

Classic Poetry Series

Jack Spicer

- poems -

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Jack Spicer (30 January 1925 - 17 August 1965)

Jack Spicer was an American poet often identified with the San Francisco Renaissance. In 2009, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer* won the American Book Award for poetry.

Life and work

Spicer was born in Los Angeles where he later graduated from Fairfax High School in 1942, and attended the University of Redlands from 1943-45. He spent most of his writing-life in San Francisco and spent the years 1945 to 1955 at the University of California, Berkeley, where he began writing, doing work as a research-linguist, and publishing some poetry (though he disdained publishing). During this time he searched out fellow poets, but it was through his alliance with Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser that Spicer forged a new kind of poetry, and together they referred to their common work as the Berkeley Renaissance. The three, who were all gay, also educated younger poets in their circle about their "queer genealogy", Rimbaud, Lorca, and other gay writers. Spicer's poetry of this period is collected in *One Night Stand and Other Poems* (1980). His *Imaginary Elegies*, later collected in Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* anthology, were written around this time.

In 1954, he co-founded the Six Gallery in San Francisco, which soon became famous as the scene of the October 1955 Six Gallery reading that launched the West Coast Beat movement. In 1955, Spicer moved to New York and then to Boston, where he worked for a time in the Rare Book Room of Boston Public Library. Blaser was also in Boston at this time, and the pair made contact with a number of local poets, including John Wieners, Stephen Jonas, and Joe Dunn.

Spicer returned to San Francisco in 1956 and started working on *After Lorca*. This book represented a major change in direction for two reasons. Firstly, he came to the conclusion that stand-alone poems (which Spicer referred to as his one-night stands) were unsatisfactory and that henceforth he would compose serial poems. In fact, he wrote to Blaser that 'all my stuff from the past (except the *Elegies* and *Troilus*) looks foul to me.' Secondly, in writing *After Lorca*, he began to practice what he called "poetry as dictation". His interest in the work of Federico García Lorca, especially as it involved the *canto jondo* ideal, also brought him near the poetics of the deep image group. The *Troilus* referred to was Spicer's then unpublished play of that name. The play finally appeared in print in 2004, edited by Aaron Kunin, in issue 3 of *No - A Journal of the Arts*.

In 1957, Spicer ran a workshop called Poetry as Magic at San Francisco State College, which was attended by Duncan, Helen Adam, James Broughton, Joe Dunn, Jack Gilbert, and George Stanley. He also participated in, and sometimes hosted, Blabbermouth Night at a literary bar called The Place. This was a kind of contest of improvised poetry and encouraged Spicer's view of poetry as being dictated to the poet.

Spicer's view of the role of language in the process of writing poetry was probably the result of his knowledge of modern pre-Chomskyan linguistics and his experience as a research-linguist at Berkeley. In the legendary Vancouver lectures he elucidated his ideas on "transmissions" (dictations) from the Outside, using the comparison of the poet as crystal-set or radio receiving transmissions from outer space, or Martian transmissions. Although seemingly far-fetched, his view of language as "furniture", through which the transmissions negotiate their way, is grounded in the structuralist linguistics of Zellig Harris and Charles Hockett. (In fact, the poems of his final book, *Language*, refer to linguistic concepts such as morphemes and graphemes). As such, Spicer is acknowledged as a precursor and early inspiration for the Language poets. However, many working poets today list Spicer in their succession of precedent figures.

Spicer died as a result of his alcoholism. Since the posthumous publication of *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer* (first published in 1975), his popularity and influence has steadily risen, affecting poetry throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. In 1994, *The Tower of Babel: Jack Spicer's Detective Novel* was published. Adding to the Jack Spicer revival was the publication in 1998 of two volumes: *The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, edited by Peter Gizzi; and a biography: *Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* by Lewis Ellingham and Kevin Killian (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

A collected works entitled *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer* (Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian, editors) was published by Wesleyan University Press in November 2008, and won the American Book Award in 2009.

