why not an automatic weapon
like other juvenile killers?”
I ask. His pressured response,
full of rehearsed and bitter private jokes,
conveys little,
but I gather he thought of a knife
at the time of provocation
(where fists were unthinkable, let alone
knives). It must be a knife.
“They got me after school,” he chants,
“I’ll get them after life.”
I remind him we aren’t dead.
He refuses to listen.
Has found no trace of his tormentors
but seems to assume he’ll stumble across them.
Maternal types in the villages, meanwhile,
shelter and feed him.
The outdoor life seems to be doing him good ...
in any case he got away from home.

Occasionally, too, I see the Lad.
Given time, he worked things out.
He divides his time between a gym, clubs,
and auto showrooms.
The last of his cohort to drive ... but
there is no cohort here;
only the memory of one,
and girls, and places to take them.
“All I need, now I’m handsome.”
(All local jocks and studs have been made nerds.)
He boasts about the number
of his conquests, their skills and jealousies;
the fact that they have no alternative
does not strike him as qualifying
his triumph, but as triumph.
He drums his hand on the door
of a Lamborghini,
beside a perfumed shadow, and roars away.

For my part, I work at
whatever the neighborhood Council
suggests. I have no skill
for plumbing or carpentry,
preventative health care, pacifying
three- or inspiring twelve-year-olds,
but after a month or so I pick some up.
Then on to the next.
The point isn't efficiency.
The process of heroic construction
is mostly one of repair.
Our gleaming city
is an occasional trick of light
on greed-exhausted brick,
a heavy evening mood
that is part love but mostly yearning for it.

And other people ...
I try, as I always have,
and succeed!
One who grows faint on scaffolding
will feel my supporting arm,
a crying stranger find a sudden shoulder,
her husband a needed word.
In this world of trolley-cars and kitchens
I cook, and clang the bell
to warn the children playing three blocks ahead.
Through hot or frigid nights
of our regular seasons,
I purvey literature.
But at times, behind eyes
and the mind installed behind them,
I see another mind,
which wants only to serve
something unworthy,
to sink in the despair of television,
and – if it senses
I do not seek release
but have found it – to murder me.

My friends are generally far away
and happy. They write and paint
the works that trickle down.
But some ... well, Richard
decided the time has come
at last to find his bear,

and walked the whole North Woods but failed to do so,
and blames me.

Jim has become as alarmingly young as his women.

Anne has begun to preach
to my good comrades here;
she thinks it's dreadful that they aren't free.
Because she is, they do not hear her.

Beyond the town, between the villages,
the land rises in waves
of mountains and returning trees.
Death too seems more
a matter of space than time, here:
a place, thick-walled and heavy-eaved,
wherein sits the old sage
from old etchings,
who looks by damaged light into a book.
It changes when you approach it.
It contains savage truths.

Zombie Jamboree

1

(see Anthony Burgess, *Enderby*)

After long silence, Enderby's muse
returns. Her dictations,
however, are peculiarly tentative,
soft and self-interrupted,
a babyish scolding.
He struggles, mumbling.

It's his fault. He drove her away
that time she appeared
nude and golden
in his bed in Tangiers, and said,
in her harsh way, "When I give
I give big. Darling." And he
(– you wonder, reading a Brit,
how sex ever arises
beneath that glum impacted wit)

could only visualize,
as if from above, his white pulpy buttocks,
and gibbered "no no no,"

and she, amused, rose
and dressed and, patting
his hand on the way out,
said: "Minor poet."

(It isn't the greatest novel
but it contains the whole point of fiction.)

2

An incredible snafu leaves
Bush completely on his own
one wintry afternoon in Europe.
Back home, heads roll. Back home goes to Def-Con III.
The Premier or Prime Minister or whatever
of Europe stands with Bush on the steps

of his palace and peers,
embarrassed, about, and offers
the use of his own Executive Guard
and limo.

The President shakes him off and decides to walk.

