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Prodigal Son (Midway Along the Pathway)

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For you I would build a whole new universe around myself. This isn’t shit it is poetry. Shit Enters into it only as an image. . . .

(“Love Poems”)

In 1975, Black Sparrow Press published The Collected Books of Jack Spicer, edited by Spicer’s longtime friend and fellow poet, Robin Blaser. The Black Sparrow Spicer, as an object, communicates a certain version of Spicer that is as necessary as it is incomplete. The cover illustration depicts the tarot deck’s Four of Cups—a pensive-seeming man under a tree, with three chalices in front of him, and a fourth chalice ostensibly being offered by a hand reaching out from a cloud. Are we to imagine Spicer as the pensive man in his cups, or is Spicer the hand extending a fourth chalice (in which the pensive man qua reader shows little evident interest)? Of course there are many ways to interpret any tarot. In the context of literary history, Spicer has existed—despite the efforts of Black Sparrow Press and coterminous critical attempts at resuscitation—as the neglected chalice, the unaccepted and/or unacceptable gift.

Spicer’s unacceptability, his staked position outside of poetic convention or establishment, is duly noted by Spicer’s admirers. His poetry, however, is not simply that
of a rabble-rouser, despite Spicer’s deep interest in the imbrication of rabble and arousal. Poetry, like a slipknot, only rarely understands who or what within it, at any given moment, is central. Indeed, the aggressive, sometimes bullying, playfulness of Spicer’s poetics—eccentricity that in part explains his exclusion from a poetry world beyond that of Berkeley, California—has in past decades actually cozened Spicer’s adoption by

\[ \text{L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E} \]

poets, from Buffalo to San Francisco. To be sure, \( \text{L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E} \) poetry and its perceived aspirations toward aberrance have become a convention unto itself. The latter’s claiming of Spicer as arch-enabler, like the Black Sparrow edition, gives a necessary but incomplete impression of Spicer’s importance to contemporary poetics.

Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian’s new edition of the collected poetry of Spicer includes all of the serial poetic sequences to be found in the earlier volume, as well as his earlier nonserial poems, an extended version of Spicer’s brilliant and hilarious “Unvert Manifesto” (1956), and previously unpublished poems from both Spicer’s early and later productive years. Gizzi and Killian’s edition offers a more adequate and less affectively distorting account of Spicer’s amazing two decades of output. This new edition is elegant and polished in all the ways the Black Sparrow importantly and justifiably is not. My

\[ \text{Vocabulary Did This to Me} \]

does not displace Blaser’s 1975 edition, so much as honors it as crucial part of the ever-growing Spicer archive—ever-growing, thanks to the efforts of Gizzi, Killian, Michael Davidson, John Emil Vincent, and others. To say that the new edition is grand—looks grand, feels expensive in all the ways in which the Black Sparrow perhaps utopically does not—is not to say that Spicer has arrived. He was already here, but never so lucidly. Gizzi and Killian’s decisions are laudable, particularly their inclusion of Spicer’s earliest poetry, which hitherto was available only in a separate volume.\(^1\) Each of Spicer’s serial sequences was originally published in the form of a limited-run, illustrated book; these books, produced by White Rabbit Press (principally operated by Spicer’s friend, Graham Mackintosh), are works of art. Illustration (most often by Spicer’s friends or cohorts) and text twine into each other in the manner of William Blake’s illuminations. Gizzi and Killian are therefore to be commended for reproducing at the outset of each of Spicer’s individual books the original cover illustration of said work. Eventually, ideally, we will have a facsimile of these works. Until then, we have this incredible new edition. Spicer’s poems have never looked so new. And the surprise of rereading Spicer in this edition is great.