Works:

One Night Stand and Other Poems (1980)

After Lorca

The Tower of Babel (1994)

The House That Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer (1998)

My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer (2008)

"Any fool can get into an ocean . . ."

Any fool can get into an ocean
But it takes a Goddess
To get out of one.
What's true of oceans is true, of course,
Of labyrinths and poems. When you start swimming
Through riptide of rhythms and the metaphor's seaweed
You need to be a good swimmer or a born Goddess
To get back out of them
Look at the sea otters bobbing wildly
Out in the middle of the poem
They look so eager and peaceful playing out there where the
 water hardly moves
You might get out through all the waves and rocks
Into the middle of the poem to touch them
But when you've tried the blessed water long
Enough to want to start backward
That's when the fun starts
Unless you're a poet or an otter or something supernatural
You'll drown, dear. You'll drown
Any Greek can get you into a labyrinth
But it takes a hero to get out of one
What's true of labyrinths is true of course
Of love and memory. When you start remembering.

Jack Spicer

A Diamond

<i>A Translation for Robert Jones</i>

A diamond
Is there
At the heart of the moon or the branches or my nakedness
And there is nothing in the universe like diamond
Nothing in the whole mind.

The poem is a seagull resting on a pier at the end of the ocean.

A dog howls at the moon
A dog howls at the branches
A dog howls at the nakedness
A dog howling with pure mind.

I ask for the poem to be as pure as a seagull's belly.

The universe falls apart and discloses a diamond
Two words called seagull are peacefully floating out where the
waves are.
The dog is dead there with the moon, with the branches, with
my nakedness
And there is nothing in the universe like diamond
Nothing in the whole mind.

Jack Spicer

A Poem For Dada Day At The Place April 1, 1958

I

The bartender
Has eyes the color of ripe apricots
Easy to please as a cash register he
Enjoys art and good jokes.

Squish
Goes the painting
Squirt
Goes the poem
He
We
Laugh.

II

It is not easy to remember that other people died
besides Dylan Thomas and Charlie Parker
Died looking for beauty in the world of the
bartender
This person, that person, this person, that person
died looking for beauty
Even the bartender died

III

Dante blew his nose
And his nose came off in his hand
Rimbaud broke his throat
Trying to cough
Dada is not funny
It is a serious assault
On art
Because art
Can be enjoyed by the bartender.

IV

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.

Jack Spicer

A Poem Without a Single Bird in It

What can I say to you, darling,
When you ask me for help?
I do not even know the future
Or even what poetry
We are going to write.
Commit suicide. Go mad. Better people
Than either of us have tried it.
I loved you once but
I do not know the future.
I only know that I love strength in my friends
And greatness
And hate the way their bodies crack when they die
And are eaten by images.
The fun's over. The picnic's over.
Go mad. Commit suicide. There will be nothing left
After you die or go mad,
But the calmness of poetry.

Jack Spicer

A Red Wheelbarrow

Rest and look at this goddamned wheelbarrow. Whatever
It is. Dogs and crocodiles, sunlamps. Not
For their significance.
For their significant. For being human
The signs escape you. You, who aren't very bright
Are a signal for them. Not,
I mean, the dogs and crocodiles, sunlamps. Not
Their significance.

Jack Spicer

A Second Train Song for Gary

When the trains come into strange cities
The citizens come out to meet the strangers.
I love you, Jack, he said
I love you, Jack, he said
At another station.

When passengers come in from strange cities
The citizens come out to help the strangers.
I love you too, I said
I love you too, I said
From another station.

The citizens are kind to passing strangers
And nourish them and kiss their lips in kindness.
I walk the unbelieving streets
I walk the unbelieving streets
In a strange city.

At night in cold new beds the welcomed strangers
Achieve in memory the city's promise.
I wake in love with you
I wake in love with you
At last year's station.

Then say goodbye to citizens and city
Admit this much—that they were kind to strangers.
I leave my love with you
I leave my love with you
In this strange city.