He knows the American Embassy
is just a short distance up
this boulevard. He's pissed
but unafraid. Perhaps
being used to his unobtrusive Secret Service
makes their absence less evident. Or
he draws on his deep personal faith
in Jesus. That's what it is.

He enjoys walking,
the chill air, the weird pompous buildings.
He encounters Europeans. They
wear leather coats and zebra shirts and feathers in their hats,
which conceal implanted antennas.

(When they aren't chattering to each other,
they appear to be talking to themselves.)

They recognize and surround him.

They remonstrate and gesture.

Cheney, back home, is moved to a safe location.

Bush knows what they might want to rag him about –

- Iraq
- the Kyoto Treaty
- Palestinians –

but he doesn't speak European.

Despite their noise they seem to bear
some strange metaphysical weight
that isolates them from each other. Also
they're smoking, which slows them down.
Bush wonders if he's in danger.

The thin lips twist
mirthlessly; he squares his shoulders.
He recalls that he has been born again
and is justified in the Lord. But
the crowd parts, enfeebled
perhaps by that; perhaps
by that metaphysical weight.

The backwash of adrenaline leaves
the President melancholy,
and, nearing the Embassy,
he looks up at the sky –
unsure if the lights he sees
are the white bellies of birds,
the Pleiades, or an airstrike.

It was after the Great Society
 but before the Conservative Revolution.
 If he thought about it at all,
 Nixon's aim was to gut our department
 through overburdening and underfunding –
 taking credit for our benign
 programs while they survived
 and for cutting them when they failed.
 Meanwhile I pretended life was meaningful,
 with an adding machine that took up half my desk.
 In the space that remained, I set up my pad
 and phoned the firms on my roster.
 "Is this Dick Grinder Inc.?" "Yes!"
 "Is this Bert Blender, Financial Officer?" "Yes!!"
 (That plump, delighted voice
 which never asked my name.) "Bert,
 we're calling about the people
 we've sent. How's Lateesha?" "Fine."
 "How is LaTonya doing?" "Not
 so fine ... we had to let her go.
 I'll mail you the paperwork." "What seemed
 to be the problem?"
 "I think she said something about her babies
 who went to live with her cousin,
 but the cousin's boyfriend shot
 her boyfriend, and Mama
 (I'm not sure whose mama) bitch-slapped
 the cousin, and someone ran out of the house,
 and the boyfriend's cousin couldn't
 make bail, and then the plumbing blew up
 because somebody flushed a diaper –" By
 now we were helplessly giggling
 but I said, "Now Bert,
 we need to feel our employers
 understand the needs of our placements."
 "I do! I'm very sympathetic,"
 he cried, and went on to tell
 how he often sat on the stairs
 (which no one used) in his building
 and thought about the Bomb
 and wept, and how he couldn't
 rely on any support,
 not only at the office;

and continued this way for some time.
I doodled and muttered,
“I know you’re trying to run a business,”
and agreed to review LaTonya
at some future date.
Then I finished the form and inserted it
in a binder down the hall.
Whatever became of those binders?
By now, they rest in the landfill
beneath all our cities
with every human sigh.

4

The traffic moves, revealing
what stopped it:
four – now five – police cars
surrounding a nondescript Accord.
Is it drugs? The car
itself? Stolen,
or chased down after speeding?
or something unimaginable ...

The driver invisible,
the cops not yet emerged,
there are only the flashing lights,
the five cars and the one.

They are – here comes the metaphor –
a herd of postgraduates parsing Derrida.

5

As the sun sets over Haight-Ashbury,
Bill and Connie return with munchies.
They shriek their adventures, their near escapes,
as we throw ourselves on the chips.
It takes them a while
to return to our state

of various undress
across the two joined mattresses and floor.
We are all most interested in Connie's
progress, but
she wanders topless to the window
and loses herself in what she sees.
And Sam loses himself
obsessing about which political grouplets
will converge tomorrow on the city
to march against the War.
Some lose themselves in the music,
some in the lights on the ceiling.
I babble about creativity,
always, always about creativity,
the vision I have not found,
the one I imagine I've found ...
And so, another opportunity
for sex until oblivion
is only partly seized.
But Connie does not return
from the window, and, gradually,
I get up to join her.
Beneath the moon, the diner is closed. The dealers
have vanished from the alleys. Even
the mad, discharged soldier
has left our corner.
But the street from end to end is filled
with the grey people of the future.
Both terrible and silly
they make their nothing noises,
back to back and belly to belly.