In 1949, a twenty-four-year-old Spicer insisted that “[w]e must
become singers, become entertainers. . . . There is more of Orpheus in Sophie Tucker than in R. P. Blackmur.”2 Bracketing the quasi-Rimbaudian bravura of so precocious a pronouncement—precocity being advantageous for those who die so young as Rimbaud or Spicer (who died at forty)—this dictum, notwithstanding its surfacing throughout Spicer criticism, suffers in its transparency so often being taken for granted. More simply, Spicer’s accounts of his own poetics too often are understood as nonproblematically sincere, even as Spicer’s poetry admonishes us against so straightforward a sincerity. The foregoing dictum’s usual gloss suggests that there is more of Sophie Tucker in Spicer than there is of R. P. Blackmur, given Spicer’s supposed apostasy of the academy in favor of a poetry along the lines of Tucker’s burlesque and vaudeville; although Blackmur only clumsily represents the academy, per se, and more persuasively invokes a rigorous thoughtfulness not dissimilar from Spicer’s own. Spicer’s poetry often speaks truculently against its own thoughtfulness, just as it speaks against the givenness of aforementioned sincerity. Further, the gloss presumes Spicer’s attachment to Orpheus as obvious. Obvious, yes, if we equate Spicer’s career-long fascination with Orpheus as self-explanatory. Less obvious, if we honor Spicer’s Orphic ambivalences. We shall return to the matter of Orpheus, who seems for Spicer less paradigm of poetic charisma than natal mythology of poetic failure. We shall return, likewise, to these ostensibly estranged narratives of failure and charisma.

Spicer’s reputation, far more than that of other poets, has been adumbrated by his own pronunciamentos, in part because Spicer seems to have found irresistible his peculiarly teetering soapbox. At the same time, the foreclosures attendant to holding Spicer to his own words can be redressed only in more scrupulous a relation to his provocation rather than recapitulation of it. I think, for instance, that there is a lot of Orpheus in R. P. Blackmur; further, that Blackmur and Spicer have far more in common than literary history and literary criticism would otherwise suggest. Beyond the biographical dovetail of Blackmur and Spicer both dying in 1965 (Tucker, for the record, died in 1966), Blackmur and Spicer equally engaged in an ongoing study of what Blackmur denominated language as gesture. Not only language as gesture, but poet as gesture: Spicer, photographically, has been preserved as a series of gestures variously resonant with his poetic production—Spicer, hunched, Quasimodo of the Berkeley Renaissance;3 Spicer, blurred into a Francis Bacon of need, ruthlessly inseparable from ambitions bent toward abdication of need; gesture of obliquity, as though the sylph in a mirror, limit of a camera’s capture.

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Spicer as gesture: love child of limp wrist and the middle finger. Flipping the bird, again and again and again. As Spicer writes in his anti-Whitmanian “Song for Bird and Myself” (1957) (in which the Bird on one level refers to Charlie “Bird” Parker),

But the poem isn’t over. It keeps going Long after everybody Has settled down comfortably into laughter. The bastards On the other side of the paper Keep laughing. LISTEN. STOP LAUGHING. THE POEM ISN’T OVER. Butterflies.

(70)

Spicer’s poem, more accurately, is both anti-Whitmanian and Whitmanian. Whitman, campily characterizing himself as “me imperturbe” (191), as often strikes the pose of perturbation:

Aware now, that amid all the blab whose echoes recoil upon me, I have not once had the least idea who or what I am, But that before all my insolent poems the real Me still stands untouched, untold, altogether unreachèd, Withdrawn far, mocking me with mock-congratulatory signs and bows, With peals of distant ironical laughter at every word I have written or shall write, Striking me with insults till I fall helpless upon the sand.4

Spicer’s “The Poem Isn’t Over” as accurately describes the constitutive unfinishability of Whitman’s own Leaves of Grass, a book revised under the same name seven times, across four decades.5 Only the coercions of chronology and adjudication would indicate each revision as an improvement upon those preceding. More interesting in relation to Spicer is the notion that Leaves of Grass, divorced from the diachronic, coexists with other versions of itself. Such is an underlying motive in Spicer’s turn to serial poems, and no less, his experimental poetic attempts at both proliferating and sustaining simultaneously multiple versions of persons. Whitman’s contribution to American poetry too often is vitiated in terms of his ancestral function as bardic gay avatar, as though Crane and Spicer learned how to write gay poems thanks to Whitman’s earlier gay poems. Whitman’s testing of nondiachronic multiplicity is not unrelated to questions of queer poetic form; but the influence on Spicer of Whitman’s formal assays of genre can’t be underestimated—neither subordinated nor separated from either’s queer poetics.