Jack Spicer

Berkeley in Time of Plague

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 reportioned us,
Swelled us to dizzy, unaccustomed size.
We died prodigiously; it hurt awhile
But left a certain quiet in our eyes.

Jack Spicer

Concord Hymn

Your joke
Is like a lake
That lies there without any thought
And sees
Dead seas
The birds fly
Around there
Bewildered by its blue without any thought of water
Without any thought
Of water.

Jack Spicer

Dear Lorca

Dear Lorca,

These letters are to be as temporary as our poetry is to be permanent. They will establish the bulk, the wastage that my sour-stomached contemporaries demand to help them swallow and digest the pure word. We will use up our rhetoric here so that it will not appear in our poems. Let it be consumed paragraph by paragraph, day by day, until nothing of it is left in our poetry and nothing of our poetry is left in it. It is precisely because these letters are unnecessary that they must be written.

In my last letter I spoke of the tradition. The fools that read these letters will think by this we mean what tradition seems to have meant lately—an historical patchwork (whether made up of Elizabethan quotations, guide books of the poet's home town, or obscure bits of magic published by Pantheon) which is used to cover up the nakedness of the bare word. Tradition means much more than that. It means generations of different poets in different countries patiently telling the same story, writing the same poem, gaining and losing something with each transformation—but, of course, never really losing anything. This has nothing to do with calmness, classicism, temperament, or anything else. Invention is merely the enemy of poetry.

See how weak prose is. I invent a word like invention. These paragraphs could be translated, transformed by a chain of fifty poets in fifty languages, and they still would be temporary, untrue, unable to yield the substance of a single image. Prose invents—poetry discloses.

A mad man is talking to himself in the room next to mine. He speaks in prose. Presently I shall go to a bar and there one or two poets will speak to me and I to them and we will try to destroy each other or attract each other or even listen to each other and nothing will happen because we will be speaking in prose. I will go home, drunken and dissatisfied, and sleep—and my dreams will be prose. Even the subconscious is not patient enough for poetry.

You are dead and the dead are very patient.

Love,
Jack

Jack Spicer

Fifteen False Propositions Against God - Section XIII

Hush now baby don't say a word
Mama's going to buy you a mocking bird
The third
Joyful mystery.
The joy that descends on you when all the trees are cut down
and all the fountains polluted and you are still alive waiting
for an absent savior. The third
Joyful mystery.
If the mocking bird don't sing
Mama's going to buy you a diamond ring
The diamond ring is God, the mocking bird the Holy Ghost.
The third
Joyful mystery.
The joy that descends on you when all the trees are cut down
and all the fountains polluted and you are still alive waiting
for an absent savior.

Jack Spicer

Fifteen False Propositions Against God - Section XIV

If the diamond ring turns brass
Mama's going to buy you a looking glass
Marianne Moore and Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams
going on a picnic together when they were all students at the
University of Pennsylvania
Now they are all over seventy and the absent baby
Is a mirror sheltering their image.

Jack Spicer

Five Poems From "Helen: A Revision"

Nothing is known about Helen but her voice
Strange glittering sparks
Lighting no fires but what is reechoed
Rechorded, set on the icy sea.

All history is one, as all the North Pole is one
Magnetic, music to play with, ice
That has had to do with vision
And each one of us, naked.
Partners. Naked.

* * *

Helen: A Revision

ZEUS: It is to be assumed that I do not exist while most people in the vision assume that I do exist. This is to be one of the extents of meaning between the players and the audience. I have to talk like this because I am the lord of both kinds of sky—and I don't mean your sky and their sky because they are signs, I mean the bright sky and the burning sky. I have no intention of showing you my limits. The players in this poem are players. They have taken their parts not to deceive you [or me for that matter] but because they have been paid in love or coin to be players. I have known for a long time that there is not a fourth wall in a play. I am called Zeus and I know this.

THERSITES: [Running out on the construction of the stage.] The fourth wall is not as important as you think it is.

