JUST LET ME SAY THIS ABOUT *JUST LET ME SAY THIS ABOUT THAT*

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A COMPLEX echo alerts us to the ambitions of John Bricuth's new poem-as-press conference, *Just Let Me Say This About That*, right from the start:

> *Butt ache and backache back up and the great*
> *Rent in the great veil rising at an annual rate*
> *Of ten percent, a short fall in the long term,*
>
> *A headlock in the third fall from the huge*
> *Shoes of the dead, sharp bursitis and the shopping mall,*
> *Some say, have you stumped. Sir, a comment?*[1]

The piling up of phrases, all the talk about falls, and then at last the postponed plea for a good word: it is a send up of the opening of *Paradise Lost*, which begins "Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit / Of that forbidden tree" and winds its way over as many lines of suspended syntax to the invocation "Sing, heavenly muse. . . ." John Milton had the audacity to write dialogue for God (or at least petition his muse for it), but His lines make up only a small portion of the total epic. Bricuth's all-purpose authority figure—be he president, analyst, big brother, or deity—takes the lion's share of the poem for himself, threatening, teasing, belittling, and now and then solacing his three questioners as they beg him for help making sense of their lives. The lines above are spoken by Mr. Bird, who joins Mr. Fox and Mr. Fish in the miniature press corps that gives the man they call "Sir" his occasion. The poem's two thousand and seventy-six lines consist solely of the exchanges between them, with the questions in italics and the answers in regular type. The names give it the feel of universal allegory; the context, however, filled with Pontiacs and brutal cops

[1] John Bricuth, *Just Let Me Say This About That* (Woodstock, NY, 1998), p. 9. Subsequent references to the poem will be given by page number in parentheses in the text.

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and song lyrics like DO-RON-DEE-RON-DEE, is unmistakably American. Indeed the promise of democracy is the necessary, heartbreaking subtext for its questions about what presidents (and gods) need from the people who need them, and what they will do to get it. Bricuth—whose real name is John Irwin, a professor of American literature at Johns Hopkins—attacks these questions by creating an enormous storytelling ego, whose recollections rummage freely through the latter half of our century. His creation stands up in a characteristically modern forum to justify his ways to men.

Above all this poem is about a voice, and it's worth getting an ear for its dialect before going any farther. In the following lines Sir—I will call him what his questioners call him—addresses Mr. Fox's anxious plea, "*Confused, heartsick, afraid, we think if you / Don't know or dare not tell the truth, then who?*"

> That's right, Fox, put me on the spot.
> So it's the truth you want. Hell, here I thought
> It's Bird and Fox just asking a lot of questions.
>
> Try this then. The truth is almost from
> The first I've envied animals their furred
> Grace and feet inset with soft segmented
>
> Pads of dark leather to creep and stalk,
> Link that with this hanker I have to be
> Some old fart free most afternoons, then just
>
> Nod if you've the slightest inkling what
> I mean. Let me put it to you in an image—
> You know how times you're set to clean your room,
>
> Or desk, and find you need a second desk in your
> Room because each thing is there in its own
> Place and there's no room left on your desk,
>
> In much that way life shows us what we want's
> Another, Fox, to get the first one straight,
> Then makes us see that's just what we won't get. (11-12)

At the start the reply is sarcastic, aggressive, with a hint of the fondness for slang and tough talk that carries him away later in the poem. But in a blink he is off on a reverie of animal life, absorbed first in the redemptive detail of segmented pads, then the escapism of "creep," the dim menace of

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"stalk." The sarcasm returns, turned lightly against himself as an old fart, until the condescension of "slightest inkling" abruptly withdraws the invitation to laugh along. Finally he offers up the homely image of the desk. Its lesson sneaks up from behind the innocuous furniture of the metaphor, and the question is left open whether that hard last line reflects his despair, his listeners' sad lot, or both. The real achievement here—Sir's and the poem's—is the volatility of the tone. He speaks throughout in improbably long sentences, buoyed by resourceful enjambment and the punctuation of the stanza breaks.[2] Few of these garrulous periods are without several shades of threat and comfort. The rapid oscillation is his art as a rhetorician, a game played as much with himself as with his listeners. And it is a game he plays compulsively: even here at the beginning of the poem, in such moments as the self-rallying of "Try this then," his virtuosity is shadowed by the threat of boredom.