But back to perturbation. “Have you ever wrestled with a bird / you
idiotic reader?” (71). Spicer’s poetry asks on many registers to be dismissed: as irritant, as irascibility. In the case of “Song for Bird and Myself,” the poem presumes it has been dismissed before it necessarily has been, or stages dismissability’s incontrovertibility as grounds for the poem’s short temper. It is wise, here, to think of Donald Winnicott, for whom aggression is the infant’s experiment in testing the limits of another’s love. How long will it take for you to leave me, as thunder that precedes the lightning of Don’t Leave Me.

Spicer’s poems are both exercises and experiments in gesture. As Blackmur writes, “[W]hen the language of words most succeeds it becomes gesture in its words. . . .” All the more so in Spicer’s poetry, in which the form of poetry cleaves to poetic language, conventionally understood. Spicer’s poems, at their most flinty and confoundingly beautiful, are gestures. Not only in the sense of gesturing toward, but gesturing for their own sake. The poem as vehicle for some other demonstration. If Whitman, gesturally, conceives a poetics of cruising, Spicer extends a Benjaminian topos of cruising-in-ruin. Signals are overdetermined, or undetected altogether. Proustian choreographies of implicit seduction cede to demands, rejections, and regrets stitched with their own sense of inevitability. The anger of Spicer’s poetry is striking, not only as directed at particular persons or situations, but more so when launched against the predicament of poetry, as such:

—A human love object is untrue.
    Screw you.

—A divine love object is unfair
    Define the air
    It walks in.

Imagine this as lyric poetry.

Spicer’s anger—as both abstraction and particularity—is directed at form, at voice, at the hypothesis of content. This is to say that Spicer’s anger keenly surfaces in the ravaged snags of form, voice, content. Or to cite Blackmur citing Othello, “I understand a fury in your words / But not the words.”

Blackmur published Language as Gesture in 1954, as Spicer very much was reaching poetic boil. Spicer’s poems came fast, just as Blackmur was hammering away at a corresponding set of poetic problematics. Blackmur’s attachments to Hart Crane and Emily Dickinson chime with Spicer’s attachments to Crane and Dickinson. In the case of Crane, Spicer might find a template of flaming inebriation burning itself out. In the case of Dickinson, Spicer might see in her extravagant variants a model for Spicer’s variant-like
serial poems (intimated in Spicer’s brilliant review of Dickinson’s vari-iorum edition). The poets that Language as Gesture eclectically explores are the poets to whom Spicer likewise attaches (as, for instance, in Spicer’s early poem for Hart Crane, “A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Landscape” [2000]). Language as Gesture, aware of Spicer or not, uncannily offers a succinct engraving of Spicer’s own onerous, brilliant adventures in the perviousness of person and form. The following, from Blackmur, citing Yeats’s “Crazy Jane”:

I had wild Jack for a lover;
Though like a road
That men pass over
My body makes no moan
But sings on:
All things remain in God.9

Or as Spicer would say, Poet, be like God (50). I had wild Jack for a lover. Yeats’s stanza approaches the spatiality that informs Spicer’s own scrupulous investigation of poetic form. Is poetry like a road, or like a room? How to distinguish the song from the moan? These questions are at the heart of Spicer’s poetry, even as Spicer already resonates with Yeats: two poets, distracted and consumed by the possibility of love channeled across the long distance of mortality. Which likewise describes the lyric experiments of Dickinson and Crane: the distance between life and death, which, poetically speaking, Blackmur articulates in his brilliant if curmudgeonly essay on Crane. Two gay alcoholic poets who die before their careers could adequately explain themselves. The teetering soapbox: let me say what I can while I am able.

