



Heaping Abuse On The Master

Poems by Jon Adams



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Somis, CA 93066, USA. • www.jondude.com • jla@jondude.com

Heaping Abuse On The Master

This chapbook presents poems I wrote from the mid nineteen-seventies until the year I left Long Beach - 2004. They are dated but not arranged chronologically. The title is a line from one of the poems in this book. There are also two essays, one on writing and one about snails.

I heard a critic say that poetry is the ultimate literary form of self absorption. I believe it is more the ultimate form of literary self immolation. The art form requires synthesizing senses, scene, emotion and events. It becomes words internally and it emerges from the soul until it accretes on paper - almost meaningless to readers.

Poetry is very difficult to understand unless one wrote it. The exceptions are the Japanese forms - Haiku and Tanka. These highly structured poems are little lightning flashes of nature, and need no intellectual consideration. They are tiny stamps of beauty on a natural canvas.

Coleridge wrote, "The poet... brings the whole soul of man into activity..." Robert Frost wrote to Louis Untermeyer, "A poem... begins as a lump in the throat... It finds the thought and the thought finds the words." So, I must apologize that I cannot explain it better than those two giants of the form.

The final poem, SOLILOQUY... was a farewell to my home of twenty-three years. I wrote it on the last evening I lived in the house. It is also a goodbye to a woman.

I think it is the best poem I ever wrote. I haven't been able to write one since.

– Jon Adams, December 2004

Dedicated to Sappho
c. 612 B.C.

"Deathless Aphrodite on your rich-wrought throne."

ROAD SCENES I (1991)

Putting his cart before his horse
the old man tempted premonition.

In one hand he grasped the reigns
of futile force played against the wind.

In the other he held a clump
of grass to tempt fate.

A howling wind followed the silent
procession of illusion and failure.

A red sky gathered.

LATITUDES (4/31/91)

Warm permutations
smack my face
from some other clime;
Where fronds stir
and gators croak
and dew drips naturally
So I take my brandy
with branch water
tonight.

INTROSPECTION MUSE (3/13/89)

Consider rowing against sand
arrayed in waves and swells
against your back/and wonder
about going into each day
backwards/in the first place.

BRASS RINGS (5/2/89)

I love this time in Spring.
Watching the garden grow;
you don't have to do anything.
It's bedded, fertilized and trimmed.
Just water it now and then
to spend more time there.

Will I get the new computer today
or tomorrow?

Should we eat the old
asparagus before the new;
or get the spare room cleaned
before the computer comes?

Does the difference really matter?
Or does only the coincidence count?

BIRTHWEEK (5/2/89)

When the date of your celebration
comes around again too soon, you
become wary of steps before you -
weary of steps behind.

Anniversaries, too.

A LINE FROM JOYCE (1993)

"Wavewhite wedded words shimmering on the dim tide." When my muse's granary runs low and words fail effort, I reach for Ulysses and go to original page ten, and begin with "Woodshadows floated silently by through the morning peace . . ." and usually can't read beyond "Wavewhite wedded words shimmering on the dim tide." I put down the well-worn wrinkled pages and wander off to Hibernia for an ale and a hike along the sandstrewn shingle, sniffing at the scent of Buck Mulligan's shaving lather. How can I write another word when that line exists, daring me to get past it?

CONVERSATIONS AT
A PARTY IN GLENDALE (2/1/88)

Was I invited here?

Did you see the Superbowl?

Whose seven thirty-three is that?

(How did I come to this dry stream?

Where are the stepping-over stones?

I live here to grow carrots, ranunculus,

and paintings and haiku and

where the sun is a road sign.

This is another aspect.)

Is this great Brie, or what?

(She brought me to this place

of wool and polyfabric

penguin walking calculators.

Defer, she said. Don't talk too much.

Don't detail them to death.

Nice tie!

(I am entertained when I walk among Melvilles,

vivid minds, splashes of color against rotting;

or when I hear the dance of words

caring about least metaphors, or

tracing alizarin brushstrokes,

but I also enjoy social zoology.)

Trick shoes!

(I take things home in my wordsack,

mileposts of passage and style over substance,

from places where the rough feel of hunger

never transcends wallets, where success

means a new suit.)