Sir works in a number of literary modes, including lyric idyll and Maoist aphorism, but the book is subtitled "A Narrative Poem" and it is as a storyteller that he is most powerful. Some of the stories are brief: a high school hockey game close-fought to the end when there's "No great play kept back to throw against them, bone- / Tired behind the eyes, with that helpless trembling / Down your legs' back" (26). Others go on for pages, as when he describes the bum he calls Crapsack and his encounter with the impervious blonde who sweeps him aside in the subway, leaving him with "The crazy rage striking in all directions / To find itself because the pain's close / And the cause is out of reach" (37). There's a theme here, as Sir admits:

> What can I say?
> It's mainly the way I am? It's . . . more the way
>
> Things are? But then folks claim, the way I am
> *Is* the way things are. And what can I add
> To that? Say when the kidding starts, I just
>
> Cut loose, and kids get knocked off stoops as in
> Some sudden drive-by telling? (89-90)

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[2] Bricuth's metrical control is considerable: for example, note how the two weak syllables at the end of the line that begins "Or desk" bump up against the sharp enjambment and strong stress at the beginning of the next, making it feel crammed and rushed; another strong enjambment hard on its heels, once again separating an adjective and its noun, keeps things off balance, an organizational panic within the pentameter.

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Someone always gets hurt in Sir's stories. We usually think of anecdotes as a way of making something, however small, out of fate; here Sir reveals the relation to be grimly reversed, admitting that a good anecdote is worth (at least to him) whatever hopes are dashed or lives lost to make it work. The most harrowing tale of all is the one he invents to explain Fish's slide into indigence. In the telling—though the questioner seems innocent of all that is ascribed to him, and protests the identification—Fish becomes a working man with a bad back, suffocated by his family, sustained by tinkering with his car and sometimes by too many beers. One night before Christmas he drives straight from the bar to pick up his kids at school, and just as their sweet singing in the back seat starts to turn his heart, he loses control on the icy road and sends them over an embankment into a frozen pond. The combination of awful detail, deep sympathy, and rhetorical relish with which Sir improvises the children's death is almost unbearable—not least because his gift for realizing anguish does nothing to temper his tragedian's heart.

Almost all of the stories are about this kind of failure: best intentions, bad breaks, and ultimate despair. Everybody is vulnerable to a good decline-and-fall narrative. Late in the poem Sir summarizes the point he has been trying to make:

> . . . the self, once thrown up as a platform
>
> For high dreams, turns out to be a flop,
> Dissolved by death, leaking sawdust from
> Its seams in sleep, without a stable here
>
> And now, let alone a here to come,
> It can't fulfill a narrative's big shoes . . . (95)

The self is too fragile even to tell a real story about; or perhaps the only real stories are about its loss. At any rate it is a bad place to rest your hopes. Fish, Fox, and Bird don't have many illusions about this, but they still beg for some hint of sympathy: as Fox says, "what's wanted here's / The sense exceptions will be made" (89). But Sir is systematic in dismantling the idea that the emptiness of self can be redeemed by another chance. Having warned them that there is no second desk in which to achieve the order impossible in the first, he goes on to play countless variations on this

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lesson: however little they have, that's all they get. His interest, almost experimental, is in seeing what they make of life when they are forced to confront it on its own terms, when they know they are in it for good. "Yet isn't that the point— / That life, like that odd animal the universe, / Seems to be a thing with no outside, / A blind curve whose elbow holds us all?" (28). He also knows that by forbidding them any dreams beyond the scope of his own story-making, he keeps them coming back for what becomes their only hope, an arbitrary act of his unpredictable grace.