The vicissitudes of the soapbox are further complicated by Spicer’s eventual attachment to tropes of vocal displacement. For instance, Spicer insists in his eleventh-hour Vancouver lectures that the poet is a radio, receiving the transmissions of Martians.10 The insistence of a Martian language sustained through if not redeemed by poetry smacks of the facetious. This is nonsense, and I’m doing my best to transliterate nonsense—a return to Spicer’s earlier animation of Dada and Kurt Schwitters’s Mertz: the latter of which indubitably proposes a false etymology of the Martian, as though the poet’s obligation were to salvage what for others was dejecta and jetsam. Nonfacediously, Spicer’s fidelity to Martian language registers as flippant and simultaneously perhaps resists its own flippancy (dares us to take it seriously). Sometimes, I am inclined to think of Spicer’s insistence on this particular sci-fi Ars Poetica not only as flirtation with its own blitheness, but covert means of keeping safe the sensitive stakes of the project under hand. One could turn here to Derridean theories of translation, although translating Spicer’s project into the Derridean invariably leaves out too much of Spicer’s own innovations: just as
good-intentioned but similarly scalpeled attempts in previous decades have left too much of Spicer’s poetry on the floor for the sake of resuscitating Spicer as proto-Blanchot, proto-Derrida, proto-Lacan. Translation, for Spicer, arises as an amorous ordeal, the imagined crux of attempting less to understand than to formulate what arises from beyond. Martians, for Spicer, are a limit case. How to honor not only what is light-years away, but what is both light-years away and barely taken seriously?

That Spicer dares his readers to take and not take the Martians seriously is compounded by the fact that Spicer insists on poetic practice-as-Martian dictation for the sake of reneging his own writerly self-significance. We have here a version of Cocteau’s Orpheus awaiting a radio signal—Samuel Delaney meets T. S. Eliot’s poetic impersonality. Such self-abdication is complicated not only by the inimitability of Spicer’s presence in these poems—affectively, intellectually, corpulently, erotically, etc.—but likewise by the inimitability of Spicer’s mythology of self-abdication. Impersonality-as-transmittability doesn’t oppose personality so much as become personality unto itself. An analog would be the famous “transmissions” and impersonations of Ruth Draper. I have never heard Ruth Draper’s voice, per se, but I’ve heard her voices. Most indelible for me is Draper’s monologue, “The Italian Lesson” (1925), in which a silver-tongued, silver-spooned woman of means “translates” the first lines of Dante’s Inferno.

Oh what wonderful lines! Aren’t they marvelous? Now let’s see, “nel mezzo,” let me see, “nel mezzo” just means “in the middle,” doesn’t it? “In the middle.” And “del camin” means, um, “of the road.” “In the middle of the road.” That’s not very poetical, is it, in English. Now well we can take certain liberties, don’t translators always, I mean take certain liberties in order to maintain the beauty of it and the meaning at the same time. For example, we could say instead of saying “in the middle” we could say “midway,” and instead of saying “of the road,” we could say “along the pathway.” Don’t you think that sounds better?

Draper’s dilettante is a lovable nut, and loving her is different from loving Draper doing the nut. What matters, in this context, is the way in which Draper was famous for being other people, and that the funniness of her monologues arises as much from the enactment of verisimilitude as from absurdity itself. Draper channels someone channeling Dante erroneously, and this meticulous
enactment of meticulous and extravagant erroneousness ("Don’t you think that sounds better?") illuminates one aspect of Spicer’s own project—to return to earlier terms, the necessary collision of charisma and failure, or failure, lovingly rendered, as its own charismatic allure. As Spicer writes, in his own “loose” translation of the *Inferno*,

Dante would have blamed Beatrice  
If she turned up alive in a local bordello  
Or Newton gravity  
If apples fell upward  
What I mean is words  
Turn mysteriously against those who use them  
Hello says the apple  
Both of us were object.

("Sheep Trails Are Fateful to Strangers,” 257)  

Or as Spicer wrote years earlier, in “Imaginary Elegies” (1960),

It is as if we conjure the dead and they speak only  
Through our damned trumpets, through our damned medium:  
“I am little Eva, a Negro princess from sunny heaven.”  
The voice sounds blond and tall.  
“I am Aunt Minnie. Love is sweet as moonlight here in heaven.”