Let's go!

(Diogenes will not look here!)

JUSTICES (8/15/88)

The system is the enemy
when it serves only
those who can pay its rate.

Caesar Chavez
lay on his back
weak arm held
against pale face,
listening to visitors.

We will pick it up for you,
the black man said softly.
You can't go on, said the actor.

He stared at them
thankful that they
brought cameras,
rolled his eyes and said,
Justice must be done.

In the land of Milken money
"crime doesn't pay" is bullshit;
ask a lawyer how well it pays.
Up the Barricades!

I am the criminal who pours
catsup on grapes in the Safeway,
plasters stickers on the price tags,
wears the button proudly (HUELGA!),
goes to parties where the deadly fruit
is served, and trash it in the hosts' faces.
Where Chavez fasts
the campesino's children
die in cancer clusters
because when you buy the grapes
you kill them!
Up the Barricades!

Bankrupt viper coils, beneath black robes,
protecting other snakes who rattle cash tails.
Slap a boycott sticker on a market shelf
and go to jail.
Spray carcinogens on grapevines
and go to the bank!
Up the Barricades!

Every fruit they pick is fatal.
Every time I hear "justice"
spoken like a treasured heritage,
I want to reach for my gun,
storm the halls of "Justice"
with my dying brown-eyed army,
and rip her blindfold off.

FINISHED SATURDAY (1991)

Tobacco & brandy,
lawnchair and shade,
digging done and
seeds planted,
water hissing from
beyond the neighbor's fence
announce the day is finished.

Frozen deeds,
random thoughts,
empty buckets and
stained knees,
a day's last late honeybee
tells me it's time to go in.

COMING DOWNPOUR (3/13/89)

Hollow thumps of thunder
echo over distant horizon
at once with light's flashes.

Pure ozone streams about me
here in the safety of concrete
and wooden porch roof.

This patter, patter will rise
to crush the grass, bend the limb
and wash the paved place near

where I sit noticing only
silence, like the thunder
and the patter, patter.

WOODCHOPPING (3/13/89)

Bring me tea
and branches!

Feel how well this blade cuts
honed by my own hand.

Trust the bark to cling
as long as it is allowed.

Is there no mercy
for old giants,

or, must we kindle their bones
for our own warmth?

Even this tea was born
from the death of promise.

What was the instrument that
struck down this giant...

The blade, the sharpening file,
the thirst?

GERMINAL POEM (10/15/88)

October sun burns the raspberry leaves.
Bottom light pours over the spent Geranium.
The angle grows shallow in the flower beds.
I turn the soil carefully looking for bulbs.
Next Spring is down here.

SEMINAL POEM (4/3/91)

Hungry; Eat.
Tired; Sleep.
Curious; Ignore it!

The old Zen Roshi
lay on a hard board,
watching a fly
land on his nose.

Eyes crossed,
back howling in pain,
he faked disinterest
and the insect flew away.

The lesson is
there is no lesson.

Or, the lesson is
you can catch a fly
with a poem.

SQUARING OFF WITH POLITICAL CORRECTNESS:

An Examination of Cultural Language Revisionism
and a Personal Response (1993)

Milan Kundera is perhaps the most important existential writer and novelist to be published in the second half of the twentieth century. Aside from being the literary descendant of Broch, Musil and Kafka, he also knows how to invent titles. The author of "Life is Elsewhere," "The Book of Laughter and Forgetting," and "The Unbearable Lightness of Being," among others, has written "Once upon a time I too thought that the future was the only competent judge of our works and actions. Later on I understood that chasing after the future is the worst conformism of all." In his book of speeches and essays titled "The Art of the Novel," Kundera traces the development and the decline of the novel from the beginning of the "Modern Era" (a euphemism for the last four centuries of European culture). In the chapter entitled "The Depreciated Legacy of Cervantes," he writes about a paradox: "The Modern Era has nurtured a dream in which mankind, divided into its separate civilizations, would someday come together in unity and everlasting peace. Today, the history of the planet has finally become one indivisible whole, but it is war, ambulant and everlasting war, that embodies and guarantees this long-desired unity of mankind. Unity of mankind means: No escape for anyone anywhere."