This skepticism, and worse, sarcasm, about self and heaven represent a broad assault on the consolations of philosophy. Nor does Sir neglect more homely and intimate sources of solace, particularly pets and children. We have seen that he is capable of tenderness and even envy toward animals. He is susceptible to the purity of their affection, a simplicity that frees him from his reflex of contempt: "Mostly it's the gaze breaks / Your heart, that mute devotion struggling to say / How we're their all in all" (68). Two pages later he admits a larger meaning to this fondness: "a dog / Or cat's sweet single-hearted love of its / Own master seems to mirror in reverse / What we expect from gods" (70). Sir is, after all, speaking to Messrs. Bird, Fox, and Fish, men he wishes—at times—might be more like the animals they are named for. He takes pleasure in ventriloquizing the innocence they have lost, or never had: "'Are you sad? / That's no good. I can help. Can't I help?' / That's just the way they talk, Bird, like the simple, / Gentle souls they are" (69). What is so unsettling here is the nature of the comfort he seeks from pets, mixing the pleasures of mastery with a deep dependence on their resilient servitude. In their devotion they are mirrors of what we want from gods; yet no one is farther from their purely loving, do-anything-for-you language than Sir himself. The dream of such a symmetry is a dramatic evasion of the responsibilities that any pet owner, to say nothing of deity, takes on in caring for something weaker than himself.

If Sir likes to think he has a feel for animal innocence, his engagement with childhood is still stronger, and more complex. He is terribly sensitive to the child's vulnerability in family politics, the subtle gradations of parental preference and "that deep gut-wrenching / Elevator free fall children feel / When families start to fight" (56). No one has brought the

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desperate stakes of middle-class Christmas gift-exchange into poetry so plainly and painfully before. But as with animals and their owners, the other side of the child's dependence is the need parents have for their children. Just before Fish loses control of the car, he recognizes that "he's had angels in his house / For many years, close watchers set to see / He makes it through a dangerous time, children / Sent to lead him home when he gets lost" (64). This is a lot to ask of the kids, who are still singing "In soft voices so's not to set Dad off" (63). The consistency with which parents nonetheless do ask for such help, even redemption, is precisely why Sir kills the vessels of their hope. Children, he later explains, are yet another version of that second desk, the other life through which our own might be redeemed. "You're folks who never face the hard scrabble / Of your lots until I take the children, / Much less, conceive the self's deep isolation" (92), he tells the three. The solace parents take from them makes them his most formidable rivals, a dangerous position in a poem so full of drive-by tellings.

This dream of a mirroring love is most fully developed when Sir tells the story of the little girl Amy searching for her lost dog Piper. Preoccupations with pets and children converge as he describes how,

> Standing at my window one blue winter
> Afternoon, watching snowflakes fall
> And dusk come on, I heard the little girl
>
> Named Amy down the block, barely six
> And crying now because her spaniel puppy'd
> Slipped out of the yard that noon (a thing
>
> As blonde as she and just as innocent of
> The world) to leave her kicking down the alley
> Through the snow in rubber boots and hooded
>
> Yellow slicker calling "Piper! Piper!" (71)

Amy is a perfect innocent, whose search should convince us, if anything can, that "No dog's so lost an innocent loving heart / Can't find him out at last and bring him home" (72–73). The hand of allegory falls lightly on the reader's shoulder: Amy is *amor*, the power of love. But the dog's name too has a role to play. If we think of this little drama as a song of innocence (and Sir does use the word repeatedly), we will hear the child in the first

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of Blake's lyrics calling out to the piper, who pipes songs that transport him from laughter to tears:

> Pipe a song about a lamb;
> So I piped with merry chear,
> Piper pipe that song again—
> So I piped, he wept to hear.[3]

This is the power Sir covets, raising his listeners up and casting them down. To follow the allusion is to see that Amy's cries point in two directions: toward the lost dog, and toward the piper, some adult or higher power who might be trusted to return all to laughter. Sir may well hear her call in this way, for his feeling for her pain seems to implicate his own uncertain powers: "our first failure caring for a thing / Weaker than ourselves who trusts us wholly / Still strikes us like a thunderbolt" (71-72). There is the shadow here of an old failure to help where help was needed, and a reproach from Blake's piper, who ends his lyric with "happy songs / Every child may joy to hear." Still, Sir's crueler self has the last word, or rather withholds the last word: after promising so much for the power of Amy's innocent devotion, he never finishes the story, and the dog stays lost.