The voice sounds blond and tall.  
“I’m Barnacle Bill. I sank with the Titanic. I rose in salty heaven.”  
The voice sounds blond, sounds tall, sounds blond and tall.

(27)

As with Ruth Draper, I gravitate toward a version of Spicer who slips away, even as that slippage is signature, and inseparable from the sense that one is close enough to smell his breath. Poetry as intimacy of effluvium. Each ventriloquization in the preceding lines only nominally removes us from Spicer. The very terms of the channelings characterize Spicer far more than they do Eve, Minnie, or Bill. And each conjuring, like a tall glass of water, sounds blond. Spicer, especially in the glory days of Berkeley, was in his own fashion a tall blond. But is Spicer losing himself to his own voice, or losing himself in the voices of others; or some combination of the two? Vocal dissipation grounds itself in the voice of some hunkier tall blond man (we’re talking blond, after all, not blonde), both effecting self-loss and somehow conducting an austere conduit to an object of hypothetical desire: “blond and tall” as distillation of amorous object, reduction of person to the statistical (not even, as they say,
the vital statistics), if only because the tall blond man is accessible only on the level of voice. And barely: as Spicer writes, “The sun that shines so brightly on your lips has made you forget how to cast a shadow. We have been looking for you on the insides of mirrors. You might have given us great joy. No, you are too tall for love” (53).

The pathos of anyone nearly being anyone else circulates throughout Spicer’s poems as both the occasion and stymieing of poetic (which, apropos Spicer, is to say erotic) hopefulness:

Eurydice could be anyone. Is I suppose
Anyone.
That makes the poem harder.

(60)

Harder as more difficult, as more durable, as more erect, as more unbearable. One can’t have one without the others. The voice of a tall blond that arises, perhaps unexpectedly, is any tall blond, and no tall blond, and in the vexed spirit of Spicer’s multitudes—both apposite with and against Whitman’s multitudes—it is this that makes lasting poetry, which sustains what otherwise feels (for Spicer, for the poems, for the reader) dangerously fugacious.

Here we come to one of Spicer’s most disarming and thoroughgoing poetic enterprises: that poetry’s capacity for imagining (erotically or otherwise) is nonequivalent to imagining, as such. Spicer’s poetry doesn’t afford a consoling proxy for what beyond poetry is unavailable (e.g., a tall blond), but recapitulates a calligraphy of empirical unavailability, staging the latter as the fate of both poet (curt, cranky) and poet’s putative fantasy. That Spicer so demonstratively circumscribes the flourishing utilities of his medium countermands modernism’s Make it New; and, contrarily, asserts poetry as far less availing than it might be. Such an enterprise, in the end, is what makes Spicer’s poetics so counterintuitively availing, full of flourish. That Spicer’s poetry restricts rather than realizes (or perhaps realizes restriction) importantly complicates Spicer’s biographically chronicled interest in magic: for instance, Spicer’s abiding interest in the tarot, or—as wonderfully collected in this new volume—Spicer’s “Poetry as Magic” (1957) workshop questionnaires. Contra apocrypha, Spicer is at best an ambivalent believer in magic and, at his most movingly stern, a denier of magic. The first instance in Spicer’s poems of magic’s equivocally charged unavailability appears in “Some Notes on Whitman for Allen Joyce” (1980):

He was reaching for a world I can still remember. Sweet and painful. It is a world without magic and without god. His ocean is
different from my ocean,
his moon is different from
my moon, his love (oh, God
the loss) is different from
my love. (55)