Against such "terminal paradoxes" as this, Kundera warns of the disappearance of the novel as an art form, preceded by what he calls "the process of dizzying reduction" that reduces our lives to "social functions" and our history to "small sets of

events that are themselves reduced to a tendentious interpretation." He asks: "if the novel's *raison d'être* is to keep "the world of life" (Husserl) under a permanent light and to protect us from "the forgetting of being," is it not more than ever necessary today that the novel should exist?" Developing this, Kundera concludes: "I know that the novel cannot live in peace with the spirit of our time: if it is to go on discovering the undiscovered, to go on "progressing" as novel, it can do so only against the progress of the world."

Milan Kundera, recognized as a powerful force in literature and point-man for the existential movement in philosophy, lives in Paris. From his domicile in the balliwick of French Deconstructionism, the other and diametrically opposed contemporary movement in philosophy, the Czech emigre novelist must feel as I do. I've become a lyrical linguasaur surrounded by double-talking New Age, newspeak multiculturalists.

I have committed my literary direction toward writing *as I see my writing must be accomplished*. Even if I have no audience other than myself, it is the path I choose. My work will not bend to 'political correctness,' formula or marketability. My creative conscience cannot allow it.

THIS & THAT (3/13/89)

I.

There's a thin line between
This and That.
This is my head
and That's my hat.

II.

There's a really thin line between
This and That.
This is my hand
and That's a cat.

RYEGRASS, A MASK, FLAVOR (2/88, Three Haiku)

Severed breaths of cat
crouching under wavy grasses,
prepared to spring – Butterfly!

Beard clings hopefully
to my naked countenance –
Grass on a smooth rock!

Touch the warm wind with
the tastebuds on my forehead –
The breeze tastes mindless!

ON THE AMARYLLIS GROUND (3/13/89)

On the amaryllis ground
lay the splintered shells
of ancient snails, ground away by
tools and weather's bleach.

The greenest place around.
Where grow the Amaryllis bells?
In soils enriched by old dry
shells next to each.

LESSON I (8/20/92)

Buddha was reproached
by a wavering student
heaping abuse on the master.

"Hold!" the pure one said.

"If you offered a gift
to another man, and
if the other man refused,
to whom would the gift belong?"

"To the giver," answered the student.

"Keep your abuse," said Buddha.

"Enjoy it yourself."

EYE IN GOLD (9/16/88)

I require you in a view
walking along
this edge between
firm sands &
endless ocean

to be there
to be holding your
fingers to your mouth
as if trying to hide

from me? From what
harridan or echo?
I will paint you thus.

Your eye in gold
perfect hair 'cross
perfect cheek,
slight lowering of
your face against
the bright backdrop
of earnest hopes;

Silent humming
your song heard
and understood
deep in my own eye.

Eye in gold,
more than known colors.

Eye in gold,
I have painted you thus.

IDEAS (2004)

It is better
to plant your seeds
in the minds of men
than to ejaculate them
on the wind.

5 HAIKU (1990)

Springing many ways,
the antelope spirit moves
-so capriciously!

A tree cannot grow
against its grain. But see!
It grows against all winds!

Oh! Silent morning.
How sparrows break the misty
night's embrace. With song!

Chirrup! Chirrup! What
do they sing, these tiny birds,
that signals morning?

Ah. Ah! The eagle
dips her wing to say, "I know,"
but soars in silence!

FRUIT (2004)

Do not deny your tongue
the sharp quality of new apples
even in your fullest day.

The master craftsman
nearly always holds new tools
in careful appreciation.

But never let the lasting raisin
out of your arm's reach.

Its taste may bland, but
it will outlive tomorrow's peach.

NAKED KARMA (2000)

If my chest burst
suddenly with hair,
wouldn't you miss
my baby's ass skin?

COYOTE I (2004)

The hum of many years
sounds now to my unforgiving ear.

New day.

Breakfast in a sold kitchen,
accompanied by birdsong,
awaiting the arrival of no one.

Mind's ear is always tuned
to birds that sing of
tomorrow, carefully reminding
me of today's imperative.

A languor falls aside
with empty eggshells.
Light fills the concrete land.
Smiles regain my countenance.
All expands with motor noise.
I gaze again at another horizon.