If Sir does look back here to a scene of ancient failure, it is one of many moments that suggest he has a past. In one sense this is obvious: he is full of stories about his days in the navy, growing up in a college town, or the music of his youth. But there are also periodic suggestions that his past haunts him, and that his tale-telling and bullying worry old wounds. He is frank enough about his own unsteady hopes and adolescent embarrassments; the most surprising admission comes when he is hashing out the injustices of Christmas. "Because you know, Fish," he says, "For reasons I could never comprehend / Daddy always liked you better"; the thought of that unfairness "still makes me mad / Enough to spit" (56). In electing a president we are apt to flatter ourselves that we are engaged in a special exercise of reason, and we expect the man we choose to embody the best self we project for that occasion. Politicians are supposed to rise above the mixed moral territory of our resentments and petty grudges (however much we may relish occasions when they don't). But for a

[3] William Blake, *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Garden City, 1965), p. 7.

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moment Sir's persecution of Fish is not just a cruelly arbitrary lesson in life's hardships—that would be bad enough—but a countermove in an old family game that he can't quit playing. Whatever the true nature of the office he holds, he is using it to settle old scores, and the poem's already fraught quartet is drawn into the vortex of family.

If this is unsettling politically, it is that much more so for the poem's theology. The notion that God is compulsively repeating his old injuries makes him too much like us to have the power we wanted him to have. And for that matter, if he is Fish's brother, who could his father be? Have we been knocking on the wrong door? Fish turns out to offer a curious answer to this question. In an earlier aside Sir admonishes him, "Fish, you've had a taste for the dramatic / Ever since that trick with your initials / And the multiplying act" (24). Fish and multiplying—the lines tease us with the miracle of the loaves and fishes. That would make the trick with the initials the early Christian formula *Iesu Christe Theou Uios Soter* (Jesus Christ Son of God and Savior), or *ICHTHUS* (fish). Other moments bolster this momentary identification: his suffering in the story told at his expense, and his insistence on the dignity of being "*kindly, common, mortal man*" (79). Could Fish be Christ? If so, and if we accept *Paradise Lost* as a loose frame for the poem, then Sir as the slighted brother must be Milton's Satan, displaced son and ur-politician.

This assumption illuminates many odd corners of the story. Sir's first proclamation is the chastened maxim, "Ambition in a young man is a terrible thing" (9). Near the end of the poem he laments losing the great war, then consoles himself that "Each of us preserves inside a special / Time and place where we've known peace" (101)—as Satan, having lost the War in Heaven, tells himself "The mind is its own place. . . ."[4] Failure strikes him "like a thunderbolt" (72). And the persecution of Fish seems calculated to violate all of Christ's promises, taking the children and mocking his powerlessness to bring them back. If God is dead in twentieth-century America, Satan has stepped into the empty office, or been elected to it. Without patronage Christ has meanwhile slipped back into the

[4] John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 1.254, in *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York, 1957), p. 217.

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amnesiac ranks of the citizenry. What is poignant about this tentative scenario is the hint in the Amy story, and in Sir's wide sympathies generally, that there was a time when he was emboldened by his new latitude to try his hand at the good works from which he was barred so long ago. But if the outcome of the story is any indication, this doesn't seem to have worked out, whether for want of will or power, and his overriding motive remains that old sense of injured merit, the original grudge.