ZEUS: [Disturbed but carrying it off like a good Master of Ceremonial.] Thersites is involuntary. [He puts his arm around him.] I could not play a part if I were not a player.

THERSITES: Reveal yourself to me and don't pretend that there are people watching you. I am alone on the stage with you. Tell me the plot of the play.

ZEUS: [Standing away.] Don't try to talk if you don't have to. You must admit there is no audience. Everything is done for you.

THERSITES: Stop repeating yourself. You old motherfucker. Your skies are bad enough. [He looks to the ground.] A parody is better than a pun.

ZEUS: I do not understand your language.

[They are silent together for a moment and then the curtain drops.]

* * *

And if he dies on this road throw wild blackberries at his ghost
And if he doesn't, and he won't, hope the cost
Hope the cost.

And the tenor of the what meets the why at the edge
Like a backwards image of each terror's lodge

Each terror's lodge.

And if he cries put his heart out with a lantern's goat
Where they say all passages to pay the debt
The lighted yet.

* * *

The focus sing
Is not their business. Their backs lay
By not altogether being there.
Here and there in swamps and villages.
How doth the silly crocodile
Amuse the Muse

* * *

And in the skyey march of flesh
That boundary line where no body is
Preserve us, lord, from aches and harms
And bring my death.

Both air and water rattle there
And mud and fire
Preserve us, lord, from what would share a shroud
and bring my death.

A vagrant bird flies to the glossy limbs
The battlefield has harms. The trees have half
Their branches shot away. Preserve us, lord
From hair and mud and flesh.

Jack Spicer

For Billy

That old equalizer
Called time by some
Love by others
Cock by a few
Will come to meet you at the door
When you go
(Knowing that death is as near to you as water)
Go to fuck and say goodbye to your Mexican whore.
They will be waiting in the same room for you:
Time with his big jeans
Love with his embarrassed laugh
Cock with his throat cut wearing a bandana.
They can equalize anybody
January, February, March,
April, May, June, July, August, September,
October,
November,
December,
I love you, I love you,
Scream when you come.
There is not another room to go into
But hell, Billy,
It was hell when they shot you.

Jack Spicer

For Mac

A dead starfish on a beach
He has five branches
Representing the five senses
Representing the jokes we did not tell each other
Call the earth flat
Call other people human
But let this creature lie
Flat upon our senses
Like a love
Prefigured in the sea
That died.
And went to water
All the oceans
Of emotion. All the oceans of emotion
are full of such fish
Why
Is this dead one of such importance?

Jack Spicer

Imagine Lucifer

Imagine Lucifer
An angel without angelness
An apple
Plucked clear by will of taste, color,
Strength, beauty, roundness, seed
Absent of all God painted, present everything
An apple is.
Imagine Lucifer
An angel without angelness
A poem
That has revised itself out of sound
Imagine, rhyme, concordance
Absent of all God spoke of, present everything
A poem is.

The law I say, the Law

Is?
What is Lucifer
An emperor with no clothes
No skin, no flesh, no heart
An emperor!

Jack Spicer

Ode For Walt Whitman

<I>A Translation for Steve Jonas</i>

Along East River and the Bronx
The kids were singing, showing off their bodies
At the wheel, at oil, the rawhide, and the hammer.
Ninety thousand miners were drawing silver out of boulders
While children made perspective drawings of stairways.

But no one went to sleep
No one wanted to be a river
No one loved the big leaves, no one
The blue tongue of the coastline.

Along East River into Queens
The kids were wrestling with industry.
The Jews sold circumcision's rose
To the faun of the river.
The sky flowed through the bridges and rooftops—
Herds of buffalo the wind was pushing.

But none of them would stay.
No one wanted to be cloud. No one
Looked for the ferns
Or the yellow wheel of the drum.

But if the moon comes out
The pulleys will slide around to disturb the sky
A limit of needles will fence in your memory
And there will be coffins to carry out your unemployed.

New York of mud,
New York of wire fences and death,
What angel do you carry hidden in your cheek?
What perfect voice will tell you the truth about wheat
Or the terrible sleep of your wet-dreamed anemones?