Magic emerges as that which is
needed in the postlapsarian, be-
cause the fallen world, having
proved insufficient, needs some-
thing like smoke and mirrors, the
variously disingenuous or mer-
ciful inventiveness of hocus-pocus.
Spicer’s sense of magic’s compen-
satoriness—a compensation immi-
ently jeopardized by its being
recognized as magic—argues again-
ast the default of letting poetry
accomplish more than persons de-
nuded of poetry might accomplish.
If we have fallen from Whitman’s
world, which didn’t need magic,
then it seems an act of honesty for
Spicer to imagine a poetry that
lacks both Whitman’s ebullience
and the magic that could fake the
former in ebullience’s absence.
Spicer, in this sense, is a realist, and
often it is from this realism that his
crankiness seeps. Spicer in some
fundamental way doesn’t believe
in poetry and that, again, makes
his poetry all the more transform-
ing. The bluntness of poetry de-
limiting its own shortcomings,
grouchily effervescing at its own
self-imposed limits, circuits
throughout Spicer’s career. (The
apogee of this disclaiming of magic
is Spicer’s serial poem, *Billy the Kid*
[1958].) If poetry can’t make the
world more beautiful (it cannot),
then what? If poetry cannot, even
in the manner of Cavafyesque
dissatisfaction, acquit its own erotic
pursuits, then what can poetry do?
This is a question that Spicer’s
work poses again and again.

There is no magic in poetry. Po-
etry cannot produce a world that
doesn’t already exist. What would
seem deadening in other hands
is Spicer’s contrarian alchemy.
He traffics in magic without sub-
scribing to it, as borne out in
Spicer’s agnostic and often self-
contradictory poems for and about
Orpheus. The self-administered
penuries of poetic possibility pro-
duce an economy of scarcity no less
dazzling. Spicer dazzles in the at-
tenuation of radius—even as the
serial poem, as imagined by Spicer,
irresolutely both repairs the atten-
uation and further extends it (how
to extend attenuation? a uniquely
Spicerian question). What one does
within the attenuation is itself an
important question, raised in his
poem, “A Book of Music” (1958),
in which the poem’s last image as-
serts itself as both materiality and
the impossibility, within poetry, of
that materiality on which poetic
trope depends:

Coming at an end, the lovers
Are exhausted like two swim-
mers. Where
Did it end? There is no
telling. No love is
Like an ocean with the dizzy
procession of the waves’
boundaries
From which two can emerge 
exhausted, nor long goodbye 
Like death.
Coming at an end. Rather, I 
would say, like a length 
Of coiled rope.
Which does not disguise in 
the final twists of its lengths 
Its endings.
But, you will say, we loved 
And some parts of us loved 
And the rest of us will 
remain
Two persons. Yes, 
Poetry ends like a rope.

(178)

There is much to say about such a poem. First, that Spicer can write 
as gorgeous an aubade as any other 
writer. Less hedged: that Spicer is 
one of our greatest poets. The 
poem is not a lover, nor is it two 
lovers, it is two lovers “coming at 
an end,” the prepositional specific-
ity (“coming at an end,” versus 
“coming to an end”) opening the 
ending before the poem barely 
commences.

Is the coming a good thing 
(the exhaustion that follows eja-
culation) or a bad thing (the ex-
haustion that follows amorous 
dissolution)? The poem doesn’t 
begin, so much as begin to end, as 
though “Coming at an end” implica-
tes us in the poem’s own undo-
ing, in an iteration already aware 
of its half-life. Again, prepositional 
specificity (“Where / Did it end?” 
versus “how,” “why,” “when. . .”)

turns toward (and against) both 
the amorous and the poetic, even 
as the question withdraws into it-
self: there is no telling, as refusal to 
answer as much as inability to an-
swer. The frustration of the ques-
tion continues in the negative 
constative, which specifies both 
that there is no love like an ocean 
and that the experience or fact of 
“No love” is itself oceanic. What is 
our subject? Coming or going? 
And where? As the poem corrects, 
retracts, recapitulates its attempt 
to understand a possible eluding 
of understanding, we realize that 
from the outset we have been on 
the brink of ending.