For all the odd bits of evidence scattered through the poem—and there are more for the finding—we learn something important about its procedure in recognizing the limits of the identification. If there are moments when it is tempting to call Sir "Satan," there are others when he looks like a petulant Job, wringing sympathy from his three comforters (in an especially insulting digression he tries to pass the Job story off as a novelty by renaming the main character Joe). For that matter, he also gathers together the quirks of a number of recent presidents. "Just let me say this about that" is a Kennedy tic; his childhood dog Chess recalls Nixon's Checkers. Carter and Clinton surface in some of the more embarrassingly down-home lines. Above all there is FDR, whose picture, with three scribbling attendants, fronts the book's dust jacket. (Roosevelt was a master of the press conference: he called his reporters his "family," and kept them loyal by a mix of flattering off-the-record comments and threats that included a dunce stool in the corner of the room.) These are among the many temptations to the epiphany, "Ah, so Sir is really *X*!" And indeed the poem's flirtations with allegory, its symbolic names and traffic in the oldest stories, lend it reach and *gravitas*. Yet all of these identifications, even the deep connection to Milton, are undercut by inconsistency and the sheer proliferation of other possibilities. It is the nature of allegory as a mode to point outward, to locate the fiction's meaning in the real world. Everything in *Just Let Me Say This About That* collapses inward toward its egomaniac host: allegory is constantly, and pointedly, short-circuited. This disjunctive relation to the America the poem anatomizes implies not so much that the country can explain Sir, as the reverse— whether he is its creator or an encyclopedia of its pathologies.

This is to say that for all Sir's assault on the consolations of the self, his own personality is enormous, inescapable. There are periodic indications of how closely he watches the little audience from which his enormous

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needs must be met: "Fish, / You have this funny look" (39) and "Bird, you're troubled. There's a question in your eyes" (52), he frets in two of many such asides. He is vulnerable in every direction. If Fish, Fox, and Bird are too docile, he grows bored and self-pitying: "No, and never mind I have my sorrows too" (32). If he gets the panicky, abject reaction he seeks, he has to press his outrageous inventions that much further to get it again. There is an Iago-like sense of desperation to keep the game going.[5] As the poem continues, this yields increasingly personal revelations, stories about the golden autumns of his youth or his years working in a missile silo ("it took another / Decade, once that tour was up, to get / My full digestion back to where, come midnight, / I could eat an onion sandwich and still / Expect to sleep" [111]). The most excruciating reminiscences have to do with his evidently fragile aspirations as a singer. These are in some ways the most stylistically courageous episodes in the poem, if only because they reach so deep into the soup of popular culture and adolescent (or arrested adolescent) agony. They dare the reader to cringe at finding such stuff in verse. The first comes near the beginning of the poem, a nightmare of being tricked into believing that a year's worth of in-the-shower rehearsals of *The Student Prince* will pay off at the high school dance, converting pimpled anonymity to glory at a stroke. "Jesus! What a dork!" (16) is the devastating and inevitable verdict. The second is near the end, as things are getting still more uncomfortably personal. Sir boasts about his love for rock and roll, then tells the price he pays for art:

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[5] Iago is invoked in a wonderful passing allusion that takes in Hamlet as well. "Then why not chunk your dogs too while I'm at it, / I'm such a smiling villain?" (28), asks Sir, recalling Iago's challenge to his audience, "And what's he then that says I play the villain . . . ?" (*Othello* 3.1.326, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, eds. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor [Oxford: 1988], p. 833). Iago's rhetorical command, cruel manipulations, and deep, barely scrutable sense of injury are qualities he shares with Sir, along with the gamesmanship that drives him to intimate his own dark motives even in dialogue with the characters he deceives. The smile comes from Hamlet's incredulity in contemplating his uncle's crime, "That one may smile and smile and be a villain" (*Hamlet* 1.5.109, in *The Complete Works*, p. 662). Pointing up how Iago's mastery covers weakness by crossing him with Hamlet's doubt is typical of Bricuth's complex allusion making; Hamlet's sense of being "too much i' th' sun" (*Hamlet* 1.2.67, *The Complete Works*, p. 657) plays into Sir's identification with Satan as well.