Not for one moment, beautiful old Walt Whitman,
Have I stopped seeing your beard full of butterflies
Or your shoulders of corduroy worn thin by the moon
Or your muscles of a virgin Apollo
Or your voice like a column of ashes
Ancient and beautiful as the fog.

You gave a cry like a bird
With his prick pierced through by a needle
Enemy of satyrs
Enemy of the grape
And lover of bodies under rough cloth.
Not for one moment, tight-cocked beauty,
Who in mountains of coal, advertisements, and railroads
Had dreamed of being a river and of sleeping like one
With a particular comrade, one who could put in your bosom

The young pain of an ignorant leopard.
Not for one moment, blood-Adam, male,
Man alone in the sea, beautiful
Old Walt Whitman.
Because on the rooftops
Bunched together in bars
Pouring out in clusters from toilets
Trembling between the legs of taxi-drivers
Or spinning upon platforms of whiskey
The cocksuckers, Walt Whitman, were counting on you.

That one also, also. And they throw themselves down on
Your burning virgin beard,
Blonds of the North, negroes from the seashore,
Crowds of shouts and gestures
Like cats or snakes
The cocksuckers, Walt Whitman, the cocksuckers,
Muddy with tears, meat for the whip,
Tooth or boot of the cowboys.

That one also, also. Painted fingers
Sprout out along the beach of your dreams
And you give a friend an apple
Which tastes faintly of gas-fumes
And the sun sings a song for the bellybuttons
Of the little boys who play games below bridges.

But you weren't looking for the scratched eyes
Or the blackswamp-country where children are sinking
Or the frozen spit
Or the wounded curves like a toad's paunch
Which cocksuckers wear in bars and night-clubs
While the moon beats them along the corners of terror.

You were looking for a naked man who would be like a river
Bull and dream, a connection between the wheel and the seaweed,
Be father for your agony, your death's camellia
And moan in the flames of your hidden equator.
For it is just that a man not look for his pleasure
In the forest of blood of the following morning.
The sky has coastlines where life can be avoided
And some bodies must not repeat themselves at sunrise.

Agony, agony, dream, leaven, and dream.
That is the world, my friend, agony, agony.
The dead decompose themselves under the clock of the cities.
War enters weeping, with a million gray rats.
The rich give to their girlfriends
Tiny illuminated dyings
And life is not noble, or good, or sacred.

A man is able if he wishes to lead his desire

Through vein of coral or the celestial naked.
Tomorrow his loves will be rock and Time
A breeze that comes sleeping through their clusters.

That is why I do not cry out, old Walt Whitman,
Against the little boy who writes
A girl's name on his pillow,
Or the kid who puts on a wedding dress
In the darkness of a closet
Or the lonely men in bars
Who drink with sickness the waters of prostitution
Or the men with green eyelids
Who love men and scald their lips in silence,
But against the rest of you, cocksuckers of cities,
Hard-up and dirty-brained,
Mothers of mud, harpies, dreamless enemies
Of the Love that distributes crowns of gladness.

Against the rest of you always, who give the kids
Drippings of sucked-off death with sour poison.
Against the rest of you always
Fairies of North America,
Pajaros of Havana,
Jotos of Mexico,
Sarasas of Cadiz,
Apios of Seville,
Cancos of Madrid,
Adelaidas of Portugal,
Cocksuckers of all the world, assassins of doves,
Slaves of women, lapdogs of their dressing tables,
Opening their flys in parks with a fever of fans
Or ambushed in the rigid landscapes of poison.
Let there be no mercy. Death
Trickles from all of your eyes, groups
Itself like gray flowers on beaches of mud.
Let there be no mercy. Watch out for them.
Let the bewildered, the pure,
The classical, the appointed, the praying
Lock the gates of this Bacchanalia.