The eventual analogical prefer-
ence for “a length / Of coiled rope” 
over the “dizzy procession of the 
waves' boundaries” intimates that 
no love is graspable or utile. Or, de-
pending on how one reads, “No 
love is . . .”, that the absence of amo-
rousness is graspable, potentially 
useful. The two formulations are 
related but nonequivalent. We are 
offered something that is graspable 
only in the logic of the poem, a rope 
painted by Magritte. This is to say 
that materiality arises as the pathos 
of its own nonsustainability to the 
extent that it was conjured at all. 
To put rope in the poem is to doom 
the rope to life on the other side of 
the looking-glass. The poem’s re-
 treat and advance recall Marianne 
Moore’s trickily magical disappear-
ances, as analyzed by John Emil 
Vincent.16 Spicer “takes” disapp-
pearance further (or elsewhere) in
“giving” the poem’s final lines to an unspecified “you.” Like Mozart’s requiem, one needs to listen carefully for where Mozart’s line cedes, in death, to another hand. Or perhaps more like Poe’s game in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1838) (from which this uncoiling sea-poem surely learns): one is told that Poe’s voice stops and Pym’s begins, and we are asked less to believe in the fiction of vocal shift than to consider why such a shift would matter.

The poem coils, uncoils, and as with many Spicer poems, recoils against the vulnerability of its own open voices. Just two poems later, in *A Book of Music* (1958) (a book of poems titled after the poem in question), Spicer announces that “Dante blew his nose / And his nose came off in his hand.” *A Book of Music* most recoils from the sensitivities of “A Book of Music” in its last lines:

The bartender is not the United States
Or the intellectual
Or the bartender
He is every bastard that does not cry
When he reads this poem.

I confess to being one of those bastards who does not cry when I read this poem. The story of the bartender flinches, for me, in relation to Spicer’s own relation to booze, but the poem does not make me cry. “A Book of Music,” however, nearly does. Which is to say that as bastard, I’m the bartender, lining up Spicer’s shots. Which is to say, contra Spicer’s gothically infamous last words, “my vocabulary did this to me,” that I’m doing this to him. We’re all doing “this” to “him,” being hoodwinked, cozened, and coerced into a poetics that is sometimes brutal, sometimes angry, sometimes rueful, as we are interpellated into these positions as much as the poems self-interpellate. Brutal and rueful, the possibility—following Whitman’s revisions and Dickinson’s variants—of coexisting as both at the same time. Contra Spicer’s sense of a break in his poetry between the single lyric and the serial venture, the awful generosity of this coexistence appears even in the first poem of the collection, “Berkeley in Time of Plague” (1957):

Plague took us and the land from under us,
Rose like a boil, enclosing us within.
We waited and the blue skies writhed awhile
Becoming black with death.

Plague took us and the chairs from under us,
Stepped cautiously while entering the room
(We were discussing Yeats); it paused awhile
Then smiled and made us die.
Plague took us, laughed and reproporioned us,
Swelled us to dizzy, unaccustomed size.
We died prodigiously; it hurt awhile
But left a certain quiet in our eyes.

(5)

This poem speaks of prodigious dying. We might well consider Spicer, beyond most poets of the ilk, as a poet of prodigious dying. His poetry is prodigious in the fact of its exuberantly ambivalent accumulation. And his poetry is that of the prodigal, the one who leaves, the one who errrs, the one who returns. The parable of the prodigal strips the gild from the myth of Orpheus. The prodigal son is Orpheus without instrument, or to transpose Spicer’s prodigality onto that of Elizabeth Bishop, an Orpheus in pig-shit—predicament of which suggests more than the Orphic, the particular unbearabilities of Spicer’s commitments and retreats. Beyond which, even as we might imagine this new Spicer volume as a poet’s belated return, we might likewise consider the extent to which Spicer is a poet who leaves. His poems sometimes leave me with a punch in the gut, sometimes with the sense of left-to-be-desired (in all the idiom’s underthought registers). But that this poetic leaves—aubade without fillip—speaks likewise to the difficulty of approaching Spicer. As elsewhere I have discussed, this is a poetics no less attached to Eurydice’s aversion as it is to Orphic ambition. This poetic leave-taking (I dare you), breaks its own heart, and signals what in Spicer is unmatchable. I dare you to look, not to look. I dare you to search me out.