Clinton at the Tomb of Pessoa

This common sleep of men, the universe.

– Fernando Pessoa

On his way to Berlin
to peddle missiles, and to Moscow
to confront Putin with them, Clinton stops
in Lisbon.
Guterres the Prime Minister and other officials
accompany him to Belém,
whence the great explorers
and the first intercontinental traders
and slavers sailed.
Among the arcades
of the Hieronymite Monastery, in an alcove
in an otherwise smooth wall, the President encounters
something modern:
stacked granite cubes.
Gold letters
on three faces make separate,
signed statements; a fourth offers
another name
and dates. The Prime Minister
murmurs the name; someone explains
the heteronyms. Clinton
doesn't quite get this, but stands
with his head bowed, as at church, anthems,
and cultural events. And for a moment

the President confronts
a slight dapper form,
and a face whose look of alarm
convinces him that, in this limbo,
he won't need
the Secret Service. Introducing himself,
he extends a hand. The ensuing murmur
is decorous, the English excellent.
"I know one poet,"
says the President. "Back in my home state
of Arkansas." To an apologetic, blank
response he states: "It's an agricultural province.
Though since your day
agriculture itself
has become industrialized. Anyway, I've always felt
it must be wonderful to be a poet.

To speak with such emotional honesty.” “My work
wasn’t like that,” says
Pessoa, and explains, briefly,
the heteronyms. Clinton listens
closely, ponders.
“I guess I don’t see
the point,” he says. – “It wasn’t
by choice,” says Pessoa. “It was the only way

I could write.
I presume that in your time
everyone, even the statesman,
thinks, even speaks, as a whole.” – Clinton
grins; asks,
“Well, what did they talk about,
those multiple poets you became? Love,”
he adds, anticipating
the reply. – “One, a classicist,”
Pessoa replies, “invoked abstractions,
the occasional stone negligee, and one,
a vitalist, spilled his vitality
toward the infrequent shopgirl, but neither meant it.”
“Just as well,” says the President,
surprising himself, but thinking None of this
is recorded, and all of it
is deniable; then adding,
“Or tragic, perhaps,” which also surprises him.
Recalling the dates
on the stone, he suggests it was
politics the heteronyms
sang. The thought even
tickles him: one praising Trotsky,
another the local dictator (what was his name) – But

Pessoa says
he was a monarchist,
with little passion to spare
for either the workers’
or human progress, and his mild
oblique stare
discomfits Clinton. The latter realizes
the audience is ending, and asks a perhaps
inevitable question. But the poet
shakes his head: “I lacked
religious faith ...
if there was a Redeemer I missed him.”
“Missed him,” echoes the President, feeling
foolish. – “Where I

am now, where we are sent,
is a receding point
from whose perspective nations
(those constructs, as I called them,
between the physical verities
of individual and species),
and pretensions,
and the distances between selves
and their lies, and between selves
and other selves dwindle,

and all that subsists is the gaze.”

Fred Pollack

Bio: Author of two book-length narrative poems, *The Adventure* (1986) and *Happiness* (1998), both published by Story Line Press. Other poems and essays in *Hudson Review*, *Southern Review*, *Fulcrum*, *Salmagundi*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, *Die Gazette* (Munich), *Representations* and elsewhere. Most recently, Pollack's work has appeared or will shortly appear in *The Hat*, *Orbis* (UK), and several online journals: *Snorkel*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, *Diagram*, *Words-Myth*, *Can We Have Our Ball Back?* and *The New Hampshire Review*. Adjunct professor of creative writing at George Washington University, Washington, DC.