And you, beautiful Walt Whitman, sleep on the banks of the Hudson
With your beard toward the pole and your palms open
Soft clay or snow, your tongue is invoking
Comrades to keep vigil over your gazelle without body.
Sleep, there is nothing left here.
A dance of walls shakes across the prairies
And America drowns itself with machines and weeping.
Let the hard air of midnight
Sweep away all the flowers and letters from the arch in which you sleep
And a little black boy announce to the white men of gold
The arrival of the reign of the ear of wheat.

Jack Spicer

One Night Stand

Listen, you silk-hearted bastard,
I said in the bar last night,
You wear those dream clothes
Like a swan out of water.
Listen, you wool-feathered bastard,
My name, just for the record, is Leda.
I can remember pretending
That your red silk tie is a real heart
That your raw wool suit is real flesh
That you could float beside me with a swan's touch
Of casual satisfaction.
But not the swan's blood.
Waking tomorrow, I remember only
Somebody's feathers and his wrinkled heart
Draped loosely in my bed.

Jack Spicer

Orpheus in Hell

When he first brought his music into hell
He was absurdly confident. Even over the noise of the
 shapeless fires
And the jukebox groaning of the damned
Some of them would hear him. In the upper world
He had forced the stones to listen.
It wasn't quite the same. And the people he remembered
Weren't quite the same either. He began looking at faces
Wondering if all of hell were without music.
He tried an old song but pain
Was screaming on the jukebox and the bright fire
Was pelting away the faces and he heard a voice saying,
 "Orpheus!"
 He was at the entrance again
And a little three-headed dog was barking at him.
Later he would remember all those dead voices
And call them Eurydice.

Jack Spicer

Psychoanalysis: An Elegy

What are you thinking about?

I am thinking of an early summer.
I am thinking of wet hills in the rain
Pouring water. Shedding it
Down empty acres of oak and manzanita
Down to the old green brush tangled in the sun,
Greasewood, sage, and spring mustard.
Or the hot wind coming down from Santa Ana
Driving the hills crazy,
A fast wind with a bit of dust in it
Bruising everything and making the seed sweet.
Or down in the city where the peach trees
Are awkward as young horses,
And there are kites caught on the wires
Up above the street lamps,
And the storm drains are all choked with dead branches.

What are you thinking?

I think that I would like to write a poem that is slow as a summer
As slow getting started
As 4th of July somewhere around the middle of the second stanza
After a lot of unusual rain
California seems long in the summer.
I would like to write a poem as long as California
And as slow as a summer.
Do you get me, Doctor? It would have to be as slow
As the very tip of summer.
As slow as the summer seems
On a hot day drinking beer outside Riverside
Or standing in the middle of a white-hot road
Between Bakersfield and Hell
Waiting for Santa Claus.

What are you thinking now?

I'm thinking that she is very much like California.
When she is still her dress is like a roadmap. Highways
Traveling up and down her skin
Long empty highways
With the moon chasing jackrabbits across them
On hot summer nights.
I am thinking that her body could be California
And I a rich Eastern tourist
Lost somewhere between Hell and Texas
Looking at a map of a long, wet, dancing California
That I have never seen.
Send me some penny picture-postcards, lady,
Send them.
One of each breast photographed looking
Like curious national monuments,

One of your body sweeping like a three-lane highway
Twenty-seven miles from a night's lodging
In the world's oldest hotel.

What are you thinking?

I am thinking of how many times this poem
Will be repeated. How many summers
Will torture California
Until the damned maps burn
Until the mad cartographer
Falls to the ground and possesses
The sweet thick earth from which he has been hiding.

What are you thinking now?

I am thinking that a poem could go on forever.

Jack Spicer

Radar

A Postscript for Marianne Moore

No one exactly knows
Exactly how clouds look in the sky
Or the shape of the mountains below them
Or the direction in which fish swim.
No one exactly knows.
The eye is jealous of whatever moves
And the heart
Is too far buried in the sand
To tell.

They are going on a journey
Those deep blue creatures
Passing us as if they were sunshine
Look
Those fins, those closed eyes
Admiring each last drop of the ocean.