SURPRISES (1982)

Not your father;
I want to be
your autumn sky,
a clear umbrella,
held yet hard to imagine.
Go easy when you feel
like treating me
to a surprise.

PEOPLE EAT THESE THINGS? (1997)

Morning, March twenty-second, the second full day of Spring, I go out to smell the first roses. What a glorious morning. The sun is out and tugging at the seedlings. I'd better get some garden work done.

I decide to check the seed flats which I keep alongside the southern side of the house. Last January I built a temporary shelf along the stucco wall. I made it from cedar fence boards and some rusty wire racks that used to hold mugs in a restaurant dishwasher. That way I could be sure no snails would get into the sweet green shoots while they struggled up from the potting soil in my plastic packs.

I walk around the corner and head for my darling pepper plants. Yesterday, I counted two shoots per pocket, each about an inch-high. I have Big Berthas, Ivory Hybrid and Purple Hybrids. That's six to twelve plants of each. It's going to be a task finding room to stick them in the garden, what with the abundance of marigolds, zinnias and snow peas I already have growing. Then there's the tomatoes, the radishes and the leaf lettuce! Maybe the radishes will be devoured at our table by the time I have to transplant the peppers.

I stop at the spot and look at my tiny pepper shoots. My eyes fall on barren soil, punctuated by the tiny stumps of what were yesterday's green hope. Gone!

Frantically, I lift the plastic trays, searching along the sides and bottoms for the culprits. No snails! I tear at the boxes, flats and water-holding trays, spilling liquid garden gravy on my clean jeans. My shoes runneth over with muck and smelly stuff. Yuck! On the back of a tray I find the solitary snail!

Our back yard is a little green paradise. It is about

the only thing left that makes it worth remaining in the southland we once loved and thrived in. Fenced away from the real world out there where you can get mugged at your local ATM or shot at for picking your nose on the freeway, the garden yard is our last refuge from the madness. Around Easter, the amaryllis bulbs burst out in radii of white and apple blossom colors, with giant flower trumpets the size of basketballs. There are over three hundred bulbs back there, and they all produce each spring. My cutting-back begins in November. By Christmas I have got to the roses, the bulbs beds are fertilized and the annual beds are dug, composted and ready for the spring planting. In January, I begin the seed work. My many rows of flats and recycled plastic six-packs are filled with potting mix and planted. After watering them in, I line them up and start spreading snail control powder everywhere I can.

Snails (terrestrial gastropod mollusks, esp. those of the family Helicidae, having a spiral shell, as *Helix pomatia*, an edible European species, and including the shell-less slug, *Limax maximus* . . .), sometimes called slow and lazy creatures, are actually critters of nocturnal habit with ravenous appetites and accelerated reproductive programs. If not controlled, snails and slugs will overwhelm any garden. That's a fact. They eat when you are in the house watching N.Y.P.D. Blue, paying your bills or sound asleep. That makes them nearly invisible, because by the time you arrive where they had dinner, they've meandered down a hole or are craftily concealed under a felicia Marguerite. As do many southern California gardeners, I employ ample quantities of commercial boxed snail killer. It's made of pulverized mica and other stuff that gets into the snail when it is forced to crawl on its belly-foot (gastropod) over the stuff.

This material is ingested by the snail and it paralyzes the vermin. When the sun comes out, the snail bubbles, bakes, and fries to death in the heat. This method is preferable to slaughtering the snail either by stepping on it and having to scrape off your shoe - or the tried and true fastball into the fence method (The latter doesn't work if you don't get a clean hard toss). Besides, Buddha, whose all-seeing figure squats between my New Zealand flax and the English lavender, frowns on murdering anything, including the lowly snail.

When Long Beach started its incomplete compulsory recycling program (The city won't take organic wastes such as tree clippings, logs or leaves. These items are very difficult to compost.) I read the information mailing to see if they would take snails. I couldn't find anything about them, but I have dispatched many plastic bags of the crawlies in that ugly trash can with wheels.

I stand in awe that one tiny mollusk, retracted now into its Winnebago, could wreak such havoc in my pepper pots overnight. It consumed sixteen starts in one meal! I am livid!

