

The Prodigy

by [Jeffrey Burghauer](#) (August 2019)



People on a Train, Marie-Louise Von Motesiczky, 1920s

On the train from Buffalo
To Manhattan years ago,
Reading Dylan Thomas, and
Writing with my other hand,
I became aware of this
Figure keen to reminisce,
Sighing with a sweetened woe:

“I got drunk with him, you know.”

“Dylan Thomas? When?” I said.

“Back at Yale, my roommates led
Dylan ‘round in fifty-four,
Halfway through the reading tour—
Basically conducting him
Bar to bar & whim to whim.
Jesus, a disgusting cad.
Very sordid. Very sad.”

All his features drained of art,
Something deep within the heart
Had begun to sweetly blur
Through this somber traveler.
He began to slowly slack
His imagination back
When his body's real design
Like a fiber optic line
Taut across the midnight's pit
Proved a perfect conduit:

“Ever since my boyhood, I
Was a mathematics guy.
But my friends loved poetry.
I loved them. And they loved me.
So, when it came time to fête,
Let's see...T.S. Eliot,
Off they went, with me at heel,
Like a happy spaniel.”

Noticing me noticing
That what he had thought to bring

On his trip was limited
To a garment bag (he hid
Nothing very well), he sighed:

“Yesterday my brother died.
Funeral’s tomorrow in
The old hometown, New Berlin,
Half an hour east of Troy.
When I was a little boy...”

But this rumination slid
Really far away. “A *kid*—
I was just a kid when they
Sent me all the goddamned way
Up to Harvard. But they said
Any callow boy whose head
Could do math like mine...*insane*.”

Our nearly antique train
Going at an antique pace
Through a bleakly antique space
(Iron lace, a heaven’s face

Quietly immune to grace)
Jerked a little bit, and slowed
Where the angry earth was ploughed.

“Damn it, just a callow kid.
And for all the good it did...”

Under all the current strain,
The departments of his pain
Started their reversion to
Waste & welter that withdrew
All those years ago to form
Something like a narrow norm,
Like a world, a Where to when
This aríthmetícíán.
The extended finger of
Memory delayed above
Pastry cases of ideal,
Well-confected & surreal
Instances of youthful shame
Sixty years could not disclaim.

“When I was a freshman, I
Made an idiot of my-
Self before the girl I *knew*
Was the very angel who
Heaven allocated for
My Beloved Forevermore.
And,” he closed his eyes to say,
“I’m afraid I ran away.
Cleared my throat, and left the dorm,
Disappeared into the storm
Like a Mediæval tyke.
Christ, how very...*poet-like!*”

“What disgrace could *possibly—*”

“Merit that?” preempted he,
Followed by a stoic sigh.
“Let me start by saying my
Memory is like a threat.
I’m *condemned* to not forget.
Everything I’m ever told.
Every plaudit. Every scold.

Every dim historic date.
Every footnote. My irate
Memory must be a king.
I remember everything.
Every type of fungus gnat.
Everything. *Except for that.*"

Once a slash of mental sky
Sudden-cleared, he ventured: "I
Think I'd bet you that the dame
Never knew my Christian name."

He condensed, an epigram.
"It's obscene to be a damn
Prodigy...but you, I sense,
Know that from experience."

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