I crawled into bed with sorrow that night
Couldn't touch his fingers. See the splash
Of the water
The noisy movement of cloud
The push of the humpbacked mountains
Deep at the sand's edge.

Jack Spicer

Six Poems for Poetry Chicago

1

"Limon tree very pretty
And the limon flower is sweet
But the fruit of the poor lemon
Is impossible to eat"
In Riverside we saved the oranges first (by smudging) and left
the lemons last to fend for them selves. They didn't usually
A no good crop. Smudge-pots
Didn't rouse them. The music
Is right though. The lemon tree
Could branch off into real magic. Each flower in place. We
Were sickened by the old lemon.

2

Pieces of the past arising out of the rubble. Which evokes Eliot
and then evokes Suspicion. Ghosts all of them. Doers of no
good.
The past around us is deeper than.
Present events defy us, the past
Has no such scruples. No funeral processions for him. He died
in agony. The cock under the thumb.
Rest us as corpses
We poets
Vain words.
For a funeral (as I live and breathe and speak)
Of good
And impossible
Dimensions.

3

In the far, fat Vietnamese jungles nothing grows.
In Guadacanal nothing grew but a kind of shrubbery that was
like the bar-conversation of your best friend who was
not able to talk.

3

Sheets to the wind. No
Wind being present.
No
Lifeboats being present. A jungle
Can't use life-boats. Dead
From whatever bullets the snipers were. Each
Side of themselves. Safe-
Ly delivered.

4

The rind (also called the skin) of the lemon is difficult to understand
It goes around itself in an oval quite unlike the orange which, as anyone can tell, is a fruit easily to be eaten.
It can be crushed in canneries into all sorts of extracts which are still not lemons. Oranges have no such fate. They're pretty much the same as they were. Culls become frozen orange juice. The best oranges are eaten.
It's the shape of the lemon, I guess that causes trouble. It's ovalness, it's rind. This is where my love, somehow, stops.

5

A moment's rest. I can't get a moment's rest without sleeping with you. Yet each moment
Seems so hard to figure. Clocks
Tell time. In elaborate ceremonial they tick the seconds off what was to come.
Wake us at six in the morning with messages someone had given them the night before.
To pierce the darkness you need a clock that tells good time.
Something in the morning to hold on to
As one gets craftier in poetry one sees the obvious messages (cocks for clocks) but one forgets the love that gave them
Time.

6

The moment's rest. And the bodies entangled and yet not entangled in sleeping. Could we get
Out of our skins and dance? The bedclothes
So awry that they seem like two skins.
Or all the sorts of skins that we wore, wear (the orgasm), wanted to wear, or would be wearing. So utterly tangled.
A bad dream.
A moment's rest. The skins
All of them
Near.
I saw the ghost of myself and the ghost of yourself dancing without music.
With
Out
Skin.
A good dream. The
Moment's rest.

Jack Spicer

Sporting Life

The trouble with comparing a poet with a radio is that radios don't develop scar-tissue. The tubes burn out, or with a transistor, which most souls are, the battery or diagram burns out replaceable or not replaceable, but not like that punchdrunk fighter in the bar. The poet

Takes too many messages. The right to the ear that floored him in New Jersey. The right to say that he stood six rounds with a champion.

Then they sell beer or go on sporting commissions, or, if the scar tissue is too heavy, demonstrate in a bar where the invisible champions might not have hit him. Too many of them.

The poet is a radio. The poet is a liar. The poet is a counterpunching radio.

And those messages (God would not damn them) do not even know they are champions.

Jack Spicer

Thing Language

This ocean, humiliating in its disguises
Tougher than anything.
No one listens to poetry. The ocean
Does not mean to be listened to. A drop
Or crash of water. It means
Nothing.
It
Is bread and butter
Pepper and salt. The death
That young men hope for. Aimlessly
It pounds the shore. White and aimless signals. No
One listens to poetry.

Jack Spicer