

Roger Craik

IN MEMORY

An office door marked Lewis Fried.
Nothing more.

Behind the door marked Lewis Fried,
a desk, three chairs, all surfaces bare.

Lewis Fried.
Nothing more.

THE “!” EPIDEMIC

Nothing now's
allowed to be anything
unthrilling, mundane, just as it is,
for *he* is here: viz:

!

He's everywhere!
There's no restraining him!!
He goes after everything!!!

Ode to Mrs. Claus

Inflated on the nation's lawns she stands
Wed but unbeatified beside
Her lord's red-robed rotundity. Benign
In tiny spectacles she glows amidst
The chafing antlered parcel-groaning sled,
His welcome-armed huzzahs and ho ho ho
And snow that neither drifts nor blows upon
The arctic wastes of supermarket glass.

Can it be right for man to live alone
Or natural to thrive a bachelor --
His evenings all his own beneath a lamp,
With book and pipe and, later, bath and bed?
America is having none of that,
Still less for him, a present-bearing thief,
Both brave and free, to plunge himself so deep
Into a million chimneys' secret flues
And spangle bounties at the sock-hung hearth
For little girls, and little boys, unless
By matrimony's filament he's bound
To her, whose rosy-bunched pincushion face,
Grandmotherly-indulgent, free from death's
Disfiguring advance, is always there
To smile approval on his toil, and us.

But is this *all* she is, subordinate
To him around whose rubicund physique
Some mystery, however faint, still swirls?
Pronounce his name, in Dutch "San Nicolaas,"
To be the immigrant you never were.
Your saint once lived a persecuted man,
Imprisoned, tortured for belief. And *her*?
Could she have had a name, this Mrs. Claus,
And what, if past she had, was ever hers
Before her married immortality?--
A menstruating goose-girl by a brook

Shadowed by the dark Carpathians
Before the soldiers came? Or, if that fail,
Just call her Jade and have her sliding down
A fireman's pole. Still not convinced? Try this:
"That's her, third from the left, at Bennington,
Graduating class of '21 --
Not brilliant, but capable, at least,
Of seeing something pointed out to her."

Consider creatures as were born in fire
Or ash, the half-lion half-man manticore,
Or else conceived by sun in muddy banks
Or thriving jewel-eyed in the rotting hearts
Of century-old oaks! How quaint these seem,
Consigned to fable, woodcut, analect,
And yet this Mrs. Claus, who year by year
Proclaims the very insecurities
That gave her birth, prodigious stands at ease
As fear and dogma's mismatched masterpiece.