—Queen’s University
NOTES

1. Said volume being Jack Spicer’s *One Night Stand & Other Poems*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 1980). The exclusion of these poems from the 1975 Black Sparrow edition intends to honor Spicer’s own renunciation of these “single,” lyric poems in favor of his later production of serial poems. Spicer’s renunciation appears in his poem, “For Robin,” in his 1957 book, *Admonitions*, reprinted in the volume under review (155–68, quotation on 163). (All subsequent references to Spicer’s poetry cited parenthetically in the text are to this volume.) This renunciation has been the subject of much critical discussion. Daniel Katz imagines that Spicer’s own declaration and concomitant serial practice is “rightly seen” as “turning points in Spicer’s poetics.” Again, one of the virtues of Gizzi and Killian’s edition is its complication of this “turning point,” implicitly arguing for a coherence across a poetic career that from the outset was internally at odds with itself. The turning point, while on some level formally or biographically significant, oversimplifies Spicer’s poetic trajectory (Katz, “Jack Spicer’s *After Lorca*: Translation as Decomposition,” *Textual Practice* 18, no. 1 [2004]: 83–103, quotations on 84). For a different problematization of Spicer’s renunciation, see my reading of Spicer alongside Leo Bersani (*Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008], 126–67).


7. Ibid., 4.


   Finally the messages penetrate
   There is a corpse of an image—
   they penetrate
   The corpse of a radio. Cocteau
   used a car radio on account of
   no speed limit. In any case
   the messages penetrate the
   radio and render it (and the
   radio) ultimately useless.

   Prayer
   Is exactly that
   The kneeling radio down to the
   tomb of some saint
   Uselessness sung and danced
   (the radio dead but alive it can
   connect things

Finally the messages penetrate
There is a corpse of an image—they penetrate
The corpse of a radio. Cocteau used a car radio on account of no speed limit. In any case the messages penetrate the radio and render it (and the radio) ultimately useless.
Spicer’s delight in baseball throws a spanner in the presumed cathexes of gay poets. I don’t like baseball, but I, I think, like Spicer, am engrossed by the idea of a diamond around which players play, for stakes at once enormous and magnificently nugatory. The honoring of a game’s rules as point of departure for watching what happens in the diamond’s limbo suggests a version of Frost’s apocryaphal tennis net. But different, if only because Frost’s tennis imagines one-on-one, whereas Spicer’s baseball, in the manner of Charles Fourier, welcomes not only a collectivity adherent to shared rules (and likewise wishing sneakily to break them), but an audience for those adherences and disjuncts, the baseball stadium as Greek theater. Home plate, for Spicer and Marianne Moore alike (two poets whose love of “the game” throws a curveball into any vocabulary of poetic meticulousness), suggests for Moore more than Spicer a glee in contingency. In Spicer, on the other hand, home plate suggests a glee in the inexorable (cf. Euripides) rendered both vernacular and mutably audience friendly. The gorgeousness of men in tight white pants, compelled to occupy geometry, itself might further complicate our sense of Spicer’s notion of poem-as-inhabitability, of the homer.


... Dante
Was the first writer of science-fiction. Beatrice
Shimmering in infinite space.


“Dear X,
I love you more than anyone could ever do.
signed
Y”

... “... Yes, Virginia, there is a postoffice.”

... “... I’m going to go home and eat rose-petals.”

... “... It has all been anticipated, there isn’t any more for you to do.”

“Dearest Y,”


The brown enormous odor he lived by
was too close, with its breathing
and thick hair,
for him to judge. The floor was
rotten: the sty
was plastered halfway up with
glass-smooth dung.
Light-lashed, self-righteous,
above moving snouts,
The pigs’ eyes followed him, a
cheerful stare—
even to the sow that always ate
her young—
till, sickening, he leaned to
scratch her head.
But sometimes mornings after
drinking bouts
(he hid the pints behind a two-
by-four),
the sunrise glazed the barnyard
mud with red;
And then he thought he almost
might endure
his exile yet another year or
more.