Running now, I go for the red and yellow cardboard box of poison. I take it to the seed flats and cover the soil of every tray, the cedar boards, the tray bottoms, and for good measure, the ground beneath the whole shebang. I empty the box.

Next, I replant the peppers. In a week or two I should have replacements stretching for the sun. I run around to the Amaryllis, now sporting two-foot high spears ready to burst into flower. Several had been nibbled, but none is seriously damaged. I pick through the leaves and find twelve more culprits. They survived my week-ago dusting. They all go onto the sunniest spot in the lawn, cooking territory.

I decide to get more powder and dust the bulb beds again. My larder is empty. I used it all. I must buy more.

Then I check the petunias. I previously dusted little circles of the stuff around each plant. I pick up forty more snails, eye a spot along the fence and after a quick glance at Buddha deposit them on the lawn. From the marigolds I get seventeen more. I find twenty eight around the new herb plants in front of my rose beds. My search complete, the spot on the grass resembles the remains of a fine French meal, with the shells of gastropods littered and bubbling in the bright sunlight. PEOPLE EAT THESE THINGS?

At the store, the checkout lady rings up my total. "That's a lot of snail killer! Should last you all year."

"I intend to use it all today," I say, fumbling for another quarter.

"You must be overrun."

"Not for long."

The shoppers behind me smile. They know, I can tell. Their shopping carts are filled with red and yellow cardboard boxes. They, too, look as if they are in a hurry to get home.

I unload my car and head to the rhubarb. My glorious three plants had been attacked in my absence - IN BROAD DAYLIGHT! Still in the shade, the plants attracted seven snails that morning.

Total war! Buddha smiles, reminding me that it is not correct to pitch his friends against wood. I break my windup and step off the mound, tossing them on the smelly pile. I tear open the first box and get on with the dusting. It takes me over an hour to complete. When I am done, only one box remains.

I stand in the middle of the lawn and consider the scene. A cream film nearly covers the soil, everywhere. My Amaryllis leaves are the color of lace. The

flies buzz near my feet, seeking snail flesh. Buddha grins from his shady place. I look at the Petunias near his bare feet. They are in shambles! The varmints trashed his garden, too! He gives me a ceramic smile, knowing all, and yet nothing. I am the one whose task it is to make the garden survive, not the stone Absolute. Enlightenment! I run into the house.

The brown paper bag fits right over his head. Buddha's bare toes are all I can see. I quickly pluck the last snails from the ruined petunias and add them to the litter on the grass. Then, I perform a victory dance on the spot, smashing them into a gooey paste, ignoring the moral and philosophical consequences. I will not allow them to destroy this last refuge! I will have flowers to smell, lettuce to dine upon! I will not surrender!

MY EPITAPH (1984)

Make much of me!
This is only temporal
and may soon fail.

A careful touch
have I, you said.
But does it reveal
my trembling hand?

So travel my way
for a while,
know well my
sea-dark wine.
Inhabit my
sea-going spirit!

FROM A BROWN PAPER BAG (1994)

The vagaries of pleasure
led me to believe my lifeline
ran up to my elbow, until
I noticed it was just
a hardening of arteries.

FLIER (1976)

My body healed
your many wounds.

I walked away for years
and every time now,
I look up expecting
to see you,

and there are only
eagles in high places.

ADDENDUM (1976)

and if I thought
for a minute
you were trying
to get to me,
I would have given
you all the time
in the world.

SHADOWS (2002)

Standing in the lawn
some fluffy shadows
scudding under foot.

Nothing encumbers this
but a solitary dragonfly
becoming a cloud
to tinier beings.

FAMILY GATHERING (1989)

In satin flowered room
great with cards and whisper,
sympathy and love;
thus, uncle.

My coat too bulky for the day,
I stood smoking in the foyer,
waiting to carry him down
where even he passed
the last time we gathered here.

My mother was in L.A.
I told my aunt she couldn't make it.
We then went out
to the soft cool earth
that tenderly takes our dead.

TRACKING (1976)

While commending me
for telling you
I loved you,
you chastised me
for hiding so long.
But does the lion
tell the antelope?