> Then when the moment comes the crowd's been waiting for
> All night—show-stopper, grand finale,
> Coup de grâce, what you will—I lightly
>
> Moonwalk backwards 'cross the stage, grab
> My crotch, yank myself up tippy-toe
> Abruptly by the stones to scale a further
>
> Octave, Fox, then thrust my lone gloved fist
> (All glittering and gold) suddenly
> Aloft, cuing as I do a pyro-
>
> Technic piece that fires before the beat
> And by macabre mischance ignites my hair. (116)

To the list that includes Satan, Iago, and FDR must be added Michael Jackson—however embarrassing his crotch-grabbing may be to the reader accustomed to the decorums of *Paradise Lost*. Sir faces us with the idea that gray suits notwithstanding, politicians are close cousins of this pop exhibitionist, as perhaps are gods in their burning chariots. The mix of dictions and range of reference reach a kind of crisis at this moment, almost as though his indiscretions are destroying the poem, and Fox protests the hero's final self-dismantling: "*Oh, sir, you've answered / All our questions, told us more by now / Than we'd the wit to ask or any wish / To know, and yet withal nothing we / Had hoped*" (118).

Earlier in the poem Sir riffs contemptuously on daytime television talk shows, "how / It feels to have a life worth saving, and earned / Not by being true or good, not by / Even being humble, but by some self- / Demeaning revelation, real or feigned" (81). By the late pages he has succumbed to this awful logic himself, holding on to his audience by playing host and confessor at once. The relentless mortification of the talk show plot brings him to a catalogue of remedies with the brand names Paxil, Prozac, Zoloft, "And still I'd always end up / Standing in my bathroom, staring at / The mirror, thinking, boys, if only I'd / Look close, I'd see just how I got so beaten / Down" (121). Perhaps this is the bare truth, after so much exuberant invention. There are no miracles in the poem, and no hard evidence that his powers are anything other than a fantastic con game, capitalizing on the human tendency to mistake misfortune for malevolence. When he runs out of ways to shock and dismay his audience, he

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is done; all that's left is a plea for sympathy. And yet—there is still a brilliant reversal to come, converting this psychopharmaceutical nightmare into a set up for the last truly reliable pleasure, the one shot at meaning and the ultimate threat: "nothing quite restores the rush of vigor to / The blood . . . No, nothing quite gives back that special thrill, / Seeing we're Americans, like going / Out and killing something" (123). The violence of his storytelling to this point has been *didactic* violence, always excused by teaching a lesson about life. Now it is for its own sake, a hunter's thrill. When his bloodthirsty reverie breaks, Fish, Fox, and Bird are gone.

"Now where did those three go?" (124), Sir asks. The poem ends here, and we are spared a true soliloquy from this loneliest of men. There is no certain answer to his question. Perhaps they simply flee like frightened animals; or perhaps, as in *Paradise Lost*, they strike out on their own, the world all before them where to choose. The poem is agnostic as to whether its three stooges have learned anything about tyranny. The same question lingers about Sir. Will he find another audience and start fresh, charming and brutal as ever? His parting line does have a surprising air of unconcern. Or have we witnessed his final overreaching and last unmasking? Either way there is a tragic echo in the silence that falls when he stops speaking. The tragedy is partly Sir's: he has gone to pieces, if he was ever whole. But it is partly ours too. For this politician-god is a mirror of the fractured expectations that set him up, democracy's self-betrayal in the dream of a man who is of the people but better, down-home but dignified, predictable but forgiving, whose perfect rectitude has a human touch. This incoherence may be the ultimate target of Bricuth's wild, funny, unconsolable near-monologue. Such paradoxical demands will always destroy the man crazy enough to try to meet them; and for connoisseurs of political violence like us, perhaps that is what they are good for.

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