SECOND TRY (1982)

Chasing all those dreams
sleepy pleasures of my own...
I grabbed once for
a wild and sandy mushroom
and came up with soft stained hands.
"Tomorrow," I said,
and walked away
with boardwalk visions
of carnival life.

3.15.75

the poet is
man of few words,
& in most cases
strictly to himself.

but words pulled
from perfect memory
can be forced at
high rate of speed
through
 electric tunnels
burning
 holes in
steel.

TOYMAKER'S NOTE (1989)

Another surprise!
When I stick wet boots
into fire -
steam makes smoke rings!

FOR YOU, TOO (1976)

I wish it well
this thing;
to go out among mountains
of new spirit for
many fruitful seasons.
If it were only up to me.

A Careful man
even sometimes rushes
headlong at his life,
to trip on his doorstep.

Talk well, tongue,
words of life and death.
Talk well of how
we've made
the choice at last.
And mention all of this
with certain breath:
The future's prologue,
just as well as past!

So it is up to me,
that only by the fact of roads
does place exist.
Only by the fact of clocks
do years construct the future.

WHITE (1976)

Snow squirrels leaving
tiny tracks where soon the wind
will dust them over.

Snowy birds come north
in this season, March wind from
south, her warming breath

pulls buds from frozen
twigs, and lighting on the pond
I see dragonflies,

little helicopters
with tiger-striped fuselage.
Where do you fly from?

RELIQUARY (1994)

From the curb, half left half right,
cemetery and city split this horizon.

Look down the hill
at rows of granite and limestone,
perfect harmony, weathered,
on the cusp of earth and sky.
Light and dark, up and down,
steel and glass, city and tombs,
so perfectly obvious!

Spread me along
this sheer divide
between heaven and earth.
Don't lose me at sea!
Don't cover me!
Let the ground be my back,
the sun find my face
where I will imagine
the stones in a line,
the city, the graves.

Spread me along
this fine distinction
between heaven and earth.
The shade of summer
and spring downpours
will be my clocks.
The black of winter night
and mold of autumn
will grace my resting place.

I must be on this edge,
invisible ashes,
witness to all these things.

LANDING (10/1/96)

Palm Springs, San Jacinto's green shadow,
flickers under the wing
and I see the washboard ridges of Route Sixty.
White caps point from Mount Gorgonio
to the haze of rumored desert.
The great vessel lowers
and we glide on the promise of electric angels,
into the shifting maze of cities
clustered so improbably here.
I see winking lanterns, square perfection,
capillaries of headlights,
through holes of orange flint
signalling, "I am here. I am here."
The human cargo rustles awake,
offers its cups and peanut wrappers.
Fasten your seatbelts, please.
And we all gaze down on heaven,
renewed that it has waited for us.
One minute and there's the river.
Oh, there's my bank, and isn't that our street?
Over the four-oh-five and there's the runway.
Welcome to God's Country.
Watch your step, please.

OCTOBER HAIKU (10/15/88)

Gray cat curls around
a rose bush's trunk, sleeping.
-The claws have thorns!

ROSE WINTER HAIKU (2/88)

Pruned for better growth
and old wood thrown in a heap –
these roses will thrive!

SOLILOQUY AT A TWO-WAY MIRROR (2004)

I.

This Atlantis
beneath the pond where only turtle necks
break the surface,
this invisible heavy place must have an ear.
Once again, then.

II.

How is it that we pluck roses
worshipping their beauty only
as we mourn their deaths?
Only after life is snipped away
do we delight in its fragrances.
How is it then that love should be
plucking the rose, felt after
more than before.

III.

Even in this shallow evening, you!
This empty place lies in repose,
as if I had turned it away, too.
Subdued and hungry,
it's hard to feel you here
from miles of tiny magnets away.

IV.

You said you need to be alone
for some time and how I know you
have been for some time.

You said it's not an easy thing to do
and I am here again at the pond
of old reflections, longing for
something in its two-way mirror,
waiting for your warm wind
and once welcoming ear
to let me mouth better rhyme.

V.

In hard days when all things
were cast aside for purpose,
the heart slowed intentionally.
So many weights could break it.
I begged you to slow yours
and match my forlorn pace.
You stood a bit away.
When I reached the bottom,
you were gone.

VI.

Light is surfacing.
I am going.

You were the rose.